

CARNEGIE ENDOWMENT FOR INTERNATIONAL PEACE

SECULAR PARTIES IN THE ARAB WORLD

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ROBIN WRIGHT: Hello. My name is Robin Wright. I am the diplomatic correspondent of The Washington Post so I want to welcome you today to this very topical discussion on the secular – the challenge to the secular parties in the Middle East. I have just finished a book on this subject, and I find it perhaps the most important untold story in the Middle East today. There is a huge space in the spectrum with one end dominated by the Islamists and the other by autocratic regimes. The most important empty part of it is the issue of what happens to the secular parties and the fact that they have so far failed to create a viable alternative in the region.

It's also important for the United States because these are the people we look to the most to transform the Middle East. These are the people who are most welcome in Washington, and yet these are also the people who have the least support at home.

What we're going to do is Marina and Amr Hamzawy will each speak for 15 minutes and Owen Kirby will speak for 10, and then we'll open it up for questions. Let me introduce the panel briefly.

Marina Ottaway is an old friend and I guess a relative by marriage. Her husband is my distant cousin. We are related to the oldest signer of the Declaration of Independence. She is well-known to many of – anyone studying democracy in the region today. She specializes in post-conflict reconstruction issues in problems of political transformation, and is the author of "Uncharted Journey: Democracy Promotion in the Middle East," along with Thomas Carothers. She is really running the defining program on democracy I think in Washington and in the United States in fact.

Amr Hamzawy is a noted Egyptian political scientist who previously taught at both Cairo University and the Free University of Berlin. He has been particularly focused on reform issues, the role of Islamist opposition groups and the changing dynamics of political participation in the Arab world. He is the author of "The Saudi Labyrinth: Evaluating the Current Political Opening."

Owen Kirby is now manager of political programs at the State Department with oversight of all MEPI programs, Middle East Partnership Initiative, in the areas of rule of law, parliamentary strengthening, political party building, civil society, electoral administration, media and youth. What do you do for your spare time? (Laughter.) Before that, he worked at IRI, the International Republican Institute, and he will be the discussant and comment on the paper today.

Marina, why don't you begin?

MARINA OTTAWAY: Okay, thank you very much. I think I'll speak from here. I think you can hear me quite clearly in any case.

We all know that the issue of democracy promotion in the Middle East has been very much at the forefront of U.S. policy in the area. There are all sorts of programs that

seek to promote democracy. Owen knows more than most of us do about what we are actually doing to try and do this.

The problem with any – when we think about any democratic transformation in this region or in any other region in the area, is that in the end, it is political actors that determine whether or not democratization is going to take place. The question is whether there are political organization, there is leadership. But there are people who in fact are in a position to bring about democracy. And democracy does not just become a reality because there are people who believe that democracy is a good thing; it comes into reality because there are countervailing political organizations. In other words, there are different political forces, none of which can dominate the political scene.

Other than the sort of just of belief in democracy, the desire for democracy is not going to lead to a democratic transformation unless there are these political organization that can counterbalance each other. When we look at the Middle East today, the situation is rather bleak when you look at political organizations because what we have been witnessing in the last few years is of course the rise of the Islamist parties. This has received a lot of attention, and it is something that many people worry a great deal about, and I think for good reasons.

And the reason to worry about the rise of the Islamist parties is not necessarily that all Islamist parties are inherently dangerous but that there are really no other political forces in most Arab countries that are capable of providing counterweight to the Islamist parties. In other words, when we look at what I see as the three major potential actors in a process of political transformation in the Middle East, namely the reformists in governments of ruling parties where there are reformists, the secular parties and the Islamist parties, these being the potentially major actors, the Islamist parties are by far the best organized and the strongest ones at this point.

It is a stool with three legs and those legs are not all the same length. I mean, very clearly, the length of the sort of – the secular party leg and the reformers in the ruling establishment leg are by far shorter than that of the Islamist parties.

We have undertaken a project at Carnegie to try to map out these political actors. Some of you may be aware that we have done a great deal of work on Islamist parties. That is where we started the research because that was clearly the most important phenomenon right now. But we have the second part of the study is this paper on the secular parties that we are discussing today. And then there is a third paper on the reform in the ruling parties that Michelle, Dunne and I are writing, that should – we hope to have it by September. Nobody publishes papers in August because nobody is going to be read here to read them, so probably we are going to issue that paper in September, and then we'll complete the study.

Let me talk specifically about the secular parties now. And first of all, a word of caution: This word, the “secular parties” has been ignored, mostly controversial. We did the presentation of this paper in Beirut with Amr a few weeks ago. And we spent a lot of

time discussing the use of that term because one thing which is quite clear is that the parties that you call secular, that is parties that go back either to a liberal tradition or to a Arab nationalist tradition, of a socialist tradition of sorts, do not want – do not consider themselves to be secular because they interpret secular as being militantly secular, or most secular parties. And they all become very defensive on this point of saying, no, we are not a secular party; no, we are not against Islam. The word of secular is very often interpreted to mean anti-Islamic.

We recognize that they are not anti-Islamic. We recognize that culturally they belong to the broader culture of the Middle East countries, but at the same time, these are not political parties. They turn to Islam in order to derive their ideologies. I said these are parties that are either liberal or socialist in orientation, and we have yet not found a term that is less controversial and more better description than secular. So if any of you have suggestions, you might consider it for a second edition of the paper. But at this point we call them the secular parties.

Now, what is the situation with the secular parties? In many countries the secular parties have a long history in the long tradition. It was, after all, a secular party like al Wafd that dominated the political scene in Egypt for a while, from the 1930s up to the free officer's revolution. Secular parties have played a very important role in independence – in the struggle for independence in most Arab countries. Think of the Moroccan parties. Well, Istiqlal had more or less a religious orientation, but certainly USFP and in Morocco, the Front for National Liberation in Algeria, and so on, were certainly secular parties. And then of course the Ba'ath Parties in Syria and Iraq. And all of the Nasserite Parties that developed in the – during the '50s and '60s.

So essentially, secular parties have played a very central role to the politics of – to the politics of the Arab world. And it's really only with the rise of the Islamist parties, beginning in the '70s, and then escalating throughout the '80s and '90s that these political parties have disappeared, at least have disappeared as central political actors.

What is the problem? And I think I see three major – or our research, I should say, really identifies three major causes of the weaknesses of these political parties. The first one is that the title of the paper says they are literally fighting on two fronts. These are political parties that are struggling hard to survive with all of the restrictions that Arab governments impose of them. Secular parties or not free to operate freely, neither are the Islamist parties free to operate freely, but the Islamist parties have been somewhat better capable of defending themselves against the restrictions imposed by the governments and because they – and partly because they have used the mosque, the religious gathering, as a way of spreading their message. And it's very difficult for government to crack down on the religious activities of course.

Also, they have been – and also partly because of what they have done. They have organized – the Islamist parties have been very conscientious organizers, I should say. They really have taken the idea of building political structures extremely seriously.

And they have built political – they have been political institution. They have built a political – a political organization in a way that the secular parties have never tried to do.

Now, at this point, the secular parties don't quite – and this is one of their main problems, is that, on one hand, that they are fighting against the Islamist parties that are out-competing them in all – certainly whenever there is an election, the Islamist parties tend to do much better than the secular parties. But they are also fighting against the government to maintain their political – their political space in order to be able to be allowed to operate.

In recent years, they have pulled closer to the government. Essentially, they have sought the help of the government to protect them against the Islamists. But the governments have not rewarded them. They take the case – I mean, one of the best-known case at this point is the – (unintelligible) – and the Ayman Nour in Egypt. I would argue that the Egyptian government needed a party like that, needed a secular party in order to try to halt, at least to slow down the advance of the Islamist. And yet, you know, for – Ayman Nour is in prison. He is not – there was certainly no – I think he was much less of a threat to the government than the Islamists. Look at the election results.

So that this – the tactic that many of these parties have followed that move closer to the government and almost form an alliance with the government against the Islamists has not been the reward by the governments at all. So that makes their position very precarious.

The second issue that I think is one cause of the weakness of these parties – and I'll put this a bit more explicitly here than we have put it in the paper – is the problem of class relations in Arab countries, that a lot of the – the leadership of the many of the so-called secular parties really comes from the intelligencia of these – so does the leadership of many other political parties.

But there is certainly a – these are not popular parties. These are not parties that led by people who feel at least, who feel particularly comfortable essentially dealing with the people where the – sort of the lower-class people, which is where a lot of the recruiting of the Islamist parties take place. Now, Islamist parties also recruit among the middle class. But the point is that both the secular parties and Islamist parties recruit among the middle class, but it's the only Islamist parties at this point that are recruiting among the lower class. You see that all of the time simply when you look at where the offices of the various types of political parties are in the Arab world, where the base of support comes.

And in fact, one thing that always strikes me – and I'm not speaking for Amr here because we have not discussed this particular point, but I'm always struck, talking to rep representative of these secular parties about almost the contempt that is expressed at some times for the lower class, essentially. How can you build a political organization, a liberal political organization when so many people still are susceptible to the – are not educated and are open to the message of the Islamist or are opened to the message of –

depending on the country of the tribe and the clan and so on and so forth. That does not make for very successful political organizing.

And finally, the other problem for the secular parties here is that they have lost what was one of the main – their main messages, that is the message about social justice, which was of course the message of the Nasserite Parties, leave aside what they actually did, but in terms of message, there was a social message there. There was a message about transforming the society and so on. That message has – they have totally lost it to the Islamists. The groups that have now presented themselves as fighting for equality, fighting for justice in the society – this term “justice” comes up all of the time in the discussions of the Islamist parties – is the Islamists. And the secular parties have almost ceded the ground on that particular message to the Islamists.

The third reason for this weakness of the secular parties is that a lot of them are losing leadership, more than followers. They are losing leadership to nongovernmental organizations, that what you find is, particularly among younger people, people who, in terms of their sympathy, in terms of their way of thinking could be expected to become involved with the liberal parties in particular, or even with some of the more socialist-oriented parties have decided that instead of becoming involved in party politics, they are going to start an NGO.

And there is a lot of this that is going on. To some extent it is – again, it may be the fault of the leadership of these parties, political parties. Secular parties are gerontocracies. So in some cases are the Islamist parties, but essentially the power is really in the hands of the older people. When you have an organization like the Wafd, where the leadership passes from somebody in their 80s to somebody in their 70s, you can see how the younger people get discouraged.

If you look at the political get discouraged. If you look at the political parties in Morocco, there is a lot of grumbling on the part of the younger people, even the ones who stayed in the party, who essentially don't see much of a future for themselves because by the time they can rise through the ranks and be in a leadership position, they are going their 60s themselves. There is a lot (?).

And so, a result of this – a lot of younger people decide not to try to make a career in the political parties, but instead to start NGOs, to go into sort of – to follow a different kind of politics, a different kind of political activity, and that of course deprives the parties then of leadership, deprives the parties of new blood so that it becomes a sort of vicious circle.

Now, what are the consequences? And I'll try to wrap up quite quickly and then let Amr take over. The consequences are, first of all, what I pointed to before, the lack of countervailing powers. In other words, it's difficult to imagine a democratic outcome in Arab countries in the struggle for influence, the struggle for power is going to be a head-on confrontation between governments on one side and Islamist parties on the other. The absence of the center, essentially, the weakness of the secular parties is depriving Arab

political systems of a moderate sector, so that you have – and without this center, essentially, politics becomes a confrontation between the governments and the Islamist – and the Islamist parties. Secondly, I think it deprives organizations in the United States and in Europe that are seeking to promote democracy of what it should be their – how do you say, their natural allies, the political organization with which it would be easiest for the United – for American organizations, for international NGOs, for European governments to work, and in fact are the secular parties.

Islamist parties are not natural allies for the U.S. and for Europe. There are real problems of communications. There are differences in way of thinking. Certainly, the secular parties are much promising allies, but they are not there. They are not really there as a major political force with which we can work.

So this leaves essentially – this undermines not only the sort of balance of power in Middle Eastern countries, but it also undermines the – it makes it more – it undermines democracy promotion activities. It makes it much more difficult to engage in the Middle East.

Now, I'm leaving you at this point with a rather pessimistic message, if you want, about the weakness of these parties and I think it does reflect the conditions that exist now. We have done the research in various countries and, yes, there are differences from country to country. For example, the Moroccan parties, because they have a longer history, are perhaps still better organized – there is a little more life in parties like Istiqlal, USFP than there is for example in a party like the Wafd in Egypt, although the Wafd is also a very old political party. So there are different degrees of weakness, but there is certainly weakness across the board.

At the same time, we also believe that there is a lot of potential for these political parties because although Islamist parties at this point are stronger, they are better organized, they have done more work, I would say, they really have been much more diligent organizers than the secular parties, they have by no means captured the population. You look at political participation in elections in Arab countries and the figures tend to be very low, which suggested that there is a large public out there that so far has not been captured by anybody. And I think this is what Amr's going to discuss more.

AMR HAMZAWY: Okay, thank you very much. Let me, before moving into opportunities or chances which different Arab political scenes do offer liberal and leftist political parties, let me just put some numbers on the picture of weakness that Marina just transmitted and the pessimistic message, as she said. When you compare parliamentary representation of liberal and leftist parties with Islamist parties in a country like Egypt, you have liberal and leftist parties occupying less than two percent, 1.9 percent, of the seats of the People's Assembly as opposed to roughly 20 percent of the Muslim Brotherhood. If you move from Egypt to Jordan, liberal and leftist political parties are non-existent; they are not represented in the current Jordanian parliament.

Yemen: 6.4 percent for liberal and leftist political parties, including a former ruling party, the Socialist Union of former (south ?) Yemen, as opposed to roughly 15 percent for Islamist forces. Bahrain, Algeria, the list goes on and goes on. So the weakness which Marina described has really manifested itself in elections, in Arab elections in the last three to four years; 2004, 2005, 2006 have been years of elections, parliamentary, municipal elections, in many Arab countries and the picture which we got out of these elections was one of a highly polarized political scene, polarized along two poles, ruling establishments and Islamist movements.

Secondly, let me add to the reasons which Marina mentioned with regard to how to explain the weakness of liberal and leftist political parties. Two additional reasons which I do believe are very relevant, at least in the Near East, when you look at the case of Egypt, at Jordan, even Palestine, Lebanon, with all particularities related to the two cases. One additional reason is the fact that secular ideas, liberal and leftist ideas, were used by ruling establishments, by autocratic ruling establishments, since the 1950s and throughout the last decades in a way that discredited these ideas themselves.

So liberal and leftist political parties have an extremely tough job to get out a convincing message constituencies because their messages have been used systematically by ruling establishments since the 1950s and these ruling establishments did not lead the societies where they promised. They promised development and delivered very little in terms of development. They promised democracy and human rights, where they promised democracy and human rights, and they did not deliver. They promised independence, national independence, and they did not deliver. So the fact that ruling establishments have been depending throughout the last decades and across the Arab world on secular ideas, on secular messages, this fact has resulted in discrediting these secular ideas and messages because of the failure of ruling establishments to deliver.

A second reason which really has to be considered and it's a regional trend is related to the social fabric and to the process of Islamization that we see taking off and gaining momentum in many Arab countries since the 1970s, the outcome of which is basically a social fabric that is less willing to receive secular message. It's extremely difficult for liberal and leftist political parties to get out convincing messages in social fabrics that have been moving more and more towards different religion-based perceptions of society and politics.

Arab societies since – many of them, at least since the 1970s, have been going through a process of Islamization in which perceptions, models for society and politics, have been highly determined by religion. Religion has become a dominant factor when you compare the 1970s, '80s, '90s to the 1950s and '60s, this is definitely a different social fabric and a social fabric where it is very difficult for liberal and leftist parties to operate. In fact, this resulted in an identity crisis.

One of the points which Marina mentioned as to why the term secular is highly contested, or was contested as we met with different Arab intellectuals, primarily Lebanese, but some Arab intellectuals attended – as we met in Beirut and discussed the

paper – was that many did not feel that the term secular is suitable for the social fabric. It has become a bad word. It has become a word which you will hardly find anyone using it. In fact, many of these liberal and leftist political parties refer to sort of different alternative words, the word civil, liberal as a description, democratic as a description. The trouble is that these descriptions are being contested by Islamists as well, so they do not offer an identity, a solid identity, for liberal and leftist political parties. Islamists claim to be democratic, to be liberal, and to be civil as well. So but you really have an identity crisis out of changes in the social fabric.

Finally, and this is basically related to countries like Egypt, but to Syria and Iraq, and these three countries' political systems' ruling elites did dominate for a long while potential constituencies for liberal and leftist political parties. Egypt, if you look at trade unions, workers, different professional associations, at least throughout the 1950s, '60s, and, to an extent, the 1970s, these were constituencies for the regime, for the ruling establishment, dominated and controlled by the ruling establishment, which, in a way, deprived liberal and leftist political parties as they started to operate in Egypt by the end of the 1970s from targeting potential constituencies. Potential constituencies of liberal and leftist political parties have been used systematically by ruling establishments as well.

So, so far to a few more reasons as to explain why secular parties as they appear today in Arab politics are as weak as Marina described. A second point before I move into potential and opportunities, basically to differentiate between NGOs, civil society actors, and liberal and leftist political parties as we discuss them in the paper, because this is one of the illusions of many liberal and leftist intellectuals in the region that when you ask them about how come you are so weak, they refer to a very vital civil society scene in a country like Morocco, in a country like Egypt, or in a country like Yemen, or elsewhere.

The real trouble here is the fact that NGOs, or civil society actors, do not substitute political parties; these are, per definition, not political agents. These are not agents of representing stable constituencies or significant constituencies; these are agents to defend (sectorial ?) objectives, freedom of speech, freedom of association, or to push up the level of discussion in the respective society about issues pertaining to democracy, but they are not political agents. They are not agents of political change.

So one of the dilemmas when you look at liberal and leftist political parties in the Arab world is the fact that much of the energy of the liberal and leftist team has been driven by, as Marina described, by an interest in establishing NGOs and establishing civil society actors. And, in a way, this has resulted in ignoring any substantial – in ignoring or investing less and less substantially in revitalizing existing party structures, liberal and leftist party structures Istiqlal in Morocco, Wafd in Egypt, or elsewhere in the region, or even establishing new political parties.

Finally, just to put my first and second point in context, yes, we should not underestimate the impact of regimes' restrictions, because this is not an easy issue. And

the way ruling establishments in Morocco, Egypt, Yemen, Bahrain, elsewhere have been dealing with secular, liberal, leftist political parties has really resulted in limiting the space given to them to reach out to constituencies or in getting out even convincing messages or in coming up with convincing strategies. And these tactics of regime control still go on, even as weak as secular parties might be, Arab regimes, Arab ruling establishments, have never lost their interest in controlling them.

An excellent example is Egypt. Look at Egypt and the management of Egyptian politics in 2005, 2006, even to an extent 2007, to see we have highly weak secular political parties: as I said, less than 2 percent in the People's Assembly. But the regime still continues to use its tactics of control, containment when dealing with liberal and leftist political parties. Marina mentioned the case of El Ghad (ph). The case of al Wafd is a second example where the regime really interfered in internal dynamics of the party to basically rule out the possibility of revitalizing its structures. So it's not the fact that these parties are weak, let the regime, let them function or let them organize, no, it's still very much the case that regimes do impose restrictions on these parties and even repress them when needed, as much as they repress and impose restrictions on Islamists. So it should not be underestimated.

Now, let me move to chances and opportunities. As we look at Arab politics of today, and here basically three remarks: one, as Marina mentioned, great majorities in different, in most Arab countries, great majorities are yet to be included in the political process. If you look at those who vote in Morocco, in Egypt, or in Yemen, Bahrain, and Jordan, with the exception of Palestine and Lebanon, these are minorities. Great majorities, eligible voters, citizens, are yet to enter the political process, which means, one, that any projections with regard to the fact that Islamists do command strategic majorities, any projections are highly overestimated.

I'm not sure whether Islamists do command strategic majorities anywhere, apart from Palestine. And this was even not a majority. I mean, if you look at the details of the vote, it was 44 percent to 56 percent. But with the exception of Palestine, and even based on elections, Islamists do not command majorities. Majorities are yet to enter the political process. Of course, what really matters are organized constituencies, as we all know, but at least this fact indicates a potential for liberal and leftist political parties to organize, to get out to constituencies that are yet to enter the political process, one.

Secondly, the fact that Arab politics in some Arab countries, at least, and very much related to elections – once again, Morocco, Egypt, Jordan, Yemen, Kuwait – that Arab politics or political spaces are becoming more interesting, are becoming more dynamic, does open up new chances for liberal and leftist political parties to organize. And it's quite striking, we met different representatives of liberal and leftist political parties a couple of times over the last years in conferences, each one of us in separate meetings. And there is a sense among these parties, among politicians of these parties, there is a sense of a growing need to revitalize their structures, to finally address their crisis. And this did not exist before and this is closely linked to the dynamism of Arab politics in different countries.

This does not mean that this dynamism is taking these societies anywhere closer to democratization or anywhere closer to better representation of different political groups or different segments of the population, but it's becoming more interesting, it's becoming more dynamic. And secular, liberal, leftist political parties are sensing the need to address their crisis.

Finally, and here basically the shortcomings of ruling establishments and of Islamist movements – it's not only that ruling establishments and Islamist movements have, so far, failed to mobilize clear majorities or to organize clear majorities in Arab societies, but they have also failed to address some of the crucial questions of Arab politics and society.

Let me give you two examples, one based on the Egyptian case. We do have issues in Egypt that are of crucial significance and importance for Egyptian politics that are not sufficiently addressed by the ruling establishment and not sufficiently addressed by the Muslim Brotherhood. One are different issues pertaining to the status of the Coptic minority, Copts, and two, issues pertaining to freedoms of political association and political pluralism and their relations to upper limits, religious based or other upper limits imposed by ruling establishments. These issues are not sufficiently discussed or convincingly discussed by the ruling establishment or by the Islamist movement. In fact, there are real gaps in the rhetoric and in the programs and policies, public policies of the ruling establishment and at least rhetoric with regard to the Muslim Brotherhood. And here is a chance where liberal and leftist political parties can tap in and try to organize.

Secondly, if you leave Egypt aside and you move to a country like Yemen, different issues pertaining to social modernization, cultural modernization, are not addressed by the ruling establishment and are not addressed by the Islamist Islah Party, and these are issues, because of the political history of Yemen, because of the political culture and the fact that we did have two countries with two different political experiences until 1990, these are issues of great importance, at least for the southern part of the unified republic.

So majorities are yet to enter Arab politics or political spaces are becoming more interesting and offering more chances and opportunities and there are gaps in liberal – in rhetoric and public policy measures of ruling establishments and Islamist movements.

Finally, liberal and leftist political parties in the region – and although I said that they are developing the sense of a need to address their crisis, to address their weakness, are yet – and we discuss four cases in our paper, Morocco, Egypt, Yemen, and Kuwait – are yet to translate the sense, this need, growing need, to change in policy measures, in organizational reforms, in serious attempts to get out convincing messages, or to organize constituencies in a better way.

And the conclusion which we reach in the paper is that this is very much related to stagnant leadership and very much to stagnant membership of these parties. And this

is not an issue which can simply be blamed on ruling establishments or can simply be blamed on the social fabric and its Islamization, but this is an issue where these parties themselves are to be blamed for where they stand. Many of them have lost even the chance of the last three years to revitalize and renew their organizational structures and it's not related to which is highly referred to and often discussed in the press – it's not related to a lack of financial assets or organizational assets.

Some of these parties are as well organized as any Islamist opposition movement. Look at al Wafd. Al Wafd in Egypt is the only opposition party which is represented in every major Egyptian city. Its party was a name that still resonates with many Egyptians, has historical legacy, it has an efficient – at least on paper – an efficient organization machinery. But it was not revitalized. So what I'm trying to say is, yes, I mean, there are chances, there are opportunities, but at the end of the day it is a responsibility of these parties to get out and to translate the need to address their crisis in concrete policy measures in concrete organizational reforms.

And this is not an issue where external actors can basically make the job for them. And I guess this is one of the illusions which we have been suffering from over the last years especially in relation to American democracy promotion, but even European democracy promotion. To imagine that any training programs of sorts will solve the crisis of secular parties without getting these parties and their members to become more active to figure out strategically where they are going is an illusion as several cases have showed in the Arab world across the region and over the last two to three years. Thank you very much.

MS. WRIGHT: Thank you. Owen?

OWEN KIRBY: Thank you very much. After that last comment or set of comments, I don't know what else I can offer here. I mean, it rings true and I'd like to thank, you know, Carnegie's recent Arab Reform Bulletin, particularly the section written by Tom Carothers and talking about what it is that political parties strengthening assistance truly is. I mean, it is a set of technical recommendations, technical tools that implementers such as NDI sitting here today, I don't know if IRI is here, can offer these parties, but at the end of the day there is a limit to what technical assistance can provide. You know, issues of leadership and political vision are not things that we can provide anyone; these are issues that need to come from within.

I'd like to thank Amr as well. As someone who is on the implementing side of the equation and not just on the donor one, it is not exactly a soft spot I have for these political parties that aren't sort of rising to the occasion today, but I don't think we can underestimate the severe restrictions under which the parties, and I'm talking generally the secular parties, function in these countries. The level of oppression in some cases, the lack of resources in others are real, however this should be no excuse. The weaknesses, the internal weaknesses, particularly the three are pointed out in the paper of lack of political platforms or visions, the failure to communicate externally what the political message is, and the organizational deficiencies that secular parties all possess are real

issues and regimes aren't, as pointed here today, ultimately responsible for them. I mean, there are issues outside of the communication—outside of campaigning on the street and drumming up constituencies, that the parties can in fact address internally.

Why is this issue important though? I mean, again, I don't think there is much more I can add to what was stated today, but why is the issue of the state of secular parties important? And I think Marina pointed to a few of them. I think it is a little more explicitly stated in the new paper itself. I highly advise that everyone read the paper if they haven't. The issue is one of competition. It is of choice. This is ultimately what the Middle East Partnership Initiative was established to do. This is what our technical assistance is there to achieve and that is open, competitive, transparent political system. I mean, we are not talking about democracy if we are not talking about competition and choice. And I think it is clear from comments made today and from recent elections in the region there is not much of either, frankly. There is not a lot of competition and there's very little choice, particularly when we are talking about competition between not just parties but between political visions. This is where the competition is truly lacking.

You know, one issue in the paper that I would point to which I may not agree with, and I know it is just a sort of general comment, but it is a comment that Islamist parties offer up Islam as the solution; I think that is in quotes, "Islam as a solution," or something along these lines. Islamist parties, particularly if you look at a place like Morocco, are offering up more. And even in the Palestinian context, while the message may be vague the Islamist parties are, you know, going beyond purely Islamist sort of platforms and messages to talk about real social needs, talk about economic ones. The PJD in Morocco is a highly sophisticated party when it comes to looking at the various economic sectors in the country. So this is something that needs to be taken into account. But against that vision, against the vision posed by the PJD or in the case of Hamas that of accountability or transparency of rule of law and equality before the law, very little is being offered by the secular parties.

And ultimately if our end game is a truly democratic region, one in which there is free competition, there is transition of power on a regular basis by electoral exercises, then we need to see the secular parties take root, develop the internal structures that they need to compete. The issue of, again Amr pointed out, I mean, we shouldn't exaggerate the extent to which the Islamists pose some inevitable challenge to the political system. No, they are just highly organized internally, united behind leadership and a vision and a program. And as a result they are able to mobilize their constituencies very effectively on election day. This was very clear. I think the numbers aren't actually as dramatic as Amr stated. I think in the Palestinian context, we are talking about in the raw vote count 42 to 45 or something like this, not 50 something.

So, the Islamists are very successful at mobilizing their constituents. The secular parties should be as successful and there is nothing stopping them from mobilizing their constituents except the lack of vision and the communication of that vision, a vision that resonates at the grassroots.

I'm not certain, I mean, I think this is a question perhaps for the presenters and maybe some of the audience whether or not secular parties are losing their young leaders to the NGO community because these are the – it's within NGO and sector that you can address some of the issues that perhaps are a little more of interest to secular leaders but are not in fact, well, that don't find any resolution within the political party spectrum or arena, but also which don't resonate perhaps at the grassroots level where the Islamists are a little more successful these days.

Issues of human rights are extremely important, but the Islamists more and more are talking about real bread and butter issues and this is which – and this is the area where the secular parties aren't as successful talking about pocketbook issues, bread and butter issues, issues of daily subsistence. Anyway, that is a question perhaps for others to answer, but again this is a very important subject for us. It is a very important subject for the freedom agenda and if we want to see democracy take root in the least then we have to find ways to support the emergence of this middle ground into a political vehicle that can compete successfully with both of the other poles in the political systems. Thank you.

MS. WRIGHT: Thank you very much, Owen. Thank you very much all three of you. I want to begin with one quick question to Amr. You keep using the word illusion and it struck me that is it an illusion, are secular parties in general an illusion? Have we gone through a period of several decades which countries inherited secular rule from colonial masters? Is it realistic to think that we can count on secular parties to emerge at any time in the next few, you know, two or three decades as really viable powerful alternatives?

MR. HAMZAWY: Well it's – I mean, here we really have to differentiate and you need to adopt a case-by-case approach. And let me give you two examples, one reflecting on the Egyptian scene. I do believe that a party like al Wafd does have a great potential in Egypt even taking into consideration current restrictions imposed by the regime on liberal leftist political parties and the current moment which we are undergoing in Egypt. Al Wafd has a great potential, I would say, out of three different reasons. One, it has a historical legacy which still resonates. I mean, this is not a party that is coming from nowhere. This is party which is well known. This has been the party of secular Egyptian nationalists. This has been a party which really offered one of the most dynamic answers to a crucial problem that we have in Egypt that is with regard to the relationship between the Muslim majority and the Coptic minority.

Al Wafd has a chance as well because it has an excellent organization and financial apparatus. I mean, this is a functioning political party. It has become stagnant over the last years, but this can still be revitalized. Finally, al Wafd has a chance because – be the ruling establishment of the NDP or the Muslim Brotherhood, these are the two dominant forces of Egyptian politics, do not address some of the issues that al Wafd can easily address if it gets itself to become to be more dynamic and more vital.

Now, so far to the assets which you have in al Wafd as a party. Now if you look at the wider political scene, yes, viable does not mean that this is going to be a party that

will compete with the ruling establishment or with the Muslim Brotherhood. Now, I mean, the utmost where I see al Wafd going, if it manages to revitalize its structures, is to be a significant minority party. It to be a party which is represent not by less than one percent in the current people's assembly, but maybe taking five to 10 percent to become one of the viable political actors, but not as a competitor with the ruling establishments or Islamist movements.

And two, the viability of a party like al Wafd can materialize in Egyptian politics by simply forcing the ruling establishment and al Ikhwan, the Muslim Brotherhood, to address some of the issues that they so far have been ignoring. But at the end of the day this is a minority party. I do not see al Wafd moving into becoming the second strongest political force in Egypt. This will be left for the polarized scene for a while.

Take Morocco, and here Marina might like to add to what I will say, Morocco is different because liberal leftist political parties, especially Istaqlal and the Socialist party are better organized. These are political parties even in a European sense and this is a different tradition. When you compare it to Al-Mashruk (ph) tradition to the Near Eastern tradition or elsewhere like in Kuwait where we even do not have political parties, we have them organized under different banners. So the liberal and leftist parties in Morocco are better organized. You have a historical legacy as well and they can tap into gray zones of the Islamist movement, of the Party for Justice and Development, issues that the Party for Justice and Development cannot answer or hasn't so far answered as well as the ruling establishment, but at the end of the day this is not a party – any one of them is not a party which can organize a strategic majority. These are minority parties at the end of the day.

And the question is what we develop and what we put forward in peace under post-modern politics is in a way to call on these parties to leave aside as a paradigm of mass political parties. They do not have the potential to gain of organize strategic majorities but, if they become more viable, if they become more active, taking into consideration all what we have right now in a country like Morocco and Egypt, they can become more relevant to pluralist dynamics.

MS. OTTAWAY: If I can just add something here, this issue of what Amr just referred to as post-modern politics. If you look at the Islamist parties today I am very tempted to say they are organized along traditional Leninist lines, if you want. They are the prototype of the mass political party with cells, with branches, with a very strong political structure. They have ten years – they have been working on this for decades essentially and I think the chances that the secular parties will out-compete with them, if they start now trying to create similar competing organizations, are very remote. They have too much of a – the Islamists have too much of a head start. One thing which is very interesting, and I don't know whether it can be successful or not, is what some of the secular parties are trying to do now, that is to try to move into a different type of political activities. I'll give you two examples.

One of them is the Kifaya movement in Egypt. What did Egypt – what did the – you know, and this was in fact the best effort that secular parties made or secular organization made in the case of Egypt, saying we have to move to direct action essentially. We are not going between now and the elections, essentially, going to be able to build political structures that can compete with the Islamists; they have been at it for too many years.

So that what they did they tried to make a run around of the problem by trying to bring people out in the streets, to mobilize people through direct action. A lot of the parties that we have talked to are really looking to – are toying with the idea that maybe that is the wave of the future to—that is the way to move forward. It is a direct intervention in the political process, direct actions.

In Kuwait you see a lot – there is a lot of enthusiasm right now about the success that the students' organization had in bringing about a reform of the electoral system. And how did they do it? They did it by camping out in front of the parliament night after night and it became kind of, you know, Woodstock – you know, the Kuwaiti form of Woodstock meetings so on and so forth. And I talked to a lot of people who felt, you know, that is the way to move forward, that is the way to intervene in the political process and so on. It seems to me unlikely that this is going to be successful because it is difficult to maintain the momentum of this kind of direct intervention, but it is certainly something that bears watching because it is very much on the radar screen of these organizations.

MS. WRIGHT: Thank you. Ted?

THEODORE KATTOUF: I'd like to – Ted Kattouf. I'd like to like ask Mr. Kirby. I guess in, what, January 2006 we had elections in the Palestinian territories. It has been pointed out Fatah did not necessarily – Fatah may have gotten the plurality of votes, but they certainly did not get the majority of seats in the parliament. Hamas did and therefore was in a position to form a government. We pushed for that election – that is, the United States pushed for such elections; we sent observers, including I think Jimmy Carter, and they were judged very free, very fair elections. Indeed, the U.S. government had, through USAID projects and others, had been putting money in for years into just trying to get that result, a free and fair election in the Palestinian territories.

It appears that Mahmoud Abbas a year earlier won the presidency on a platform of a two-state solution; it appears that Hamas won its election on the basis of throw the bums out and the fact that Fatah showed its incompetence by running four or five people in won district when Hamas would run one. My question is this, we cut off – we decided that Hamas could not be allowed to succeed and so we cut off funding to a lot of things, including salaries of doctors, nurses, teachers, social workers, and the like, if they were part of the authority. And we cut all these projects, including water projects in Gaza and the like. And today it appears that Hamas, if it comes to violence, Hamas may sweep Fatah from Gaza. Do adjudge this policy to be successful, and if not what would you see as we should have done differently?

MR. KIRBY: I think it's – well, I mean, the administration has been very consistent that elections don't democracy make. I mean, this is, it's not just an election it's the outcome of those elections. And unfortunately, while Hamas ran on a political platform both at the municipal level and at the PLC, that gave Fatah real run for the money talking about issues that, you know, made—that were importantest to Palestinians and they were not national issues.

I mean, it is clear, Hamas, as you said, ran on let us throw the bums out and not because they didn't necessarily make headway on the national issue but because they did not address real bread and butter daily issues for the average Palestinians. However, those elections took place within the context and under the provisions of the Oslo Agreements and Hamas has chosen and continues to hold a position that rejects those provisions. And those provisions are inherently democratic in that, you know, those provisions require the Palestinian Authority to recognize the legitimate rights of its neighbors, not just its own citizens.

And, you know, the ball, I think since January 2006, has been in Hamas' court: do you recognize the provisions of previous agreements in practice, do you recognize the existence of state of Israel, and do you accord Israeli citizens the same rights that you would accord and wish your own citizens accorded? And so, for eighteen months now Hamas has had that choice and they haven't decided to, you know, make the right decision based on, not only the Oslo Provisions, but again, a greater democratic set of principles in international norms.

MR. KATTOUF: Can I just get a clarification?

MS. WRIGHT: I'll tell you what, there are so many people who have questions and we have limited time. I'm going to take three questions and then we will divide them up. Let's begin here.

MR. WIARDA: Howard Wiarda, from CSIS. I'm not quite sure where I'm going to go with this question, but given the discussion that we've had here, I wonder if we are really talking about political parties as anyone with a Western European or a North American experience would recognize. Or are we talking about something else and therefore require a whole new language and nomenclature and questions about what political parties do or mean, and therefore what democracy means?

It seems to me that what most of you are talking about are fundamentalist movements on the one hand and often government-run and controlled political parties which have official state imprimatur on the other and the sort of fledgling little organizations in between which, from the analysis here, don't seem to be doing all that well. So, is this really an emerging political party system that we are talking about here or is this something completely different which reflects non-Western Third World societies and cultures and which therefore require a new way of thinking about them as distinct from thinking in sort of Euro-centric political party kinds of terms? Is this

something that's really quite different and, therefore, we need a new language and set of categories to think about it?

MS. WRIGHT: Okay, let's go back here. (Inaudible) – over here.

Q: Thank you. Rich Eisendorf from Freedom House. I want to echo some of the sentiments I've heard also from the last questioner as well about civil society versus political parties. In the context of much of the Middle East where the ability to organize, participate politically, enjoy civil rights, enjoy freedom of expression is very limited, what's wrong with seeking expression through civil society and through NGOs? And I think, you know, a number of examples have been given so I'll leave it that.

MS. WRIGHT: And let's try it over here.

Q: I think the problem that you raised, Marina, about the issue of discussion in Lebanon and that the parties they did not really – they were kind of lost about how they identify this, I think this is related to the question or the comment of our colleague from CSIS. It seems to me that probably we need to examine the effectiveness of political parties in the Arab world in not imposing the word secularism there because in the true sense probably the secular parties are only Communist Party. And even Communist Party in the Arab world, I heard, and maybe this is true or not, that even the Sudanese Communist Party they used to open, recite the Koran in their official meetings. So, I think we need to use probably a different kind of narrative or language to describe, I think – I want to applaud you, first of all, for think of bringing to attention this issue which means that at least the assessment of the political parties in the Arab world and how they could be effective –

MS. WRIGHT: Is there a question in there?

Q: Yes, my question is there is other factors that they were not mentioned at all. You may consider them political factors, external factors, that has to do with the establishment or the progress of political parties. A political party seek to get to the power, but in the Arab world we still have a mixed program. It's not only to jump to replace government, it is also to have a mission of, kind of, completing national liberation program that they still – so when they seek to have people to – in the Palestinian case –

MS. WRIGHT: If you have a question, fly to that. I think we can—

Q: Well, I think the things that I am talking about is at the core of this issue –

MS. WRIGHT: (Inaudible.)

Q: Yeah, the question is, there is other factors, and you cannot isolate –

MS. WRIGHT: That is not a question.

Q: You cannot isolate building political party – there is other political factors that you have to take into consideration that play a role in building the parties in the Arab world that may not be in other cases.

MS. OTTAWAY: Okay, could I try the – I think these are political parties; in the sense that if you are dealing what we have in the Arab world, not everywhere, not in – what we have in many Middle East countries – and particularly the ones we were talking about; the four case studies we looked at were all countries that have election-based political systems – and these political parties are political parties in the traditional sense of the term. They are there to get out the vote and to get people to vote in certain ways for the elections. Now, the Islamists – sure, there are Islamist movements.

But what you find is that in countries that are election-based, these movements are in fact forming the political party, which is separate from the movement because they need for those people to go out and get out the vote on election day. So I think the term political party is very adequate, in my opinion, for this political organization. I don't see anything particularly Middle Eastern about influence by the culture over the area. There are in many ways rather traditional political parties.

Back to what political parties do in election-based systems. The issue of civil society versus political parties is the same issue. What is wrong with civil society? There is nothing wrong intrinsically with civil society. But if you are dealing with political systems that are based on elections, the civil society organizations do not do – if you want to be theoretical – they do not perform the function of aggregation of interests that then brings people to have a position in the parliaments essentially. So that is the weakness of civil society organization in election-based systems. They are not a substitute; they complement it. They might complement political parties. They might be a training ground; they might be a spawning ground for new ideas, for example. But in the end, you need people to get out the vote and there is no substitute for political party.

MR. HAMZAWY: Okay, well, I agree with what Marina said on whether we can use the term political parties or not. Yes, these are political parties. And the deficiencies, which you referred to, and which we refer to, are in fact imposed by the very fact that we still have semi-authoritarian or authoritarian regimes. So these are deficiencies, which you will find elsewhere, outside the Arab world where you do have similar political systems that push opposition political parties into spheres of being less relevant, less significant, limits the capacity to organize constituencies to act as political parties.

With regard to Islamist movements, where they have the chance to legalize and license political parties, they have been doing it. Now, if you look at the region, we have an Islamist political party in Morocco; we have an Islamist political party in Jordan; we have an Islamist party in Yemen. We don't have one in Egypt, but this is not a choice of the Muslim Brotherhood; this is a choice of the Egyptian political system, of the ruling establishment, which is yet to allow them to license a political party.

Secondly, civil society and NGOs, as Marina said – and especially Egypt and Morocco – are quite telling as examples in this regard. You have a great dynamism in civil society arenas in Egypt and Morocco in terms of debating politics, debating political reforms, debating public policies, debating even failures of ruling establishments and Islamist movements. But this dynamism has never translated itself into weight on election days. And here, we come back to election-based political systems and what you really need to compete with ruling establishments and Islamist movements. Islamist movements are quite interesting, because they have combined the two components. They have very active civil society components almost everywhere in the region, and they still have managed to build up party-like machineries, where they have the licenses. They are political parties whether or not they are movements. So it's not a question of either/or; it's not a question of what's wrong with civil society; it's a question of how civil society and dominance in the civil society arena can or cannot translate itself into weight in election-based political systems.

Finally, Mounzer's question on the way we use secular as a term is not secularist. We simply, as Marina said – we use it to indicate party platforms, political platforms that are not based on religion. So this is – in a way it's a definition by negation. And this is why the concept itself, the term itself, is quite problematic. But whether they recite the Koran or not is a different issue. Of course they can recite the Koran wherever they like. But it's not an anti-religious component, which we refer to. We simply refer to platforms that are not based on Islam or not based on Islam or not based on religion. And in fact, they make this distinction very explicit. This is the first line which you get when you communicate with them – do not use secular to mean anti-religious. This is not how they use it.

Q: Thank you, Ann Phillips. This is a personal question. I am at the State Department, but don't take this as a question from that position – very interesting presentation. I have a question. To what extent are we, perhaps – I know this is on secular parties – but creating, perhaps, an artificial dichotomy between secular and Islamist parties? And in terms of how they will or do function in the political landscape as it opens up more, to what extent will our Islamist parties in individual countries really cohesive; to what extent are they, as political landscapes open and political space opens up, potential for as much competition among Islamic organizations, Islamic parties as among secular or between the two?

Q: I think I'm working sort of the same territory. I want to talk about political parties, and I'm going to ask a question that will reveal ignorance, but I'm here to try to get rid of that. When I think about political parties in a traditional American sense, I think that they have to have at least four things to work – they've got to have ideas; they've got to have money; they've got to have patronage; and they've got to have leaders. And as I was listening to this conversation, I kept thinking about the American model and the secular parties sound to me, kind of like third parties. And we all know the American experience with third parties and the extent that they have ever been – I won't say successful, but where they've had their impact, it's with leaders like Teddy Roosevelt or George Wallace or Ross Perot. So my question is, if those four criteria

make any sense – and I'm sure there are others – who – whether Islamist or secular – is delivering on those four criteria?

MS. WRIGHT: One last one.

Q: Nidal Ibourk from Almustaqbal Alarabi Magazine. I have actually two questions. The first one is related to one of the countries that you have been speaking about. And the second one is a more general question. In Morocco, after King Mohammed the VI have taken the crown in 1999, we have seen that the country have gone through a more open and democratic process compared to other Arabic countries, and which was reflected in many programs that contribute to the development of the Moroccan society like the new family code and other programs. So don't you think that that democratic process that the Moroccan kingdom have taken represent an open door opportunity for secular parties in Morocco?

And the second question is, talking more practically, what do you think that secular parties in the Arab world should do?

MS. WRIGHT: I promised that we would end up by 1:45 so we'll do these final questions and then I'll let you –

MS. OTTAWAY: Okay, let me take your question first, because you put it very graphically. Ideas, money, patronage, and leaders – I would say patronage only – thank you. (Laughs.) I can yell. Patronage, I think only ruling parties have patronage in the Arab world at this point. I mean, you have to be in a position of power in order to be able to dispense patronage.

The other ideas, certainly, at this point the advantage in terms of ideas is on the part of the Islamist parties, because the Islamist parties have been very systematic in trying to develop their ideas. We have done a lot of work on these. And what we see is a constant evolution of the ideas of these political organizations. There are tremendous debates within all the Islamist parties and Islamist organizations. One can agree or disagree, but there is certainly a lot of intellectual ferment in these parties. We have not seen, at this point, the same kind of debates within the secular parties themselves.

Money, it's a question of – if you talk to the secular parties and they tell you the Islamists have all the advantages because they have the money, because they get money through the charity. People give to charity; it's part of the tradition. And then, they spend money on political activities. I think in many cases this is very frankly an excuse. I have heard that argument about Islamists have all the advantage in terms of money made to me by representatives of the Kuwait Liberal Organization. They are all part of the larger merchant families of Kuwait. And you almost feel like laughing when they tell you the Islamists have the advantage in terms of money. There is plenty of money to be had, but in order to get to the money, you have to have an organization. And I think there is kind of a vicious circle here.

Leadership, it's a question of – you know – at this point, I think there is more leadership in the Islamist parties than there is in the secular parties. There is no doubt about that. But I think – just one last point on your comparing the secular party to American third parties, it's not a particularly good analogy, because most of these organizations have a long history. In fact, the Waft was a ruling party once. The Waft was in power for decades. In other words, these are not new organizations that came out of nowhere. Many of them have a very long history. So I don't think there is any one group that has a clear advantage along the criteria that you have established, except for the ruling parties and patronage. I'll let you –

MR. HAMZAWY: Let me – even with regard to patronage, I would disagree to an extent, because there are informal networks of patronage, which Islamists have managed to establish across the region. I mean, Palestine is an excellent example. Egypt is a second good example. So patronage used to be state-owned or ruling establishment dominated for a long time. But this has come to an end as of the 1970s. So there are informal networks of patronage that Islamists have managed to develop.

Now, however, these four criteria – leaders, money, ideas, and patronage – I am afraid they miss a crucial point that maybe what is really central for opposition political parties – and here, I am leaving ruling establishments aside, the ruling parties, aside – is to figure out ways and strategies to manage regime oppression, to operate in a political scene that is highly restrictive and imposes different deficiencies on these political parties due to the fact that we have an autocratic ruling establishment or an authoritarian ruling establishment in place that keeps limiting the space given to any other opposition movements.

So it's maybe less about these four criteria and more about managing regime repression, managing an autocratic scene, managing an authoritarian scene. And here, I must say, when I compare the two components of the opposition spectrum in the region – Islamists and non-Islamists, liberal and leftist – definitely, Islamists have been more oppressive in managing regime repression. Although they have been more and more the target of regime repression, even when you compare them to liberal and leftist political parties, so more repression has been used in there in different countries in dealing with Islamists.

Finally, on Morocco – and I guess, here I would like to make a general point because we refer to it in the paper as well – I mean, it's not only that secular parties, liberal leftists are competing with Islamists or are facing regime restrictions or the fact that secular ideas have been discredited over time. But even when you look now at Arab politics, you look at Morocco, you look at Egypt, you look even at a country like the UAE, one of the most convincing – or maybe the most convincing – secular visions are coming out of ruling establishments. So if you look at the NDPs, the ruling National Democratic Party in Egypt, or you look at the monarchy in Morocco to an extent, you look at the rulers of the UAE – and then even though they don't have party dynamics but pluralism – but ruling establishments have made liberal ideas to a great extent be with regard to market economies, with regard to freedom, even with regard to an ethic on

democracy, have made liberal idea their own. And they are competing, in fact, in a more effective way, especially with liberal political parties.

So it's not that democratization or the fact that the regime is using a rhetoric on democracy gives liberal and leftist political parties more chances. It might give them chances; it might limit their chances, especially if they are competing on the same assets – rhetorically and in terms of public policies.

MS. WRIGHT: I want to thank you all for coming. I'm sorry we didn't get to all the questions. It's clearly an issue that we're all going to be following for a long time to come. Thank you, Marina. Thank you, Amr. Thank you, Owen. Thank you again.

(Applause.)

(END)