



PROJECT *on* Middle East Democracy

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

“Assessing ‘A New Way Forward’: One Year of the Obama Administration in the Middle East”

Project on Middle East Democracy
United States Capitol, Room SVC 203
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The Project on Middle East Democracy hosted an event to analyze President Obama’s first year in office and present ideas for a more substantive engagement in democracy promotion moving forward. In his inaugural address on January 20, 2009, **President Barack Obama** declared, “To the Muslim world, we seek a new way forward, based on mutual interest and mutual respect.” This vision of a “new way forward” became a theme of the Obama administration’s interactions with the Arab and Muslim world during its first year. President Obama further articulated this vision in his major speech in Cairo, in which he identified seven major challenges that the U.S. and the Muslim world must confront together: violent extremism, the Arab-Israeli conflict, nuclear nonproliferation, democracy, women’s rights, religious freedom, and economic development. Now, on the one-year anniversary of President Obama’s inauguration, we gather to assess the Obama administration’s first year and to examine further opportunities for the administration to implement its vision of a new beginning with the Arab and Muslim world.

POMED’s Executive Director **Andrew Albertson** provided opening remarks and introduced the keynote speaker, **Senator Robert Casey, Jr (D-PA)**. **Daniel Brumberg** of the U.S. Institute of Peace then moderated a panel of six speakers, each of whom participated in one of POMED’s three regional conferences in Egypt, Lebanon, and Jordan: **Mohammad Azraq**, 2010 Leaders for Democracy Fellow in Jordan; **Karim Bayoud**, Lebanese Association for Democratic Elections; **Cole Bockenfeld**, International Foundation for Electoral Systems; **David Linfield**, Fulbright Fellow in Jordan; **Bassem Samir**, Egyptian Democratic Academy; and **Jessica O’Higgins**, International Student Exchange Programs.

Albertson moderated the second panel, which consisted of: **Adel Abdellatif**, Arab States Bureau, UN Development Programme; **Michele Dunne**, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace; and **Steven Kull**, Program on International Policy Attitudes (PIPA). **Congressman Tom Perriello (D-VA)** provided closing remarks.

In his opening remarks, Albertson alluded to four human dignity issues that President Obama emphasized in both his inaugural address and Cairo speech: **democracy, religious freedom, women’s rights, and development**. He described this event as a forum to both discuss the administration’s first year with respect to Mid-East democracy and explore new policy options for the administration to consider moving forward.

Senator Casey used his keynote address to reflect upon his personal experience with democracy promotion and its value in facilitating the kind of change we hope to see in Middle East. He emphasized that we cannot let our domestic economic challenges derail the pursuit of a thorough

international strategy for engaging Middle Eastern regimes. “We have to be vigilant about what happens internationally,” he said, “particularly in the Middle East.” Casey specifically thanked the activists present at the event and elsewhere in the Middle East for “laboring in the vineyard of human rights, democracy, and justice.” Referencing Freedom House’s conclusion that 88 percent of people in the region live in “not free” countries, Casey conceded the tremendous challenges we face in the years ahead. However, he retained a degree of optimism for democratic progress, particularly in light of the ongoing events in Iran. Although what we’re seeing in Iran’s brutal crackdown “is the same kind of noxious, arrogant approach that they’ve taken toward the nuclear issue as well,” he said, **“we are inspired by the green movement, by people in the U.S. who remain demonstrably supportive of those in the Iranian streets. The further development of the Iranian opposition movement will change the country forever.”**

Alluding to Martin Luther King’s selflessness and tremendous capacity for compassion, Casey paralleled the current Iranian nonviolent opposition to those who participated in the civil rights struggles of the 1950s and 1960s. King’s invocation of a “blazing light of truth” in his Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech still holds value today. However, Casey conceded that the fate of Iran is ultimately up to the Iranian people. The United States cannot initiate an aggressive and pronounced strategy for fear of undermining those on the ground who resist the regime. With that said, **Casey believes that Obama has taken the correct approach thus far; Iran is not an American struggle, and we have to be cognizant of their internal politics and constructive in the larger process of reform.**

In discussing future prospects for democratic momentum, Casey acknowledged the role of new technologies – facebook, twitter, and blogging – in “opening up more space for a democratic discussion.” He praised the recently passed “Voice Act,” which he hopes will enable Iranians to more easily communicate amongst themselves by removing firewalls imposed by the Iranian regime. **“Democratic and civil rights movements are ultimately successful because of the courage of those on the front lines,”** he said, but maintained that the United States Senate must work in a bi-partisan manner to augment the reform movement through targeted legislation. Casey then concluded with an anecdote about the darkness of coal mines in Pennsylvania, and the children who lit the path for the coal miners in the mountains. He commended those on the ground in Iran for their work in holding the light for freedom and justice.

Following Senator Casey’s speech, **Andrew Albertson** took the podium to provide background context for the event, referencing the recent POMED conferences in Egypt, Lebanon, and Jordan. Each conference invited fifteen American and fifteen Middle Eastern participants to debate the four human dignity issues Obama previously articulated. Two general themes transcended each of the conferences: **1) Obama was remarkably well-received in both his Inaugural address and Cairo speech; 2) the window of opportunity to act upon this good will is closing, and the administration has yet to follow up on his Cairo speech with bold initiatives.**

The first panel expounded upon these themes and discussed the policy recommendations of each regional conference. **Cole Bockenfeld** remarked that the 56 overall recommendations not only lay out specific actions the administration can take to put action behind the rhetoric of the Cairo speech, but also attempt to explain how POMED and other organizations can approach policymakers to make these recommendations a reality. Next, **Karim Bayoud** provided context from a Middle Eastern perspective. He observed that people in the region felt Americans were willing to find solutions to end the relative antagonism and stagnation, and Obama’s election was seen as a potential catalyst for rapprochement.

Obama's nuance has been well-received, Bayoud claimed, but many people in the region now want his abstract rhetoric to transition into real policy changes in order to improve relationships. POMED's conferences presented the opportunity for people in these countries to have deep discussions about how these changes might manifest.

Next, **Mohammad Azraq** discussed points of consensus among the diverse group of participants. Most strongly supported the expansion of MEPI programs and called for more aid directly channeled to civil society. **In Lebanon, there was agreement that the U.S. should find ways to develop "Civil Society 2.0,"** a concept that incorporates many of the new social networking technologies to facilitate more meaningful discussions within Middle Eastern countries. Additionally, there was tremendous support for aid programs targeted toward women's rights – specifically gender equality in schools and training police to more appropriately handle women's issues.

Bassem Samir provided a pessimistic account of the situation in Egypt, reflecting upon his recent arrest and detainment for 30 hours in advance of his flight to the United States for the POMED event. In explaining prospects for reform, he posed the question, "What do [Egyptians] want?" He answered, **"We want Egypt to be better by ourselves, not by others – but we need help."** Samir commented that one of the most important issues under discussion was, "who should the U.S. government really support: the people, the regime, Mubarak, or some other entity?" Shifting to domestic governance, he was concerned that Egyptian officials spent much time on Palestine, Hamas, and Fatah, but not on the Egyptian people. With regard to the U.S. influence, he explained that Obama's Cairo speech showed he's trying to change external perceptions – "any good change in the U.S. will make a good difference in other countries."

According to Azraq, **the majority of Jordanian participants felt resolving the Palestinian issue was pivotal for Jordan growth.** He further asserted that the "role of the U.S. should be to support the efforts to achieve real reform in the Jordanian electoral law that rises up to the aspirations of the Jordanian population."

Commenting on Lebanon, Bayoud maintained that Lebanon is "more of a warm spot than a hot spot, with mechanisms to bring people together, but also weakpoints." He sees the primary challenge as the weakness of the state institutions – **"Lebanese people want to believe in the state, and if the state can gain momentum it will go a long way toward reducing tensions in the country."** Bayoud also highlighted a point of consensus among participants that the U.S. should take a more balanced policy approach to encourage the state to take a stronger role in the rule of law and other institutions. Ideally, this will help to reduce the Lebanese people's reliance upon Hezbollah.

Jessica O'Higgins spoke up for the primacy of education in the context of developing targeted policies, **specifically civic education which encourages students to think critically about their society and government.**

David Linfield organized the policy recommendations into two categories: 1) how can the U.S. support bottom up reform; 2) how can the U.S. support top-down reform. Surprisingly, he observed that many in the region fear the U.S. is too focused upon the bottom-up approach. While they support programs like MEPI, they don't want the U.S. to rely upon them in place of putting pressure on governments for reform.

Responding to a question about how a balanced approach toward Lebanon might manifest in the form of actual policy, Bayoud responded that “standardization” – the notion that the U.S. should always stand behind certain actions and principles – sends a message that the United States is committed to real and positive change, rather than superficial short-term solutions.

Linfield, in response to a question about the timeline of positive reform, commented that the Middle East operates on an entirely different cycle than the United State’s internal political cycle. **“The recommendations today all promote gradual change to correct the growing divide between governments and people.”**

O’Higgins concluded by addressing a question about where Kurdish minorities fit into the panelists’ recommendations. She explained that there was a push in all three conferences for citizens of Middle Eastern countries – as well as around the world – to better understand each other. “All issues will eventually be able to work themselves out by virtue of improved lines of communications...these recommendations will address a lot of the issues that take place within all these countries, including the Kurdish issue.”

After a short break, **Steven Kull** led off the second panel with an overview of Arab public opinion. He explained that Obama is “not all that popular in the Muslim world” – most don’t think he will take into account other countries’ interests when addressing the Arab-Israeli conflict. **With the exception of Lebanon and Indonesia, views of the U.S. are still very negative in the Muslim world.** When asked to explain this view, many respondents cited their concern that the “U.S. coercively dominates the rest of the world for control of Middle Eastern oil.” However, a majority believe that Obama respects Islam, primarily as a result of his Cairo Speech last year. With regard to political processes, most respondents feel that Islamists should be able to participate and compete in elections, perhaps reflecting the fact that “most Muslims want in some way to have both Sharia and democracy.” Kull sees this as the primary struggle within Muslim society; **the U.S. is simultaneously trying to democratize Muslim countries while also dictating to them the terms of electoral participation (i.e. disqualifying Islamists).**

Commenting on Obama’s policies during his first year, **Michele Dunne** observed that his “new way forward” hasn’t really been all that new. Her sense is that the administration hasn’t been thoughtful about initiating policies that target citizens of governments as opposed to the governments themselves. Further, she believes that “there was an over-reliance in the administration on what Obama could accomplish just by being who he is.”

Adel Abdellatif provided context for these policies by describing the demographic evolution throughout the Middle East. **About half of the population is under twenty-four years old, creating a degree of volatility and energy that has started to open up the “public sphere.”** He cautioned the administration by saying that if it decides to engage in these democratic issues, it has to be committed for a long time. “Don’t think that one or two years will solve these issues.” However, he views the proliferation of young activists as a sign for hope. **“I think the most important thing is how the young Arabs will be taking their destiny in their hands...that is the most decisive factor in the coming decade.”** However, Abdellatif was leery about prioritizing terrorism over other crucial issues, sensing that it might have the effect of monopolizing attention away from issues of democracy and human development.

Congressman Perriello concluded the event with remarks on the “emergence of a new set of voices” in the Middle East which have provided greater optimism despite increasingly bleak news coming out of many countries. **He underscored the significance of the administration immediately making the Middle East a high profile priority, praising Obama’s willingness to address the most difficult of challenges.** “It’s exciting to see a president and administration willing to take some bold steps.” However, he conceded a degree of disappointment that Obama’s rhetoric has not translated into real results. Although progress has been slow, **he sees a sufficient amount of interest and awareness within the administration in order to produce positive change – if good ideas are presented, “we’re not going to waste them like we have in the past.”**