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The Broader Middle East and North Africa Initiative: An Overview

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Summary

The Broader Middle East and North Africa Initiative (BMENA) is a multilateral development and reform plan aimed at fostering economic and political liberalization in a wide geographic area of Arab and non-Arab Muslim countries. In December 2004, the first BMENA meeting took place in Rabat, Morocco and was called the “Forum for the Future.” At the forum, foreign ministers and finance ministers of the countries in the region stretching from Morocco to Pakistan as well as from the countries of the G8 pledged to create several new development programs and committed \$60 million to a regional fund for business development. Critics of BMENA contend that the initiative focuses too heavily on economic issues instead of political reform and does little to strengthen non-governmental organizations and civil society groups in Arab and non-Arab Muslim countries. The 109th Congress may consider new democracy-promotion and development programs for the broader Middle East. For additional reading, see CRS Report RS21457, *The Middle East Partnership Initiative: An Overview*, and CRS Report RL32260, *U.S. Foreign Assistance to the Middle East: Historical Background, Recent Trends, and FY2005 Funding*. This report will be updated periodically to reflect new developments.

Background

In a November 2003 speech before the National Endowment for Democracy, President Bush reiterated his commitment to promoting democracy in Iraq and in the Middle East and likened his “forward strategy of freedom in the Middle East” to earlier U.S. commitments to see democracy spread throughout Eastern Europe. The President openly acknowledged in his speech that the United States has not been vigorous in pursuing the spread of democracy to the Middle East by noting that “60 years of Western nations excusing and accommodating the lack of freedom in the Middle East did nothing to make us safe, because in the long run stability cannot be purchased at the expense of

liberty.”¹ Although the Bush Administration had previously identified democracy promotion in the Middle East to be a foreign policy priority, analysts noted that President Bush’s November 2003 remarks foreshadowed new U.S. efforts to foster the spread of reform and democracy in Arab and Muslim-majority countries.²

In the months following the President’s remarks, new plans emerged for encouraging democracy in the “greater Middle East.”³ On February 13, 2004, the English language website of the London-based Arabic daily *Al Hayat* published a draft copy of the proposed G8⁴ “greater Middle East” plan, a working paper devised by U.S. Administration officials, in conjunction with European partners, to be presented at the June 8-10, 2004 G8 summit meeting in Sea Island, Georgia.⁵ The draft plan drew upon data from the United Nations’ *Arab Human Development Report* of 2002 and 2003, which extensively outlined a number of development shortfalls facing the Arab world. Among other things, the draft paper called on G8 members to provide technical assistance to monitor elections, sponsor training programs for independent journalists, increase funding for non-governmental organizations, establish a Middle East development bank, and provide training to women interested in running for elective office in countries with upcoming parliamentary elections. Overall, the draft paper focused almost exclusively on reform and made little reference to the Arab-Israeli peace process.

Although some observers praised the initiative for taking a multilateral approach to democracy promotion in the Middle East, the surprise leak of the draft to the media elicited a wave of criticism from Arab governments and independent commentators.⁶ Arab governments, such as Egypt and Jordan, expressed frustration over not having been part of the drafting process and expressed their dismay over having to find out about the proposal through the media rather than through consultations with the U.S. government. Others questioned the very definition of “the greater Middle East,” suggesting that there was little commonality among certain countries in the region and that it was difficult to apply such a broad set of policies to a diverse geographical area. Some analysts saw a contradiction in the draft, which relied heavily on the findings of the *Arab Human*

¹ “Bush Urges Commitment To Transform Mideast” *Washington Post*, November 7, 2003.

² On December 12, 2002, Secretary of State Colin Powell announced the creation of The Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI), a program to encourage reforms in Arab countries by strengthening Arab civil society, encouraging micro-enterprise, expanding political participation, and promoting women’s rights. For more information, see CRS Report RS21457, *The Middle East Partnership Initiative: An Overview*, by Jeremy M. Sharp.

³ The term “greater Middle East” has been used to refer to a large swath of Arab and non-Arab Muslim countries, stretching from Morocco in the west to as far east as Pakistan in southeast Asia. However, no precise listing of designated countries has yet emerged.

⁴ The Group of Eight is made up of Britain, Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Russia and the United States.

⁵ “U.S. Working Paper for G8 Sherpas,” *Al-Hayat*, February 13, 2004. Available online at [<http://english.daralhayat.com/Spec/02-2004/Article-20040213-ac40bdaf-c0a8-01ed-004e-5e7ac897d678/story.html>].

⁶ The Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI), an earlier U.S. program to promote reform in the Arab world, was also criticized by some for being an exclusively U.S. government program.

Development Reports, but then sought to prescribe solutions for many non-Arab and non-Muslim peoples.⁷

As a result of the leak, some Arab governments suggested that they should offer their own internal reform programs. According to Jordanian Foreign Minister Marwan Muasher, “the idea is to come up with a homegrown process in order that others not impose something from the outside.”⁸ Some U.S. policymakers, who seek to balance U.S. national security needs with the needs of regional governments, have refuted the notion that the United States seeks to dictate reform policies to Arab and Muslim-majority countries; instead, they argue that the United States seeks to support serious and verifiable internal reform programs in countries where they exist, but feels justified in taking the lead on the issue of reform with many countries in the Middle East because local reformers are largely shut out of the political process.

Arab Reform Initiatives

After the initial skepticism over the first draft, U.S. and European diplomats hoped that Arab leaders and intellectuals would produce a regional agenda for reform prior to the G8 summit in June 2004. The “greater Middle East” plan could then be offered as a G8 response to regional demands for reform. Some Arab countries, such as Jordan, have already taken steps to introduce their own reform initiatives.

In January 2004, the Yemeni government hosted a regional conference on democracy, human rights and the role of the international criminal court, which produced the Sana’a Declaration.⁹ The declaration reiterated delegates’ support for the principles of democracy, called for an end to the occupation of Arab territories, and suggested the establishment of an “Arab Democratic Dialogue Forum” to foster communication on human rights and democracy between governments and civil society groups.

In March 2004, Arab non-governmental participants¹⁰ in a conference on reform in the Arab world in Alexandria, Egypt produced the Alexandria Statement, a document that called for individual Arab countries to push forward on their own reform programs, while

⁷ According to Robert Satloff of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, “more than a quarter of all residents of Arab countries are not Arab, whether they are Berbers in Morocco and Algeria, non-Arab Christians in Sudan, or Kurds in Iraq. The G8 proposal goes one better: by its definition, the greater Middle East includes Pakistan, Iran, Turkey, Afghanistan, and Israel, making it a region in which Arabs are a distinct minority. Yet, virtually all of the proposal’s analysis and recommendations are directed toward Arabs. Where is the recognition of the region’s ethnic, cultural, religious, and linguistic mosaic?” See, Satloff, Robert, “The Greater Middle East Partnership, A Work Still Very Much in Progress,” *Policywatch* #836, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, February 25, 2004.

⁸ “Arab Leaders Seek to Counter U.S. Plan for Mideast Overhaul,” *New York Times*, March 4, 2004.

⁹ The Sana’a Declaration is available at [<http://www.caabu.org/press/documents/sanaa-declaration-html.htm>].

¹⁰ Although many of the participants at the Alexandria conference were non-governmental reformers, the conference was organized by the Alexandria Library, which is nominally part of the Egyptian government.

conforming to a general framework agreed to by all Arab countries.¹¹ The Alexandria Statement was far more specific than the Sana'a Declaration in its recommendations for reforms, calling for the drafting of modern constitutions that outline a clear separation of legislative and executive powers, the abolition of emergency laws and extraordinary courts, independent ownership of the media, and the granting of political rights to students to allow for peaceful demonstrations. Beyond political reform issues, the document called for a two-state solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict, respect for the territorial integrity of Iraq, and the transformation of the Middle East into an area free of weapons of mass destruction.

In May 2004, the Arab League held a rescheduled summit meeting in Tunisia to adopt resolutions on political reform. According to delegate statements, the resolutions drafted prior to the summit meeting agreed that all Arab countries needed to change, but at their own pace. The Arab League was anxious to come to an agreement on general statements of reform prior to the G8 summit meeting in June to avoid the appearance that Western governments were driving the reform agenda in the Middle East. Some commentators viewed the Arab League meeting as an attempt by governments to take ownership of the reform process, rather than leaving it to independent Arab intellectuals and activists. According to the *New York Times*, the final Arab League document, although generally referring to respecting human rights and furthering the rights of women, did not provide specific details to effect change in the Middle East, and one conference participant described the final resolution as “wishy washy.”¹²

The June 8-10, 2004 G8 summit meeting in Sea Island, Georgia launched BMENA and laid the groundwork for future meetings by securing commitments from regional governments and G8 countries to jointly create development and education programs. Beyond BMENA, the G8 did release a statement after the summit noting that the importance of the Arab-Israeli peace process and that the Quartet road map is the way forward toward a comprehensive settlement.

The December 2004 Forum for the Future

The Forum for the Future, held in Rabat, Morocco, featured foreign and finance ministers from about 20 Arab and Islamic countries in the Middle East and North Africa, along with members of the Group of Eight industrialized nations and representatives of business and private advocacy groups. Israel was not invited to the conference. Prior to the start of the Forum for the Future, some Moroccan Islamist groups held demonstrations in Rabat. Press accounts of the conference focused largely on the negative reactions from Arab officials, who blamed the lack of progress on reform in the region on the continuation of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Secretary of State Colin Powell attempted to keep the agenda focused on reform by remarking that “increasing opportunities for all citizens, especially women, should not be put on hold to deal with other concerns.”¹³ Other critics charged that the conference was too focused on economic liberalization and

¹¹ The Alexandria Statement is available at [<http://www.al-bab.com/arab/docs/reform/alex2004.htm>].

¹² “Arab Leaders Adopt Agenda Endorsing Some Change,” *New York Times*, May 24, 2004.

¹³ “Arab and Western Ministers Voice Different Priorities,” *New York Times*, December 12, 2004.

modernization rather than on genuine political change. According to Leslie Campbell, director of the Middle East Program at the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs, “the unspoken fact behind all of the discussions is that we are trying to work with a bunch of people who are going to be kicked out of office if democratic change moves forward... for now, it’s easier to support free-trade agreements than political change.”¹⁴ However, the Democracy Assistance Dialogue did allow some human rights activists to express their opinions directly to government officials. One Egyptian human rights activist, Bahey Eddin Hassan of the Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies, stated that Arab regimes were the main obstacles for hindering reform and that Palestinian and Iraqi issues should not be used as excuses for not launching reforms.¹⁵

Overall, the Forum for the Future produced the following pledges from participants:

- Create a region-specific private enterprise development fund at the International Finance Corporation (IFC).¹⁶ The fund is designed to provide technical support and financial assistance to small private enterprises, and Forum participants pledged a total of \$60 million out of an initial funding goal of \$100 million. The United States committed \$15 million over two years to the development fund.
- Create a “Democracy Assistance Dialogue” to allow civil society groups to engage regional governments in discussions on reform.
- Create a Microfinance Training Center in Jordan to work with non-governmental organizations that engage in providing small loans to entrepreneurs who would not be able to obtain financial support from ordinary banks.

The next meeting of the Forum for the Future is scheduled to be in Manama, Bahrain in November 2005.

Existing U.S. and International Reform Programs

U.S. Bilateral Economic Assistance. The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) has a long-standing presence in the Middle East and, in addition to Iraq, currently operates missions in Egypt, Jordan, the West Bank and Gaza Strip, Lebanon, Morocco, and Yemen. USAID programs in these countries are tailored to each country’s specific needs. Overall, they are designed to promote economic development and modernization by expanding local infrastructure and water resources, improving access to education, encouraging good governance, and strengthening efforts for socio-economic reform in the region. In FY2005, Congress provided \$1.4 billion in economic assistance to Arab countries. Non-Arab countries, such as Pakistan and Afghanistan, also receive substantial amounts of U.S. foreign assistance.

¹⁴ “U.S. Slows Bid to Advance Democracy in Arab World,” *New York Times*, December 5, 2004.

¹⁵ “Straight Talk,” *Washington Post*, December 15, 2004.

¹⁶ For more information, see [<http://www.ifc.org/mena/>]

The Middle East Partnership Initiative. MEPI represents an attempt to take a more thematic approach to foreign aid in the Middle East by stressing its reform elements. Although funding for MEPI represents only a small portion of total aid to the Middle East (2%), some U.S. officials stress that MEPI represents a philosophical commitment to ensure that future U.S. economic aid encourages social, political, and economic reforms in Arab countries. MEPI is managed by the State Department's Partnership Initiative Office (PI), which oversees MEPI grants to foundations and NGOs. For Fiscal Year 2006, the President has requested \$120 million in funding for MEPI. The State Department's Bureau of Human Rights, Democracy, and Labor also manages funds for democracy-promotion activities in several Muslim-majority countries. U.S. embassies in the Middle East also conduct their own workshops and seminars on reform issues.

The National Endowment for Democracy. The National Endowment for Democracy (NED) is a semi-private, nonprofit organization created in 1983 to strengthen democratic institutions around the world through non-governmental efforts. The President's FY2006 budget request calls for increased funding to promote democracy in the Middle East and requests \$80 million in total funding for NED including programs in Arab and Muslim-majority countries.

The Euro-Mediterranean Partnership Initiative. In 1995, the European Union (EU) initiated the Barcelona Process of cooperation with 12 southern Mediterranean non-EU countries, thereby formalizing a common EU approach to promoting stability and economic development in the Middle East and North Africa.¹⁷ Also called the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP), the broadly defined EU initiative incorporates development aid, trade liberalization, the promotion of political reform and human rights, cultural exchange, and the support of a peace process between Israel and the Palestinians. The EU provides over a billion dollars annually to the Middle East for economic projects and in support of the Palestinian Authority.

Current Proposals in the 109th Congress

S. 12 (referred to Senate Foreign Relations Committee 1/24/05) - authorizes appropriations for education spending in Muslim-majority countries, economic assistance for the promotion of democracy, and funding for a Middle East Foundation to provide grants to non-governmental organizations in the "broader Middle East."

¹⁷ The regional partners are Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Egypt, Jordan, Israel, the Palestinian Authority, Lebanon, Syria, Turkey, Cyprus and Malta. It should be noted that the individual members of the EU also have their own bilateral relationships with countries in the Middle East outside of the Barcelona framework.