



# PROJECT on Middle East Democracy

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## “Syria’s Democratic Past: Lessons for the Future”

National Endowment for Democracy

1025 F Street NW

January 7, 2009, 12:00-2:00 PM

The National Endowment for Democracy hosted a presentation by **Dr. Radwan Ziadeh** entitled “Syria’s Democratic Past: Lessons for the Future.” Dr. Ziadeh is the founding director of the Damascus Center for Human Rights Studies and executive director of the Syrian Center for Political and Strategic Studies. He was most recently a visiting scholar at the Center for the Study of Human Rights at Columbia University and a 2008–2009 Visiting Scholar at Harvard University’s Carr Center for Human Rights. **Dr. Steven Heydemann**, vice president of the grant and fellowships program and special adviser to the Muslim World Initiative at the U.S. Institute of Peace, followed Ziadeh’s presentation with commentary and analysis.

**Ziadeh** began by emphasizing democracy’s value to Syria in three areas: **stability in the long term, peace in the region, and economic development at home**. Although many policymakers prioritize stability in the Middle East, he believes that democratic reform is the only mechanism to create a peaceful and prosperous future for the Syrian people.

Ziadeh transitioned into a political history of Syria in the post-war era, noting that it enjoyed nearly a decade of free and fair elections from 1949-1958, during which Syria became the first country in the region to grant women suffrage (1951). More than 270 newspapers and magazines were also created this decade, and Syria instituted its first progressive constitution in 1952. Additionally, this period was Syria’s golden age for pluralistic politics, with Kurds, Druze, Christians, and ‘Alawites all well-represented in the government. Ziadeh noted the rise of **Faris al-Khoury**, a Christian, to the position of Prime Minister twice within a ten-year period.

Diplomatically, Syria experienced excellent relations with the United States throughout its formative years. Ziadeh commented that **Nazim al-Qudsi**, Syria’s first ambassador to the United States and later both prime minister and president, corresponded quite often with **John F. Kennedy** prior to and during his presidency.

However, a 1963 coup led to the rise of the Ba’ath party and the disintegration of pre-existing democratic institutions. The structure of Syrian totalitarianism took the form of a 3-sided pyramid, with the Ba’ath party, military intelligence, and the administration working in concert to consolidate absolute power. In 1973, new amendments to the temporary 1969 constitution – lead directly to the authoritarian presidential system. Ziadeh highlighted the "Emergency Law" imposed in 1963, ostensibly created to ensure political stability and "national security." It resulted in severe restrictions on the freedoms of association, expression, and assembly. Kurdish citizens became second class citizens and human rights violations spread across the country.

These violations peaked in the 1980s when the government began instituting the death penalty without fair trials. Ziadeh discussed the disappearances of politicians and activists, unfair sentences for political detainees, and the resulting sectarian and ethnic fissures which led the country into bouts of violence. One former detainee in Tadmur prison recounted that **"life in Tadmur is like walking in a minefield; death can come about at any moment either because of torture, jailers' brutality, sickness, or execution."**

Ziadeh explored the legacy of **Hafez al-Assad**, Syria's most prominent and longest lasting president from the totalitarian era, and concluded that he failed to bring about progress in any of the following areas: the Golan Heights (remained occupied by Israel), global integration, economic development (even compared to similarly sized Arab countries), human rights, competent governance, and media/communications.

After Hafez was succeeded by his son, **Bashar al-Assad**, in 2000, Syrian civil society began to speak out against repressive governmental policies. In 2005, a wide coalition of political reform activists issued the **"Damascus Declaration for Democratic and National Change."** A year later, more than 300 intellectuals and activists from Syria and Lebanon signed a petition entitled the **"Beirut-Damascus Declaration,"** which among other things called for improvements in relations between the two countries. Unfortunately, the government responded with the worst crackdown on civil society since Bashar al-Assad took power 6 years earlier. After 163 activists gathered in Damascus to create the National Council of the Damascus Declaration in 2007, Syrian security officials once again broke the movement's momentum through mass arrests.

In trying to understand the Syrian government's resiliency in the face of increasing domestic and international pressure for reform, Ziadeh introduced a comparison between ex-soviet satellites in Eastern Europe and soviet-friendly states in the Middle East. Specifically, he used Czechoslovakia to demonstrate why E. Europe has, generally speaking, had an easier time transitioning to democracy in the post-soviet era. For example, **he finds that E. European countries have more respect for governmental institutions themselves, rather than the people who run them, which contrasts with the political culture in Syria where there is a more deeply imbedded respect for political dynasties and families rather than the specific governmental bodies.**

To spur democratic growth, Ziadeh proposed a "Truth and Reconciliation Commission" to explore and officially document what he terms the **Years of Fear (1980s)**. It would largely be modeled after similar commissions in various Latin American countries, with a particular emphasis upon developing a national strategy to combat "impunity of human rights violations" by those in power.

Both Ziadeh and **Dr. Heydemann** agreed that **democracy is "an authentic part of the Syrian past, and a part in which they can take a good deal of pride."** Although Syrian officials have been adept at fending off challenges to their authority and legitimacy, there's great potential for reform activists to draw upon Syria's substantial democratic experience from the 1950s as a mechanism to produce popular momentum and pressure for political change. However, thus far this democratic history hasn't been successful in mobilizing a consolidated and strategically sound movement, and the speakers feel it's important to further examine the original reasons why democracy failed, and authoritarianism prevailed.