



# PROJECT on Middle East Democracy

www.pomed.org ♦ P.O. Box 25533 ♦ Washington, DC 20027-8533

---

**The Project on Middle East Democracy and the International Development Program at the  
Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS)**

## **Islamist Political Participation and Democratic Development: The Cases of Turkey and Morocco**

SAIS Bernstein-Offit Building, Room 500, 1717 Massachusetts Ave NW  
September 27, 2007, 12:00-2:00 p.m.

**Shadi Hamid**, Research Director for POMED, moderated a discussion on the risks and opportunities of including moderate Islamist political parties in the democratic process in the Middle East and North Africa, in the context of the recent elections in Turkey and Morocco. Featured speakers were:

**Geneive Abdo**, Century Foundation Fellow; author of *No God but God: Egypt and the Triumph of Islam* and *Answering Only to God: Faith and Freedom in 21<sup>st</sup> Century Iran*.

**Anthony Chang**, Deputy Director for the Europe Division of the International Republican Insitute (IRI), oversees IRI's Turkey program from Washington.

**Matthew Frumin**, Senior Advisor at the National Democratic Institute (NDI) and member of the recent international mission to assess and monitor the elections in Morocco.

Moderator **Shadi Hamid** began by noting the dilemma “that we want democracy, but we fear its outcomes.” The recent elections in Turkey and Morocco, he said, “offer us an opportunity to ask: **how can we incorporate moderate Islamist parties into the democratic process, and even should we in the first place?**”

**Anthony Chang** began by describing the context of the victory of the Islamic Justice and Development Party (AKP) in Turkey's parliamentary election in July, and in the more recent presidential election. Though it has been often called an “Islamist Party,” Chang said, the AKP has repeatedly rejected the label.

Since acceding to power, the AKP has supported relations with the U.S. and Israel, reaffirmed the secular nature of the Turkish state, and “been something of a champion of Kurdish rights,” he explained, though its secular skeptics, including the military, remain suspicious. Chang credited a “strong sense of identification with the Turkish republic” for making it difficult for any pan-Islamic ideology to take hold. He asserted that it was a positive development that “Islamic interests are channeled through AKP,” given that AKP seems to be **exerting a “moderating influence” on religious fervor in the country**, and that there “doesn't seem to be serious grounds to doubt their intentions so far.”

**Matthew Frumin** began by describing Morocco as a “centralized monarchy” in which the “bottom line... is that the elected government has very limited power,” with election law designed to create a “fractured parliament.” In a context in which Moroccan “political parties are battling over scraps,” voter participation became seen as a key measure of faith in the system. Voter turnout this month was 37%, with 20% of ballots cast invalid, many of them being protest votes. Frumin explained the two messages – first, that the elections were free, transparent, and fair; and second, **that “people need for this [political] process to be more meaningful... if they are going to engage.”**

With its weaker than expected showing in this month’s elections, the Moroccan Islamist Justice and Development Party (PJD) will now need to decide whether “to be an insider [in the government] and try to deliver...or to stay an outsider and be a voice for the disaffected.”

**Geneive Abdo** cautioned against applying too many lessons from these two countries’ experiences with that of Islamist politics in the Arab Middle East. She called attention to three main differences: **view on Islamic Sharia law, stance on gender issues, and degree of experience in public life.** The first two differences she traced back to the tendency of Islamist parties to respond to public sentiment, noting that the AKP reflects the consensus for a secular Turkish state, and that the PJD moderated its position on family law reform after that issue received popular support. In contrast, Egyptian and Jordanian Islamist parties reflect those countries’ own popular opinions when they call for Sharia law.

Though the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt is an opposition movement without the experience in government of Turkey’s AKP, Abdo argued that its control of large professional unions in the 1990’s suggests how it might act if in power. She noted that the Brotherhood focused on health insurance and loan programs, providing “services that the government doesn’t.” She noted **the Muslim Brotherhood’s respect for democratic process in the unions, describing how they held “free and fair elections” at a time when this was a “new experience for Egyptian society.”**

A lively Q & A period followed, focused partly on lessons for U.S. policy makers from developments in Turkey and Morocco. Abdo described how “unofficial U.S. engagement” has changed Islamist parties’ agendas in Morocco and Jordan. She pointed out as a benefit of engagement, **the “moderating influence” of Islamist parties and their need “to reach out to more secular groups”** when actively participating in the political process.

As a specific recommendation, Chang advised **the U.S. to ask its European partners to “tone down their rhetoric when it comes to Turkey,”** in light of recent critical remarks made by German Chancellor Angela Merkel and others.

Frumin cautioned against predicting the long term intention of Islamist parties, and described instead two possible options, of **either including Islamist parties “in the game” of politics, or “freezing them out of the process.”** He acknowledged risks in including Islamists into the democratic process, but sees these as less dangerous than the “real risks of not engaging” with them, noting historical examples such as Algeria in the early 1990s as evidence of those risks.