

POLICY BRIEF

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The Greater Middle East Initiative: Off to a Shaky Start

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*The administration's
Greater Middle East
Initiative must
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In the past year we have seen tremendous enthusiasm on the part of the Bush administration in promoting democracy and political reform in the Middle East. The pro-democracy declarations by high level officials started last November when President Bush, speaking at the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), announced the need to adopt what he called a “forward strategy of freedom in the Middle East.” The following month, US Secretary of State Colin Powell spoke about the “US-Middle East Partnership Initiative,” (MEPI) which set out to promote regional economic growth, women’s rights, and support for a stronger civil society. The most recent – and grandest plan of all – arrives later this month at the G-8 Summit in Sea Island, Georgia, when the

administration will officially launch what it calls the “Greater Middle East Initiative” (GMEI). Yet despite all the fanfare the new initiative, like many of its predecessors, is unlikely to work. Even before its official launch, the initiative is being greeted with skepticism in Europe and outright resentment from the Arab world.

The new initiative is loosely based on the 1975 Helsinki accords which were intended to settle post-World War II border disputes. It was signed by 35 nations, including the US, the Soviet Union and most of Europe. Its priorities include promoting democracy and good governance, expanding economic opportunities and widening regional access to education and information.

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While the administration has tried to make democracy-building a central part of its war on terrorism, the new initiative has proven to be highly controversial, both with Europeans as well as Arab governments. European leaders voiced concern the plan imposes the Bush administration's vision on the Middle East, rather than working in cooperation with reformers in the region. French Foreign Minister Dominique de Villepin, cautioned against the Bush approach, saying, "We need to work in partnership with the countries of the region. We oppose strategies formulated by a worried West trying to impose ready-made solutions from the outside."

Similar criticism could be heard from the Arab world. Three key American regional partners – Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Egypt – termed the plan a unilateral effort to impose change on their region from the outside. Egypt's President Mubarak, reacted coolly to the plan, "we should not give others the opportunity to map out our future, define our course, or work on reforming us. We must take the initiative ourselves." Similar concern came from Jordanian Foreign Minister Marwan Muasher who said that any reform effort must be a "home-grown process" and that "we hope the G-8 summit

will respond to a call from the region rather than initiate [changes from the outside]." A few days later he was even more blunt hoping the plan "never sees the light of day" at the G-8.

Problems with the Initiative

The Bush administration has made two tactical and one substantive mistake in regards to GMEI. The tactical mistakes – which are due to carelessness – are not fatal but clearly have weakened the positive aspects of the initiative. The substantive mistakes, on the other hand, have more to do with a failed policy and thus will be far more difficult for the administration to overcome.

First, in a region where perception is everything, the administration clearly blundered on where the initiative was first introduced. President Bush hinted at the precursor to GMEI at the neoconservative stronghold, American Enterprise Institute (AEI), the ideological "command center" for those who sought to transform the region through military means. In a city like Washington, where appearance often counts more than substance, the location reinforced the president's connection between the war in Iraq and the effort to democratize the region with force.

Second, the timing of the initiative has raised many questions. The new initiative is seen by some as nothing more than a way to deflect criticism away from the administration's failed Iraq policy. With the ongoing occupation of Iraq and approaching U.S. elections, some critics have questioned the administration's motives.

Finally, in regards to the substantive mistake, the content of the new initiative is recycled from programs already in place at the State Department, under the Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI). In addition, MEPI and now GMEI were formulated in Washington with little or no consultation from the region. Both are big on themes but short on substance. Furthermore, in a place where appearance is important, the MEPI program is running into a credibility issues since it is run by – of all people – the Vice President's daughter, Liz Cheney.

Unfortunately, MEPI's shortcomings do not stop there. Despite the enormous funds available to MEPI its effort do not appear to be having much real impact in the region. In fiscal year 2002-2003, the MEPI program received nearly \$129 million to promote democracy and create a lasting civil society in the region. This is a

substantial amount of money considering one of the most prominent democracy promoting organizations, the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), only has a \$30 million annual budget – globally.

While it is still early to draw definitive conclusions, some of the preliminary findings show MEPI's projects are having the opposite effect from what was intended.

1. Much of the funding goes to non-governmental organizations (NGO) that are very western in their orientation yet they lack roots in the community and have no domestic constituency. In addition, many of the funded groups spend most of their time pleasing their donor in hopes of obtaining future funding rather than meeting the needs of the people they claim to represent. (i.e. not representative)

2. The enormous level of outside funding has resulted in elitist groups within the NGO community. Rather than facilitating horizontal networks among groups as is the case with domestically funded groups, the external funding has intensified the division between the "haves" and the "have nots", and centralizes resources in the hands of the few that have connections with the West. (i.e. not democratic)

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3. Most of the funded groups tend to be competitive and protective of their “turf”, often refusing to work with other groups and often involved in “uncivil” activities. (i.e. weaker civil society)

The administration needs to stop indulging in the fantasy of democratizing the Middle East through grand funding schemes that only go towards western style NGOs. Any future plan must identify organizations that are truly representative and have

world a safer place, and that the Middle East will subsequently witness, for the first time in its turbulent history, the benefits of “freedom and democracy”. The reality is that the US “war on terror” has intensified the problems in the region, resulting in a more unstable and less safe Middle East. Much of the problems have to do with a conflicting and irreconcilable foreign policy pursued by the administration since September 11 and one that continues to support

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legitimacy within each country. If Bush’s new initiative continues along the lines of MEPI, we are at best going to see very little change in the region, and at worst a drastic setback for future reform.

Recommendations

For the Bush administration’s “Greater Middle East Initiative” to succeed it must do the following:

First, the administration must stop insisting that its “war on terror” will inevitably make the

“friendly tyrants” in the region. Second, the new initiative must recognize, as correctly pointed out by former national security advisor, Zbigniew Brzezinski, that “without political dignity derived from self-determination there can be no democracy.” The new initiative will therefore be more successful, and find wider acceptance, if it is matched by efforts to grant true sovereignty to the Iraqis – sooner rather than later. Otherwise, talk of democracy promotion in the region will seem to many in the Arab

world to be window dressing for continued external domination and control.

Third, the administration's new initiative must engage Arabs at all levels and be in sync with regional realities. The plan must gain acceptance from both Arabs in government as well as Arabs in the street. This requires an initiative that seeks input from the Arab world at its conception, rather than simply presenting a cooked plan at the end. Egyptians and Saudis will not embrace a democracy that does not take their views into account, especially if they feel that their cultural and religious traditions are being slighted.

Finally, the GMEI must avoid making the mistakes of previous funding programs like MEPI. The new initiative is more likely to work if its

funding effort goes toward legitimate grassroots organizations that have significant constituency within each country. This will require that the administration break free from its long held belief that all funding must go towards western style, secular organizations. Our purpose should not be to push a democracy that is in our image yet foreign to the people in the region.

Bush's "Greater Middle East Initiative" is off to a shaky start and will probably fail in its current form. It is clear GMEI needs a major overhaul. If not, the administration's visionary talk of a "freedom and democracy" may convince the US electorate in November that their efforts are genuine, but is unlikely to have much effect on the region it is purporting to change.

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