



PROJECT *on* Middle East Democracy

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The Institute for Social Policy and Understanding and The Century Foundation
“Restoring U.S. Credibility: Voices from the Arab World”
The Century Foundation, 1333 H St. Washington DC, January 14, 2009, 10:00 am

The Institute for Social Policy and Understanding and The Century Foundation hosted a discussion focused on the ways the U.S. can foster meaningful democratic reform in the Arab world and restore its credibility as a bastion of democracy. The panel included **Dr. Saleh Al-Mani**, Dean of the College of Law and Political Science at King Saud University in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia; **Abou Elele Mady**, founder and chairman of the centrist political party al Wasat in Egypt; and **Dr. Manar El Shorbagy**, senior consultant on U.S. affairs with the Arab Center for Development and Future Studies.

Dr. Al-Mani began the discussion by reminding the audience that, historically the United States has been viewed favorably in the Middle East. **When the U.S. first began to interact with the region it was seen as a positive alternative to the colonists of Europe.** Later on, President Carter helped to elevate the status of the U.S. by championing human rights and democracy in the Arab world. However, **this favorable opinion has deteriorated as the U.S. appears to have abandoned its values.** It is seen as a difficult ally to work with; one that backs friendly dictatorships and blindly supports Israel. Al-Mani argued that it will be important for the new administration to reintroduce peace to the region, as the polarizing effects of war allow extremists to gain a higher ground.

Abou Elele Mady expressed the optimism felt across the Arab world when America elected Barack Obama as the new president. He explained that most of the people in the region do not hate American society but they do hate American foreign policy. They are hopeful that the election of Obama signals the possibility of more balanced relations between the U.S. and the Middle East. In order for American foreign policy to gain more credibility, the new administration will “need action and not just words.” In constructively engaging with the region, **the U.S. should help foster gradual democratic changes through the development of NGOs, political parties, and a free media.** Mady argued that free elections should never be pushed upon a society that does not have these institutions established.

Dr. Manar El Shorbagy discussed how we should look for hope in the “Obama movement” and not just the man himself, arguing that real change in American society comes from social movements. She cautioned the U.S. to “clean up the house first,” explaining that **it is important to take care of American democracy at home before promoting it abroad.** She pointed to various Bush administration policies that encroached upon civil liberties and undermined the system of checks and balances and also discussed how this has provided a dangerous excuse for Arab dictatorships to follow suit. She expressed concern over the fact that many within the U.S. government criticize the Bush administration’s policies but have not been serious about a

reevaluation of those policies. When asked how the U.S. can pressure regimes to enact democratic reforms without being accused of involving itself in domestic affairs, Shorbagy argued that it is better to pressure regimes to enact meaningful change than to pressure them into doing things the population does not want. She concluded with the notion that the challenging questions of democratization in the Arab world have gone unanswered, claiming “you can’t have it both ways.” **If the U.S. is truly serious about democracy promotion and free elections, it needs to be prepared when political parties it deems unfavorable come to power.**

All participants seemed to agree that, going forward, the U.S. should not support a specific party or person and instead support the democratic process as a whole.