

U.S. and Regional Initiatives in the Maghreb

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Economic development and political reform in the Middle East and North Africa are goals that are central to U.S. foreign policy. The U.S. has a long-standing commitment to these goals in the countries of the Maghreb region, a commitment that it shares with the EU. Although many U.S. programs in the region are ongoing cooperation efforts undertaken on a bilateral basis, an increasing number of new U.S.-backed initiatives fall under the framework of President Bush's Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI), as well as the Forum for the Future partnership with the Group of Eight industrialized democracies and the countries of the Broader Middle East and North Africa (BMENA). This article will focus on our economic and political reform efforts in the broadest sense and provide some specific examples of the many programs in which the U.S. is involved, both in the Maghreb and throughout the Middle East and North Africa.

The U.S. and Europe face what President George Bush has called a "generational challenge" in helping the Broader Middle East and North Africa build a new future. We must help reformers throughout the region accelerate the pace of reform, while acknowledging that each country has its own path to freedom and democracy. In the Maghreb, this commitment is made all the more meaningful by the long-standing ties of friendship between the U.S. and the countries of the region, ties which complement those between Europe and the southern rim of the Mediterranean.

In support of reform and modernization in the Middle East and North Africa, the U.S. consults closely with all the countries of the region. As Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice said in Paris in February 2005, the efforts of the U.S. and the G-8 are fused with regio-

nal efforts like the European Union's Barcelona Process, which has been advancing modernization in the Maghreb region for a decade. NATO's Mediterranean Dialogue is another important regional forum in which the U.S. and Spain play an active role. In addition, individual EU member-states have been working for years to nurture the attitudes and institutions of liberal democracy in the Arab and Muslim world.

The U.S. has a long history of close ties with the countries of the Maghreb. Morocco was one of the first countries to recognize the United States, and the first treaty between the U.S. and Morocco was ratified in 1787, making it the longest unbroken treaty relationship in U.S. history. In June 2004, the two countries signed the U.S.-Morocco Free Trade Agreement, a historic pact that expands opportunities for the workers, manufacturers, consumers, and farmers of both Morocco and the United States. The agreement supports Morocco's economic and political reforms and is a key component in President Bush's commitment to work toward the establishment of a Middle East Free Trade Area (MEFTA) by 2013. The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) has developed a wide range of programs providing technical and public outreach assistance to enable the Moroccan private sector to benefit from the Free Trade Agreement.

The Middle East Partnership Initiative

These programs form part of a much broader initiative, one that affects not only the Maghreb but the entire Arab world. This is the Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI), which was launched by President Bush in December 2002. MEPI's goals are to support economic, political, and educational reform efforts in the Middle East and champion opportunity for all

people of the region, especially women and youth. The Initiative strives to bring together businesses, non-governmental organizations, civil society elements and governments from around the world to develop innovative policies and programs that support economic development and political reform in the region. The U.S. has committed almost \$293 million to MEPI since its inception. This funding is in addition to the bilateral economic assistance we provide annually to the countries of the Middle East and North Africa. The goal of the Initiative is to encourage political pluralism, economic openness and the growth of civil society. One of MEPI's principal pillars is the promotion of programs that provide opportunities for women. Through the Business Internship for Young Arab Women Program, MEPI provides talented young women from the Middle East unique opportunities to learn management and business skills while working in the dynamic and productive U.S. business environment. The U.S. also provides funding to the International Human Rights Law Group's project on Women's Legal Rights in Morocco, where the unequal legal status of women is a serious obstacle to gender equality and economic advancement.

On the economic front, MEPI provides support to public-private partnerships that promote economic development, good economic governance, training in business skills and job creation. For example, through the Financial Service Volunteer Corps (FSVC), MEPI provides technical assistance to help strengthen the financial systems of selected countries in the Middle East, including Morocco, Tunisia and Algeria, in order to promote broad-based economic development, investment, and employment growth in the region. The program improves the capacity of commercial banks to provide credit and other financial services to the broader economy, particularly small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs); strengthens the region's central banks, focusing in particular on improving the quality and effectiveness of bank supervision and regulation; and invigorates regional securities markets.

In Algeria, the WTO Accession Technical Assistance program and the U.S. Department of the Treasury's Treasury Debt Reform program provide technical assistance designed to strengthen and liberalize Algeria's economy. In Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia, the U.S. Department of Commerce's Commercial Law Development Program provides technical assistance and training in intellectual property rights, anti-dumping laws and procedures, competition law and

policy, electronic customs practices, e-commerce and banking.

In the political realm, MEPI contributes to the development of a pluralistic, free society in Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia through the Initiative for Open and Pluralistic Media in Arabic Speaking Countries. In conjunction with the National Democratic Institute (NDI), International Republican Institute (IRI) and other groups, MEPI has established a wide range of programs throughout the region designed to strengthen democratic processes, promote the rule of law and make parliament, political parties and other public institutions more effective and accountable. The program's goals are to increase the number and improve the campaign skills of reform-minded candidates for public office, especially women. MEPI programs help to strengthen the electoral process in the Arab world by making political parties more effective, representative and transparent. Under MEPI, the U.S. has set up a series of rotating leadership and campaign schools to provide training in campaign planning, message development, media and communication skills to current and future women leaders in the Arab world. The campaign schools in Qatar and Tunisia have trained more than 100 women from across the region, and a third school is planned for March 2005 in Jordan. The program has also set up the groundwork for a systematic election implementation and monitoring program in each location. In addition, MEPI's Legislative Strengthening Program provides technical assistance to legislators, staff and party caucuses on the local and national levels.

Another cornerstone of MEPI is its robust and creative educational program. MEPI is in the process of rolling out an Arabic-language Early Reading Program, a major effort to provide resources for the Arabic translation of early reading books for use in primary schools in the region and to provide school-based libraries across the region. The MEPI Girls' Scholarship Program builds on previous U.S. efforts by providing scholarships to girls in Morocco's rural areas. The Functional Literacy Program assists the Moroccan Government in a new initiative to develop improved literacy training materials. In addition, the U.S.-Middle East University Partnerships Program awards enable U.S. universities to work together with higher education institutions in the Middle East to strengthen university programs. In Morocco, MEPI's Judicial and Legal Reform Program focuses on the training of judges in the implementation of the new family code.

THE SEA ISLAND DECLARATION (JUNE 2004)

In the G8 meeting held in June 2004, the world's most industrialised countries made a declaration that reformulated the main lines of the American initiative, the Broader Middle East and North Africa (BMENA), in the presence of the main leaders of the region and following the criticism that the American project had received after it was leaked to the newspaper Al-Hayat in February 2004. Some Arab leaders considered the initiative, which at that time made reference to the "Greater Middle East" as an imposition of reforms from abroad. At the Arab League Summit in Tunisia held in May, this reaction led to the Arab countries presenting their own declaration for reform and modernisation in the Arab world, before the G8 Summit took place.

The Sea Island Declaration sought to aid the Arab initiative and launch the "Partnership for Progress and a Common Future" in the countries of the region. This plan basically consisted of a declaration of principles on human dignity, freedom, democracy, rule of law, economic opportunity and social justice. Its starting point is that the reforms can not be imposed from outside, that the individual characteristics of each country have to be respected and that their incorporation needs to be both at government and civil society levels. This Partnership is built around three main areas: political, sociocultural and economic, as in the three chapters of the EU's Barcelona Process.

The declaration also establishes the creation of a "Forum for the Future," which will provide a framework at ministerial level to tackle political and economic reform of the region and will establish parallel meetings in civil society. The first "Forum for the Future" was held in Rabat on 11th December 2004 (See page 55).

The declaration also included a call for the reconstruction of Iraq, full

support for UN resolution 1546, as well as, significantly, the search for solutions to the Palestine-Israel conflict based on the Road Map and the total acceptance of two states coexisting in peace and security. This call, which was absent in the initial American proposal, the "Greater Middle East," was included at the insistence of the Arab and European countries.

Even though this declaration does not seem to have obtained the necessary support to become the catalyst for reform, it has not provoked the wave of criticism in the Arab world that the rough draft did when it was made public in February. Its welcome has been qualified in various circles as "sceptic," although its content has been valued positively.

Generally, there has been a lack of enthusiasm from Europe for a project which duplicates the objectives of the Barcelona Process, that has already been running for ten years. As it was demonstrated in the conclusions of the Euro-Mediterranean Ministerial Conference held in The Hague in November 2004, the Euro-Mediterranean Ministers reaffirmed the centrality of the Barcelona Process, backed up by the European Neighbourhood Policy, over and above any new declarations, such as the Sea Island Declaration. The conclusions illustrate that there is the will to collaborate with international and multilateral projects, as in for example, the points established in the Sea Island Declaration, always as long as the policies are compatible with existing compromises between the EU and its Mediterranean partners.

Sea Island Declaration (9-06-04):

www.g8usa.gov/d_060904c.htm

Arab League Declaration in Tunisia (22/23-05-04):

www.arabsummit.tn/fr/230504-17.htm

Forum for the Future

An important new component of MEPI is the U.S. participation in the Forum for the Future. The Forum for the Future is a partnership among the countries of the Broader Middle East and North Africa (BMENA) region and the Group of Eight (G-8) industrialized democracies, all united around a common agenda that advances the universal values of human dignity, democracy, economic opportunity and social justice. The first Forum for the Future convened on 11th December 2004 in Rabat, Morocco, and was co-chaired by then-Secretary of State Colin Powell and Moroccan Foreign Minister Mohamed Benaissa. In Rabat, Foreign, Finance and Economy Ministers from 28 countries gathered to discuss and develop collaborative efforts to support political, economic and social reform in the BMENA region. Civil society and business representatives also participated in the Forum, which was an enormous success. Among the Forum's accomplishments were:

- The establishment of a Democracy Assistance Dialogue, in which member countries provide electoral assistance, focus on the role of women in the political process and advance relations between the region's governments and civil society.
- The development of a Literacy Action Plan for the region with the goal of halving the illiteracy rate over the next decade and improving education, especially for girls and women, throughout the region. Algeria, together with Afghanistan, is co-sponsor of the BMENA literacy initiative.
- The establishment of the International Finance Corporation's Private Enterprise Partnership for the Middle East and North Africa facility to support small and medium enterprises. Forum participants have already contributed over \$60 million of the \$100 million goal for the facility.
- In Morocco and Bahrain, the creation of two entrepreneurship centres to provide the region's young people with the opportunities and skills they will need to succeed in a competitive global economy.

- Working with the Consultative Group to Assist the Poor (CGAP), Forum partners have established a microfinance consultative group and are preparing to open a technical hub and microfinance training centre in 2005.
- The launching of an Investment Task Force, a private sector, CEO-led group mobilizing investment in the region to spur economic growth and create jobs. The Task Force will work with the region's governments and the OECD to remove impediments to investment.

The Forum participants plan to meet in Bahrain in November 2005 to review progress on these initiatives and point the way ahead.

Finally, on the level of educational and cultural exchange, the U.S. has a long history of cooperation with the countries of the Maghreb. Our Fulbright, Humphrey and Eisenhower exchange programs have expanded significantly over the last three years, while since 2000 the State Department's International Visitor Program has doubled in size in Morocco alone. The State Department also sponsors the visits of dozens

of U.S. academics, experts, writers, artists and performers to the region every year. The Department's Arabic book translation program produces thousands of books each year and the Department's Africa Regional Services centre ensures that American texts in French translation are available in the Maghreb.

The process of encouraging and supporting reform is, by its very nature, a pluralistic one. No one country or group of countries holds the ideal model for progress and prosperity, but the U.S. and Europe share the generational obligation to help the region along the path to reform. As Secretary Rice said in Paris on 8th February, "just as our own democratic paths have not always been smooth, we realize that democratic reform in the Middle East will be difficult and uneven. Different societies will advance in their own way. Freedom by its very nature must be home grown. It must be chosen. It cannot be given, and it certainly cannot be imposed." It is in this spirit that the U.S. and Europe are working together as partners in advancing democracy and prosperity in the Middle East and North Africa.