



PROJECT *on* Middle East Democracy

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"Freedom in the World 2010"

Freedom House

1779 Massachusetts Avenue NW

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Freedom House hosted an event to coincide with the release of its report, "Freedom in the World 2010," which marks the latest edition of Freedom House's annual assessment of political and civil rights in every country throughout the world. In a year of intensified repression against democratic reformers, the state of freedom experienced a global erosion with major setbacks in Latin America, Africa, the former Soviet Union, and the Middle East. According to Freedom House, 2009 represents the fourth consecutive year in which setbacks have trumped gains, the longest pattern of decline in the nearly 40-year history of Freedom of the World. The event featured an in-depth discussion of the changes, trends, and important events relating to freedom and democracy in 2009 and the challenges those trends pose for American foreign policy.

Jackson Diehl, Deputy Editorial Page Editor for *The Washington Post*, moderated a panel of four prominent members of the human rights community: **Jennifer Windsor**, Executive Director of Freedom House; **Thomas Carothers**, Vice-President for Studies for the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace; **Felice Gaer**, Director of the Jacob Blaustein Institute for the Advancement of Human Rights; and **Arch Puddington**, Director of Research for Freedom House.

Arch Puddington opened with a short overview of the 2010 report, emphasizing trans-regional themes and particular areas of concerns. He pointed to the Middle East as one of the few regions which never truly embraced the wave of freedom in the post-Cold War era. However, he conceded a moderate amount of human rights progress following September 11, 2001, when there was a pronounced movement within many countries to address what they saw as some of the key motivators behind extremist behavior. But this push toward reform was short-lived and 2009 saw a real decline in regional freedom, which Puddington's sees as concerning since the Middle East is so critical to global security.

Expounding upon this downward trend, **Puddington highlighted three major problem areas: 1) rule of law; 2) freedom of association (including institutions of civil society which were often held an adversarial relationship with existing political power structures); and 3) freedom of the press.**

Responding to **Jackson Diehl's** call for reactions to the Freedom House report, **Felice Gaer** remarked that the results are discouraging since she senses that democracy has largely been growing and has successfully entrenched itself in many parts of the world. However, she acknowledges that **"major powers have been able to do terrible things to their people without any significant cost to the overall stability of their respective regime."** According to Gaer "this is not a blip," but rather "the studied behavior of governments that feel that there is no cost domestically."

Thomas Carothers espoused a slightly different interpretation of the Freedom House findings,

observing that despite the "punishing decline in the last few years," there are now three more "Free" countries worldwide than in 2000. He urged the audience, as well as the panel, to maintain perspective and see the larger trend for what it is: moving in a positive direction. However, he raised a criticism of the report itself by highlighting the "tension between mentioning events and describing trends." **The report takes many ongoing issues and characterizes them as trends, according to Carothers, and perhaps gives the impression that there is backward momentum when in fact the macro-level environment is largely stagnant.** He sees this as an important distinction, and takes issue with the Freedom House characterization of the Middle East as a region where "reversals prevailed." Carothers saw these as "setbacks" but refused to use the term "reversal" since he maintained that there were not many existing democratic traditions in place to reverse. Overall, **he suggested that the word "stagnation" more accurately described the movement for democracy in the Middle East**

Responding to Carothers' critique, **Jennifer Windsor** explained that the "purpose of these findings is to alert to possible trends, which can later be more definitively identified when we look back after reflection." She sees this report as a call to wake up and take action in order to avoid the transformation from "events" to "trends." The United States, in her view, must produce concrete incentives and a much more comprehensive, nuanced strategy to counter oppressive regimes.

Diehl then posed a general question to the panel regarding the apparent failure of democratic movements in places like Jordan, Morocco, and Egypt. Gaer responded that **the success of radical political parties at the polls sent a chill through the region, as did the increased roll of Iran in supporting such groups.** Leaders are reassessing what is a valid and fair contest, and which parties seeking power actually believe in human rights, protection for women, etc. Carothers added that **the impetus for reform that emerged within civil societies proved to be weaker than the governments who attempted to either co-opt or defeat them.**

Responding to Diehl's question regarding the Obama administration's foreign policy priorities, Windsor noted that democratic inclination is not missing in the Middle East, and that the U.S. must strive to ensure a commitment to democracy, even while engaging in other areas. Gaer alluded to Obama's inaugural address in which he resolved that the United States would not give up certain principles for the sake of expediency. But she felt that the administration did not live up to that statement in subsequent rounds of diplomacy with various non-democratic actors.

The subject of democratic progress in Iraq generated much discussion, as the panelists examined why Iraq failed to achieve higher marks from Freedom House. Puddington remarked that Iraq "is on the cusp of being recognized as a partly free country – but it would have to make one more leap in reducing political violence before taking that step." Rather than addressing Iraqi prospects, Carothers questioned why the report downgrades certain countries for political violence, while seemingly ignoring that dynamic in others. Gaer responded by asserting that there is still quite a large amount of minority harassment and discrimination within Iraq, and many of those communities still live in terror. Puddington added that the **"level of violence in Iraq has affected every institution that we considered crucial to democracy: courts, NGOs, and academic institutions."**

Finally, Windsor addressed a question regarding the U.S. administration's priorities, and claimed that its Fiscal Year 2010 request was actually quite good. However, she criticized the administration's decision to cut off funding for some programs that were in fact helpful for reformers, particularly the Green Movement in Iran.