

SUPPORTING DEMOCRACY: PRESSING THE RE-SET BUTTON ON  
INTERNATIONAL POLICY  
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Session 3  
DEMOCRACY PROMOTION IN THE MIDDLE EAST

HANNA: Is there a sense that there's a new form of realism, particularly in the Middle East, that the Obama administration is not giving primacy or as much consideration for questions of democracy and human rights practice as you would like to see?

HAMID: We see already a de-emphasizing of democracy, whether it's in rhetoric or whether it's actual policies on the ground or budgetary concerns.

MELIA: I'm afraid that the new administration is moving in a certain direction where they're weakening support for civil society and social actors that we and other NGO's could be providing.

AXELROD: What role can the United States play, and other actors, to pressure governments into releasing these civil society actors?

COHEN: It seems like the Arab world is one of the more difficult regions to engage with civil society because of the stigma at least from the past eight years of the US role in the region.

OTTAWAY: I think the big problem in the Arab world is that the political organizations, the political parties, at this point, have failed to make the idea of democracy meaningful.

WHITSON: Already in Egypt it's impossible – and in Jordan now the new NGO law – makes it impossible to give money to anyone who's not a part of the state.

COHEN: If there's any region where rhetoric really makes a difference, it is in the Arab world.

HAMID: I don't think we've been very forthright about what democracy means ultimately. It means alternation of power.

GOWAN: There is actually a definition of democracy which has nothing to do with the transfer of power. It's the original one: the power of the kratos of the demos, it actually means the power of those without property.

EL-MIKAWY: We have truncated the reality of the Arab world and the Middle East too much. It's not just about religious belief.

HAMID: I do think that democracy can be part of our counterterrorism strategy. If people don't have the means to express themselves via legitimate political means they're more likely to resort to violence.

OTTAWAY: We are still in a position where the US says democracy promotion and Arab countries hear regime overthrow.

BEN-MEIR: It's insane to confuse democracy with an election, as if, if you have an election and a new regime, everything is wonderful.

HAMID: You can't have real elections without some semblance of democracy, but more importantly, you can't have real democracy without elections.

OTTAWAY: It's not as if in the Arab world we have a choice between supporting democratic regimes and not supporting authoritarian regimes. We are confronted with just authoritarian regimes.

BEN-MEIR: The key to promoting democracy: we're going to have to rethink our priorities in terms of sustainable development.

EL-MIKAWY: All of these Arab countries have the means to achieve sustainable development – and we're not just talking financial means, but institutional means, including the countries' constitutional articles.

LAURENTI: How does the issue of Palestine affect the issue of democracy throughout the Arab world?

HAMID: I think it's very welcome that the Obama is focusing on the Israeli – Palestinian conflict. It is the issue that poisons everything else in the region. However, I would caution that it is not the be-all and end-all of the problems in the region.

EL-MIKAWY: Despite the fact that this region has this image – and believe me, image counts for a lot in democracy promotion – once you have an image stuck to you, a stigma – it's really hard to get out of.

OTTAWAY: At this point the US needs to regain its credibility to be able to talk about democracy and be taken seriously.

RICH: Democracy, for all its messiness, for all its problems, is not a bad system. It is a system that can deliver certain things and, in a huge, complex country like Indonesia, it's working.

HAMID: In a variety of different ways, democracy promotion can move us toward a different kind of Middle East where extremism and political violence have less sway among the people.