



# PROJECT *on* Middle East Democracy

www.pomed.org ♦ 1820 Jefferson Place NW ♦ Washington, DC 20036

---

## Middle Eastern Democrats and Their Vision of the Future

### Keynote Address

National Endowment for Democracy  
8:30 – 10:30 AM, November 18, 2009

The National Endowment for Democracy hosted a day-long meeting to discuss the ongoing prospects for democracy in the Middle East. The meeting was opened with a keynote address from Congressman **Howard Berman (D-CA)**, Chairman of the House Committee on Foreign Affairs. The opening session also featured **Ayman Nour**, who joined the conference by phone from Egypt. The conference was opened by NED president **Carl Gershman**, who thanked Berman for his particular contribution to establishing the NED in 1984.

Berman began his remarks stating that freedom has not fared well in the Middle East during this past decade. Building freedom has been a puzzle equally for the overtly democracy promoting Bush administration and the pragmatic Obama administration. He commented that only **Lebanon and Iraq have something close to democracy**, with power coming through meaningful elections, and as countries have liberalized the rest of the Arab world remains under the control of authoritarian rule. While there have been some civil society gains, including women gaining the right to vote in Kuwait, civil society groups winning some acceptance, and Arab satellite media raising awareness, Freedom House ranks twelve Middle East states as not free and only five as partly free, with no state considered free.

He argued that there is still a question over the correct policy to build freedom and that the U.S.' inherent response has been and should be to support freedom and those who seek it. He was proud to have supported the NED and now congress continues to fund the NED, USAID and the MEPI programs to support democracy. The U.S. must always support individuals and as such he told of his personal commitment to raise the issue of Nour's imprisonment and now his commitment to remain involved in Nour's fight for freedom outside of prison.

Berman then discussed the **challenge of balancing the desire to make freedom a priority in policy with other economic and political interests**. Egypt is an example of this challenge as it is committed to peace, which is vital to the region. He asked what he should do: push **President Mubarak** to open society, don't do anything or find a balance that supports civil society. He worked to raise issues of freedom whenever he met with Egyptian officials, but he wondered if making assistance conditional on reform would be counterproductive. In Iran where the U.S. is working to end the country's nuclear program, he asked if the U.S. should shift its policies to support the democracy movement. If the goal is to end the regime then sanctions will not work, but the desire to support democracy needs to be balanced with the need to limit Iran's nuclear development, which is on a much faster timetable than regime change. Berman concluded that he wrestles with idealism and pragmatism in foreign policy every day and he gave his support to the Arab reformers at the conference.

In the question and answer session Berman expressed his concern that Mubarak is pressing the threat of the Muslim Brotherhood to protect his own interests against free elections. Responding to a

question on Syria he noted that **President Bush** gave a rousing speech on democracy, but the benefits of his policies were not clear. Berman said that he personally questioned if he should have publically raised issues of freedom when he was in Syria, rather than discussing these concerns in private. Nour responded to the question saying the U.S. should keep public pressure on these regimes to hold them accountable. In a response to a statement from **Saad Eddin Ibrahim** that argued elections bring surprises, like the elections victories of Hamas and the Muslim Brotherhood, but that this is progress and the **President Obama** should walk the walk on democracy promotion, Berman emphasized the struggle to balance practical issues with ideology.

Berman was followed by a video message from Nour, before which Nour briefly thanked the crowd. In the video he lamented that the Egyptian regime continues to limit his freedom since his release from prison and he continues to wait for his professional rights. He went on to discuss how Egypt lacks the constitutional and legal guarantees for free elections and how the regime has worked to repress political activism. **He argued that his Ghad Party was persecuted not for its desire to participate in the election, but because it challenged the formula for promoting the regime.** Upon his release he found a cross-section of Egyptians looking for change and looking forward to advance the cause of democracy. Nour then laid out ten points included in the Cairo Declaration to reform the election process. These points included: a change to the constitution that frames the electoral process, amending article 76 to remove exaggerated requirements on presidential candidates, abolishing the Political Parties Committee, limiting presidential terms to two, canceling restrictions over voting that is used to perpetuate the monopoly of power, cancel all special laws restricting media freedom, moving to a “smart” national identification card system for voting, allow judicial supervision of general elections, and form the legal basis for civil and international monitoring of elections. He lastly emphasized three important constants necessary to support democracy promotion: the conviction in partnership among free people and not regimes, the important role of American civil society in supporting democracy and community development in the Middle East, and the importance of supporting the trend towards greater and partnership between peoples for confronting isolationism, hatred, immigration, and terrorism. He concluded by saying, “he who reads history well is who owns its creation.”

Taking questions, Nour explained that there is a body within the Egyptian police that threaten every effort to reach out to the people. **He explained that in addition to restricting his travel to the U.S. he had been denied the change to travel for hajj this year.** In addition he said that the Ghad party has a comprehensive political platform available on their website, but in terms of this conference the most important issue to emphasize is that they are calling for a transitional period of 24 months in which the handicaps to political participation would be removed and free elections would be held. In response to another question he argued that the Obama administration’s decision to press the Egyptian regime privately is a mistake because it alleviates the public pressure on the regime, which cares more about its image. Egyptians pay the price for this stance, but the regime loses nothing; it should be forced to act under public pressure. He argued that while the political will to change elections is paramount, reforming the legal institutions are important and the points he laid out are vital.

Lastly, Nour answered three questions about the situation in Egypt. He believed that Egypt is “pregnant” for change, but that the dream for change is limited. Second, while he sees the Ghadd party more as a movement, he is very open to coalitions with other liberal forces, which are more natural than with religious organizations. The Ghad party is working to form coalitions with NGO’s, independent parties, bloggers, and the youth. Lastly, he welcomed other candidates, including **Muhammad El Baradei**, to the 2011 presidential elections.