

After the Storm: Democracy and Development in a New Middle East

Washington, DC

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On Tuesday, December 10th the German Marshall Fund of the United States (GMF) partnered with the Beirut, Lebanon – based Maison du Futur to host the all-day conference, “After the Storm : Democracy and Development in a New Middle East”.

The event brought together representatives of the United States Government, expert observers, and academics to discuss the causative variables and plausible outcomes of the historic events that have been shaping the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) for the past three years. Mr. Ivan Vejvoda, Vice President of Programs of GMF, provided opening remarks and introduced the keynote speaker, Amine Gemayel, former President of Lebanon. Hassan Mneimneh, Senior Transatlantic fellow at GMF, moderated the event.

H.E Gemayel began by contextualizing the nature of the upheaval sweeping the MENA region, asking whether these events are the catalyst of a new era of democracy, or the start of long term turbulence and war. He continued his analysis by illustrating the historical parallels of the MENA region today and that of post-war Europe in the 1940s. He listed infrastructure reconstruction, an intellectual counterbalance to political extremism, and government reforms as needed recipes for redevelopment in MENA region today just as they were needed in post-war Europe. From this basis, Gemayel proposed an “Arab Marshall Plan” that will utilize civil society, technology, and youth to bolster education, the economy, and democracy throughout the Arab world.

Gemayel’s presentation was followed by the beginning of the first discussion session that centered on the concept of democracy in a pluralistic environment. As moderator, Hassan Mneimneh provided the initial focus of the discourse by introducing a theme of dichotomous outlooks for the region : pessimistic and optimistic. He cited the revolutions in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Yemen as examples of the positive forces catalyzing change, and contrasted those events with the multitude of challenges incumbent in the region ; the vast water shortages and the Syrian civil war were two examples mentioned.

Presentations made by the invited discussants expanded on the theme of dichotomy and were then followed by moderated discussion. Each discussant provided their own unique perspective on the current political changes in the region, and what approaches should be used to ensure that positive change is realized. Sami Aoun, Professeur titulaire at École de politique appliquée de l’Université de Sherbrooke, examined the barriers toward greater democratization to emerging threats and more imminent threats, and argued that the wider global forces of democratization, liberalization, and secularization are the positive forces that combat those threats. Adding to the discussion was Karen Volker, Director of Volker Solutions, who brought her own experiences from civil society to outline some of the both successful and failed approaches used by USAID in Central and Eastern Europe during the 1990s.

Following lunch, the conference was interposed by a short presentation by Mark Cunningham, Managing Director of Grantmaking at GMF, on GMF’s recently formed MENA partnerships for Democracy and Development. After describing the aims and approaches of the MENA partnership, a lively discussion followed by participants around the table. In one exchange John Bell offered his own advice to Cunningham by arguing that simply providing money to civil society organizations will be ineffective. Instead, he argued, providing real tangible benefits like water resources and education will have a greater impact on the region. To that point Cunningham agreed with Bell, and emphasized that a key approach of the MENA partnership is to operate as a facilitator of resources, and to have its strategies be indigenous in origin.

Samuel Menassa, General Manager of Radio Voice of Lebanon, moderated the second discussion session titled “Development in an uneven environment : Disparity in wealth, deficit in trust, and the prospects of sustainable growth”. Here the main theme was of a more economic nature. Saleh M.

Nsouli, Former Director of European Offices at the International Monetary Fund, provided a clear picture of the dire economic problems the regions faces. He outlined possible prescriptions that can improve the outlook of the region's growth, such as reenergizing credit institutions, restoring financial stability and promoting FDI to the region. To counter Nsouli's presentation, Robert C. McFarlane, Chairman of McFarlane Associates, strove to understand the nature of the turmoil in the region. He stated the need for greater access to justice in order to combat oppression. He also specified how the rise of global energy demands will shape the Middle East in the near future. While there is a growing demand for oil, prices are reaching historic levels. This is driving larger research and development in renewable energies, which can give great impact on the region's economy. Joshua Walker emphasized the need to view the region collectively, rather than each revolution separately and in isolation to its neighbors. His comments prompted a discussion of the role of the United States, Europe, Turkey, and Iran in future. Yacoub Haddad, of AbbVie Biopharmaceuticals, raised the issue of healthcare and highlighted the need to move toward a multidisciplinary approach of increasing efficiency and, in turn, preventative medicine.

Questions raised by the second discussion session included the role of Erdoğan's Turkey and the responsibility of local actors, if and how an orderly transition may be achieved, education, and similarities within Tunisia and its changing role. Amine Gemayel and Hassan Mneimneh provided the concluding remarks for the conference, closing the day's timely and positive conversations and productive debate.

<http://www.gmfus.org/archives/after-the-storm-democracy-and-development-in-a-new-middle-east/#sthash.4mDkJOsK.dpuf>