



PROJECT *on* Middle East Democracy

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"The Role of New Media in Promoting Reform in the Middle East: The Case of Lebanon"

Project on Middle East Democracy and the Safadi Foundation USA
Room 2255 Rayburn House Office Building
March 5, 2010, 11:00 AM – 12:00 PM

The Project on Middle East Democracy and the Safadi Foundation USA hosted an event to discuss the implications of "connection technologies" for U.S. foreign policy. The year 2009 witnessed an explosion of Internet-based activism in the political cultures of the Middle East. The Use of information and communication technology (ICT) has been a transformative tool in strengthening civil society and expanding the outreach of independent voices. What types of U.S. assistance are needed to empower young reformers committed to non-sectarian politics? What is the role of ICT in promoting inter-faith dialogue and peace building? To answer things questions, **Mona Yacoubian**, Director of the Lebanon Working Group at USIP, moderated a discussion featuring **Jared Cohen**, a member of **Secretary Clinton's** Policy Planning Staff at the Department of State. **Elias Muhanna**, the other expected panelist and publisher of the widely-read blog www.qifanabki.com, was unable to attend due to the [recent birth](#) of his daughter.

Jared Cohen opened by chronicling the massive proliferation of ICT in the Middle East over the last seven years. "The Middle East has the second fastest growing internet market in the world," he reported, "and one of the fastest growing cell phone markets." Noting the significant generation gap between demographic usages of technology, **Cohen stressed that young people in Lebanon and elsewhere "will learn to use [these technologies] more innovatively than others" – a dynamic which may present new opportunities for U.S. policymakers.**

Although he conceded that "technology doesn't itself choose sides and can be used for good or bad," Cohen suggested that it would be unwise for the U.S. to withdraw from this emerging space out of fear that ICT can be used for nefarious purposes. **"Technology is impacting civil society,"** he said. **"It's not changing how big it is, but rather how visible, expansive, and inclusive it is."** For that reason, and with the understanding that young people increasingly share a universal ICT language, he urged a much more serious engagement in this area in order to influence and perhaps even control the orientation of these forces. Groups like Hamas and Hezbollah aren't shy about using these tools to recruit and disseminate propaganda, and Cohen sees the need for a counterweight to push back and provide similar tools to those who strongly disavow extremism.

"Where does this leave us in the context of U.S. policy?" he asked. **"It used to be that when we talked about new media, it meant using technology to connect people with information, which is great for things like government advocacy and messaging. The second stage was social media – connecting individuals with each other – and that started to impact how the U.S. thought about civil society. It impacted the sort of democracy assistance we gave to grassroots organizations; connecting traditional grants with non-traditional civil society entities that wouldn't even exist**

without technology. The third phase of this development was connection technologies – the larger universe of technologies -- which provided a way to connect to people, resources, and other forms of information simultaneously. There's not a single part of U.S. policy toward Lebanon that should not have a connection technology element."

Cohen also insisted that both traditional and non-traditional civil society entities can learn from each other's expertise – "I've always said that the 20th century could use a swift kick in the butt from the 21st century, and the 21st century could use a swift kick in the butt from the 20th century."

With that said, he does see some challenges in how the U.S. can integrate technology vis-à-vis Lebanon. **But he thinks that if the U.S. truly wants to provide better access to various social services to defuse the power of extremist groups, it needs to work with NGOs to make ICT more accessible.**

Perhaps most importantly, **Cohen contends that emerging technologies and social media facilitate a free exchange of ideas, empowering individuals in ways they wouldn't be otherwise and allowing them to hold officials accountable for their actions.** And as it relates to violent extremism, "If connection technology is an increasingly used tool by Hamas and Hezbollah, there's no reason not to try to influence this space."

Following Cohen's presentation, **Mona Yacoubian** shared what she believes are three crucial points:

1. We need to understand this as a value-neutral tool, not a transformative force – in order for them to facilitate an agenda or ideology, there need to be the following preexisting conditions: a vibrant civil society; an engaged public; and a government that, even if not pro-reform, is not capable of quashing reform.
2. Emerging media can also be a force for ill, helping to accelerate authoritarianism and religious extremism.
3. With respect to Lebanon and sectarianism, it's important to be aware of the power of emerging media to entrench sectarianism as well.

In a response to a question about the wisdom of U.S. officials continuing to use radio and television even though those mediums are increasingly competitive, Cohen insisted that policy-makers need to focus upon dissemination – **"if no one sees it, it doesn't matter," meaning that if emerging technologies are more easily accessible to large swaths of the population, those tools need to be prioritized.** He also addressed a question on technology in the Palestinian territories by proposing a plan for "micro-engineering loans," which would encourage people and companies in the U.S. to request coding services from anyone around the world, particularly in the W. Bank and Gaza where there's an abundance of talented software engineers looking for work.

Cohen also addressed the issue of online chat rooms serving as forums for radicalization, saying that while it's certainly a concern, at least it's happening in the public domain "where people can monitor and stop it." He pointed to an organization in Great Britain that enters these forums to provide a counterbalance and pitch moderate views, but conceded that there's no perfect solution. Nonetheless, he maintained that the prerequisite for U.S. ICT support "should not be whether individuals like our policies or not – it should be whether they are pro- or anti-extremism." **Sometimes the most credible people are adamantly opposed to our policies, he said, but we need to empower them as voices of moderation to provide counter-narratives.**