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DEMOCRACY PROMOTION UNDER OBAMA: LESSONS FROM THE MIDDLE EAST PARTNERSHIP INITIATIVE

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

As the Obama Administration lays out ambitious foreign policy goals in the Middle East, some wonder where human rights and democracy will fall on the new agenda. While President Bush's Freedom Agenda was problematic, debates over political reform in the Arab world are not likely to fade, and will inevitably produce policy dilemmas for the United States. As Obama's team builds its own approach to democracy promotion, it should examine the record of the Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI), created in 2002. MEPI has overcome early deficits to create a small-scale, successful model of "democracy diplomacy" that integrates foreign assistance with foreign policy. MEPI has reached out to civil society actors in the Middle East, supported local efforts at political reform, and created new incentives for U.S. officials to incorporate democracy and human rights advocacy into their work. The program still suffers from a lack of top-down policy support, as well as from some programming weaknesses. Overall, though, its record shows how a flexible aid program, embedded in a regional bureau, can help the U.S. government seize opportunities to protect its interests and advance democracy abroad. As such, the program suggests the value of tying foreign aid more closely to foreign policy, and moving at least some aid authority in-country and closer to the ground.

INTRODUCTION

While the arrival of the Obama Administration brought a clear end to President George W. Bush's Freedom Agenda, the future of U.S. democracy promotion in the Middle East is still an open question. President Barack Obama expressed in his inaugural address a commitment to advancing democracy, saying, "To those who cling to power through corruption and deceit and the silencing of dissent, know that you are on the wrong side of history, but that we will extend a hand if you are willing to unclench your fist."[1] More recently, President Obama has argued that the United States ought to advance democracy and development wherever it can, while Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, in congressional testimony on April 22, said the administration will "expand opportunity and protect human rights, strengthen civil society, [and] live up to the ideals that define our nation…."[2] She went on to say, "We believe that no country benefits more than the United States when there is great security, democracy, and opportunity in the world."[3]

When it comes to the Middle East, though, some commentators have suggested that the new administration would do better to soft-pedal or even backpedal on support for democratic reform. Some wish to reduce the United States' profile on the issue, contending that President Bush's linkage of democracy promotion to the war in Iraq and to counterterrorism tainted what should have been an altruistic enterprise. Some argue that the United States should step back from the forefront of this struggle because democracy must grow from indigenous demands, and if it is to be promoted by outside actors, it is best done multilaterally.[4] Others go further, arguing that democratization in the Middle East may not be in the United States' interests today because of the potential that it might provoke instability among key Arab partners, or because of the potential that democracy in Arab states might bring anti-American political forces to power.[5]

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Whether or not the Obama Administration chooses to continue an assertive, high-profile, pro-democracy policy in the Middle East, the debate over political reform will continue to preoccupy leaders in the region, including major Arab allies. Two key U.S. allies, Egypt and Saudi Arabia, are preparing for high-stakes transitions in their political leadership in the face of mounting economic and demographic challenges. Other Arab states, like Lebanon, are struggling to build stronger democratic institutions and will hold crucial elections in the coming year. As a result, even if the administration does not proactively maintain focus on reform issues, those issues will likely force themselves onto the American agenda.

Foremost among the questions for U.S. policy is how Washington should deal with its regional autocratic allies as they seek to manage these tricky political transitions. In addressing this challenge, the new administration may want to review whether the mechanisms developed by the Bush Administration to advance the Freedom Agenda can help it achieve its own goals in a challenging regional environment, or whether Bush-era programs are too flawed and ultimately too closely associated with Bush's own legacy to now be effective tools.

MEPI today is perhaps the best available example of successfully integrating democracy promotion into U.S. foreign policy.

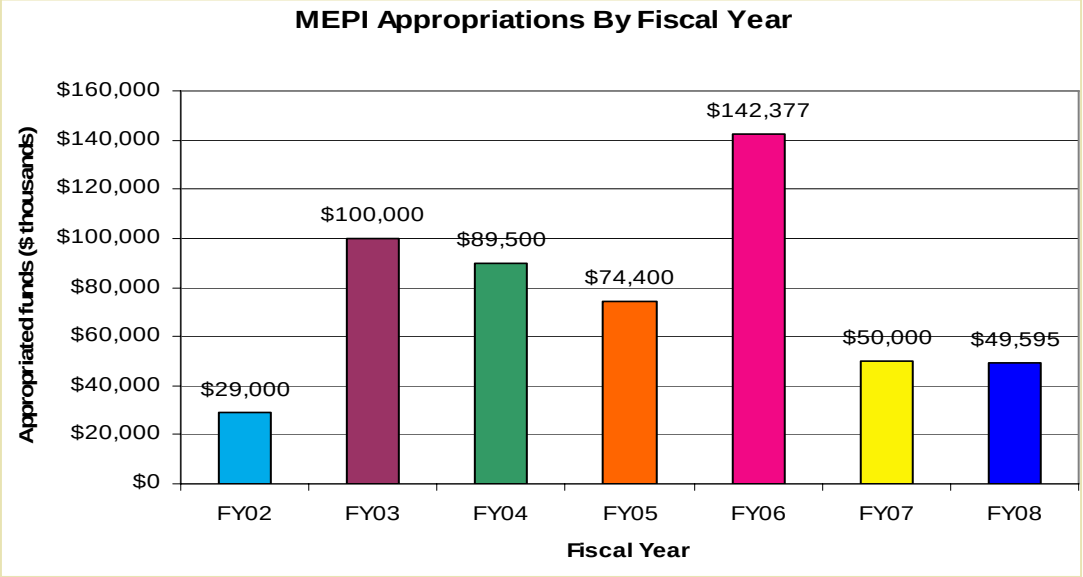
In answering these questions, the Obama Administration's new policymakers would do well to examine closely the Middle East Partnership Initiative, which in many ways was the Freedom Agenda's flagship program.[6] The Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI), established in December 2002, gave a regional bureau in the State Department, the Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs (NEA), money and authority to fund democracy assistance programs abroad. MEPI represented a judgment by the U.S. government that reducing extremism and producing sustainable development in the Middle East requires liberalizing Arab politics and economies, whose stagnation was seen as a source of popular grievance and social instability. The program was also meant to be an antidote to the United States' traditional focus on large-scale, government-to-government aid programs—instead of large bilateral projects, MEPI was established to build partnerships with non-governmental civic groups and activists in the region.

MEPI was also a bold experiment in situating programmatic and budgetary authority for democracy assistance within a regional bureau, with the goal of more tightly integrating foreign assistance with foreign policy goals. MEPI sought to achieve this by engaging foreign service officers in planning, implementing, and assessing assistance programs, and pushed American diplomats in the field to engage more deeply and in a more sustained manner with non-governmental actors in the countries where they worked. Because of this model's innovations, conclusions about MEPI's impact have implications for broader policy debates over restructuring U.S. foreign assistance and over how to advance democracy and human rights abroad.

MEPI's early efforts were notable more for their profile than their impact.[7] They heavily favored government-to-government programs, and veered at times toward fulfilling public diplomacy and traditional development goals rather than advancing political liberalization. As a result, congressional overseers questioned whether MEPI's work was really any different from USAID-sponsored programming. The program also met some resistance within the State Department, from staff who resented having to engage on issues that had traditionally been considered an irritant to good bilateral relations.

Our review of MEPI's work, however, shows that MEPI has made significant progress in recent years toward overcoming these obstacles. It has shifted focus from funding broadly defined regional changes to nurturing a cadre of civic activists, entrepreneurs, and aspiring politicians largely beyond the reach of traditional U.S. aid programs. It has developed stronger working relations with embassies and targets more of its programming funds through strategies that take account of the local environment in each country, and that dovetail with broader diplomatic efforts. Perhaps more importantly, MEPI can claim some specific impacts both on Arab civil society and on the culture and operations of the Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs with respect to "democracy diplomacy."

As a result of this evolution, MEPI today is perhaps the best available example of successfully integrating democracy promotion into U.S. foreign policy, and demonstrates the value of this model for advancing a democracy agenda in difficult environments, including those of the United States' more autocratic allies. While MEPI must continue to address its internal weaknesses, its greatest obstacles today are bureaucratic and political.



The MEPI experience presents important lessons for Secretary Clinton in her future efforts to build up foreign assistance, including democracy assistance, as an instrument of U.S. foreign policy. Specifically, MEPI's efforts suggest that there are clear benefits to tying assistance more closely to the process of foreign policy formulation and implementation, and that there are clear advantages to extending authority for aid allocations to U.S. officials who are close to the ground.

MEPI at a Glance

The MEPI office comprises approximately 30 staff in the NEA Bureau, including an office director and deputy director. In 2004, it set up two field offices in the Middle East, in Tunis and Abu Dhabi, each headed by a foreign-service officer. MEPI's efforts are overseen by a deputy assistant secretary within NEA whose primary responsibility is the democracy and human rights agenda. Through the NEA front office, MEPI's democracy efforts are coordinated with USAID, the State Department's Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor (DRL), and other relevant federal agencies.

From its inception in December 2002 through Fiscal Year 2008, MEPI was granted $534.9 million in appropriations through the Economic Support Fund, and obligated at least $411.2 million in funds through Fiscal Year (FY) 2007.[8] MEPI has used some of this funding to award grants to NGOs, contractors, and other implementers to carry out programming under four "pillars"—political reform, economic reform, educational reform, and women's empowerment. The two regional offices, in cooperation with U.S. embassies across the region, provide smaller "local grants" directed to local Arab NGOs (typically $10,000-$25,000). Larger and multi-year grants (ranging from about $300,000 to several million dollars) are provided through MEPI's Washington office. The larger grants are split widely across MEPI's four pillars, whereas about two-thirds of the local grants fall under the political pillar.

Grantmaking and program management, however, represent only one of MEPI's two main functions; the other is policy planning and implementation. First, MEPI staff work with U.S. embassies abroad to strengthen their skills in "democracy diplomacy" and to develop "democracy strategies" for each country in the Middle East. The strategies, drafted by the embassies, are discussed within the State Department and with other executive branch agencies, and then cabled out as instructions by the assistant secretary. The strategies set specific goals for each post and define related activities for the upcoming 12 to 18 months.[9] The State Department holds ambassadors accountable for their performance on these items and expects MEPI's programs—and those of other U.S. government agencies, like USAID—to be aligned with the strategies that were developed. Second, MEPI senior staff participate in departmental and interagency meetings on policies toward NEA countries that will impact democracy and human rights. MEPI staff thus form a designated link between the regional bureau and cross-regional offices in the U.S. government that work on democracy and human rights, such as USAID's Bureau for Democracy,

MEPI Spending by Pillar (% of funds)

Fiscal Years 2002-2007

Pillar	FY02	FY03	FY04	FY05	FY06	FY07	All Years (FY02-07)
Economic	21%	38%	36%	31%	13%	24%	28%
Educational	28%	25%	25%	19%	26%	16%	24%
Political	34%	25%	22%	30%	45%	44%	32%
Women's Empowerment	17%	12%	17%	20%	16%	15%	16%

Pillar allocations for FY2008 were not available. Due to rounding, not all columns total 100 percent.

Conflict, and Humanitarian Assistance, the State Department's Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, or the National Security Council's senior director for democracy.[10]

MEPI's Democracy Programming: Trends and Outputs

Appropriations to MEPI have varied widely every fiscal year since FY02, when it received its first $29 million in reprogrammed State Department funds.

MEPI's funding peak came in FY06, when Congress appropriated a total of $142 million for MEPI programming. This total, however, included $20 million in emergency supplemental funds dedicated to Iran programming, as well as $13.4 million in funds designated for programming in the West Bank and Gaza—leaving about $109 million for discretionary programs. Beginning in FY07, MEPI suffered a sharp drop in congressional appropriations under the new Democratic-controlled Congress, which was more skeptical of MEPI's contribution to regional development and less eager to fund initiatives and programs closely associated with President Bush.

MEPI's spending patterns reveal four significant trends in MEPI's evolution:

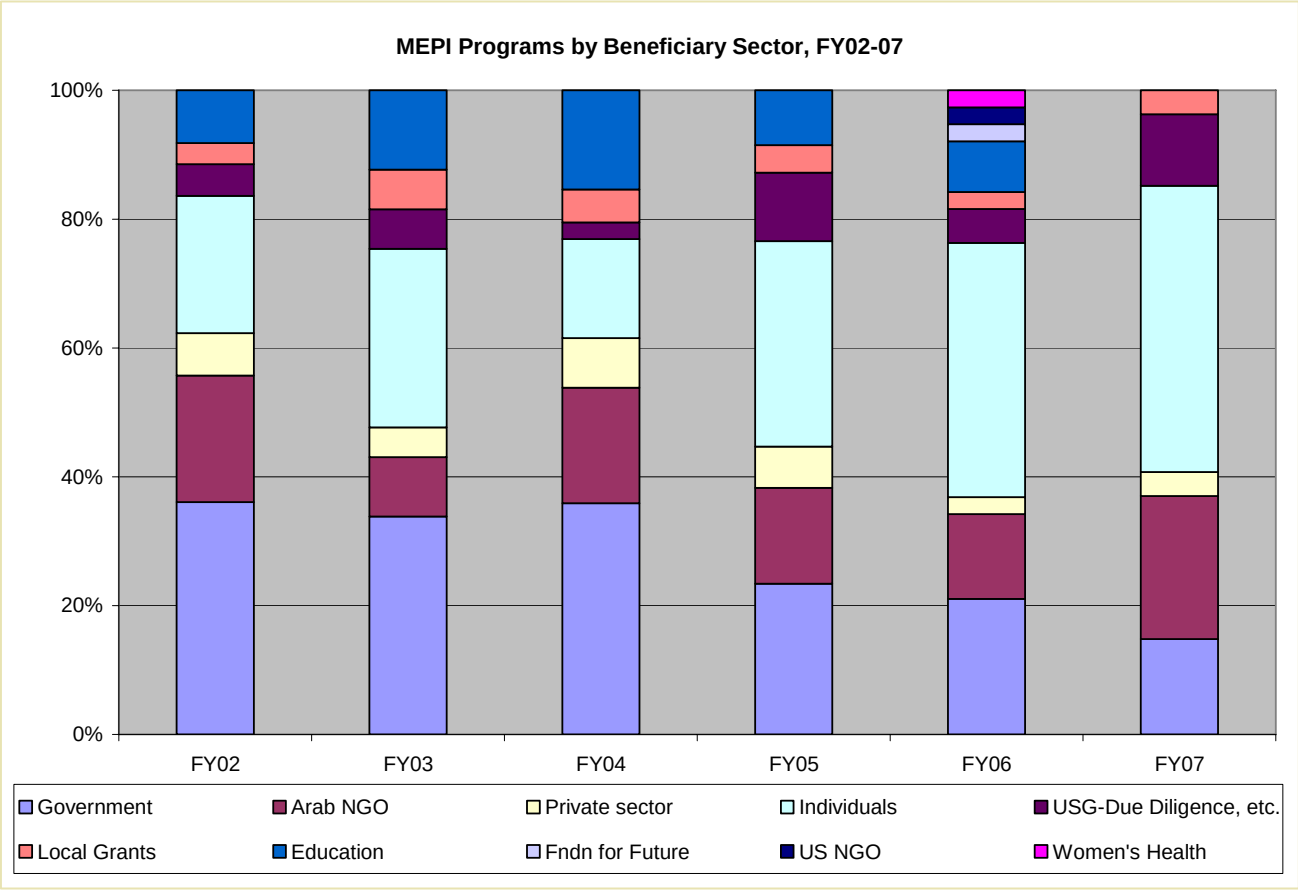
- A shift in funding in recent years away from programs focused on economic development and toward those focused on political reform;
- A steady decrease in programs targeted to Arab government institutions and officials;
- A steady increase in programs primarily benefitting local Arab NGOs; and
- An enduring emphasis on training and technical assistance programs.

As noted, MEPI divides its programming into four distinct "pillars" of reform: economic, educational, political, and women's empowerment (in practice, nearly all the women's empowerment programs are also classified under one of the first three pillars). At its inception in FY02, MEPI devoted the largest portion of its funding to programs in the political pillar. Over the next two years (FY03 and FY04), MEPI changed course and emphasized economic pillar programs, particularly technical assistance programs aimed at helping Arab countries meet the requirements of international trading regimes, including the WTO and bilateral trade agreements with the United States.[11]

This trend, however, has since been reversed: in FY05, the ratio of economic to political pillar programs came close to parity and in FY06 and FY07 political programs took the lead. In addition, MEPI's remaining economic pillar programs focus less on government-to-government initiatives than on addressing the private sector through entrepreneurship training and business development. Since many of the economic reform programs undertaken in FY03 and FY04 were government-to-government programs that could just as easily have been funded by USAID or the Department of Commerce, the return to stressing political programming was a return to MEPI's core focus—reaching out to Arab civil society to advance citizen empowerment.

Growing Support for Arab Civil Society

MEPI's evolution is also evident from an analysis of who participates in and benefits from its programming. Beneficiaries are those toward whom programming is targeted—a program's core audience or participant population. In its first several years, the largest propor-

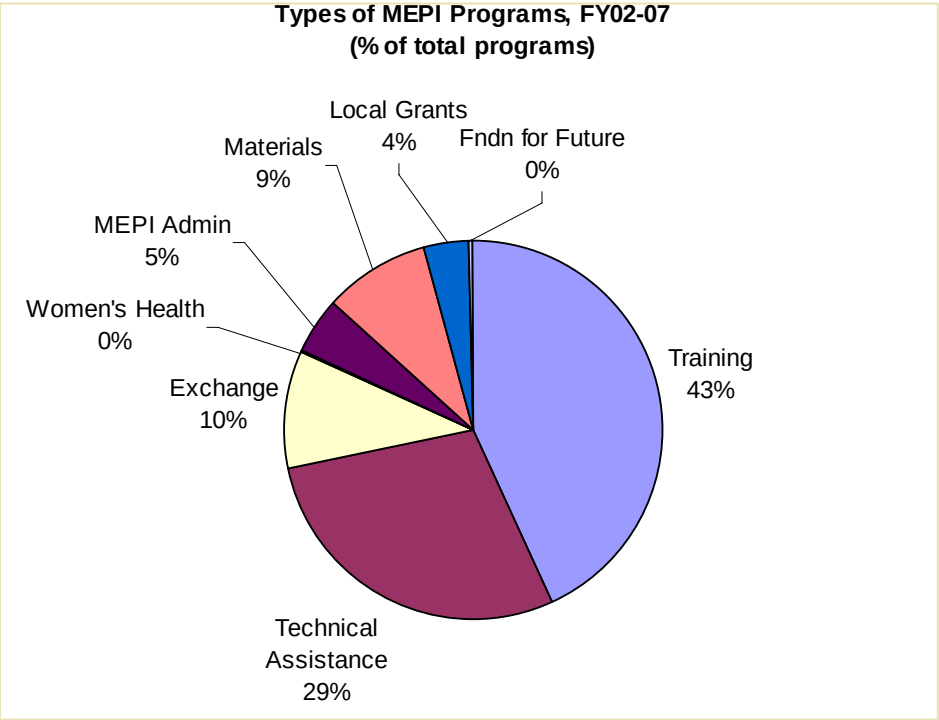


tion of MEPI programs, 32 percent, was targeted toward Arab government officials, offices, and institutions. As noted above, this led to criticism that MEPI was failing to reach its intended audience or even to differentiate itself from USAID's traditional government-to-government assistance programs. Since FY05, this has changed, with the proportion of MEPI programs addressing government audiences—including parliaments, judges, and ministries—declining every year, to only 15 percent in FY07 (the most recent year for which data are available). By contrast, the proportion of MEPI programs benefiting Arab civic groups rose from an aggregate 13 percent for the years FY02-FY05 to 22 percent in FY07.

MEPI's early emphasis on government-to-government programs and failure to fund large numbers of civil society projects reflected the tight restrictions many Arab governments maintain on civic groups. But it also revealed MEPI's relative lack of acquaintance, at first, with the civil society landscape in the Middle East, and its concomitant reliance for program recommendations on host governments, government-sponsored NGOs, and U.S. embassy staff, who sometimes steered MEPI's efforts into softer-edged projects that would not provoke bilateral tensions.

By FY07, MEPI seemed to have overcome these obstacles. That year its programs benefiting local non-governmental organizations finally outnumbered those addressing Arab governments. The funding dedicated to local NGOs supported training and technical assistance programs, and also provided material assistance. Field research and interviews suggest that MEPI was able to improve its outreach to regional civic activists through the work of its field offices, through frequent regional visits by senior staff, and through educating U.S. diplomats in the region more diligently about MEPI's goals and programming efforts. MEPI also worked more closely with U.S.-based democracy implementers who had prior experience in the Middle East, field presence in the region, and relationships with NGOs and political parties there.

Though part of MEPI's founding mission is to support indigenous reform movements in the Middle East, programs targeting Arab civil society still represents a minority of its total programming. These programs are also still largely focused on building the capacity of local NGOs, rather than providing them with direct support for the work they do locally. If MEPI's efforts to build ties to and provide training for Arab civic groups are successful, and if American and other Western donors can beat back efforts now underway by Arab gov-



ernments to restrict foreign funding of NGOs, then we would expect MEPI in the coming years to devote an increasing proportion of its funds to supporting NGO activity in the region directly. Such a development would strengthen MEPI's emphasis on supporting indigenous reform efforts and responding to local needs.

The Local Grants Program

One MEPI initiative that suggests the potential of just this approach is its local grants program. This program highlights the unique niche MEPI has developed within the panoply of U.S. foreign assistance and democracy promotion instruments. The program, which began with an allocation of $405,000 in FY02, enables local U.S. embassies to provide grants worth between $10,000 and $25,000 to indigenous Arab civil society organizations to carry out their own work. In line with their annual democracy strategies, U.S. embassies solicit applications from local NGOs for funding. With input from MEPI's two regional offices in Abu Dhabi and Tunis, the embassies determine which organizations will receive funding for their proposed projects. The Bahrain Journalists Association received a local grant to bring U.S. journalists and journalism professors to the kingdom to train local members of the media. In Egypt, the Land Center for Human Rights used a local grant from the U.S. embassy to raise awareness of the needs of Egyptian farmers, educate farmers in their legal rights, and provide them with legal assistance.

The local grants program is the most concrete mechanism available today for direct U.S. government support of Arab civil society. It also stands as a crucial adjunct to the training and capacity-building programs that MEPI funds for Arab activists. The local grants enable on-the-ground activists to put their new training to work, in order to expand or improve their own efforts to change their societies. Local grants are also a means for the U.S. government to express its concern for and commitment to indigenous groups under challenge from their autocratic governments. Because local grants are overseen by the U.S. embassy on the ground, they provide indigenous groups (who make their own decisions about whether to apply for or accept U.S. government funds) with direct and ongoing contact with U.S. diplomats. While some local activists eschew such close association with the U.S. government, others view it as vital insulation against state intimidation.

The local grants program also has subsidiary benefits that are important to the future of U.S. democracy promotion in the Middle East, and may even have application to U.S. democracy promotion elsewhere. The availability of funds that U.S. embassy staff help to allocate gives them opportunities and incentives to seek out and build relationships with civil society, improving the

depth of the diplomats' political analysis and reporting. The local grants program also provides U.S. ambassadors an additional tool to use in advancing U.S. foreign policy goals related to political and economic reform in their host country—a tool they can wield with much greater speed and autonomy than most U.S. foreign assistance. Finally, because the U.S. embassy has a say in the awarding of local grants, embassy officials have a direct stake in the grantees' success, and thus incentive to engage host governments on those political freedom issues (like freedom of association) so crucial to the work of local activists and to long-term democratic growth. The overall result of the local grants program is that U.S. democracy assistance is more supportive of indigenous needs and demands, and U.S. government procedures and incentives are more closely aligned with U.S. diplomacy and assistance strategies in a given country. These objectives are now stated as goals for all U.S. foreign assistance, and the MEPI local grants have achieved them, albeit on a small scale and within only one region of the world.

In recent years, MEPI local grants have comprised only $2 to $3 million, or less than 5 percent, of MEPI's annual expenditures. As MEPI and other investments in local NGO capacity-building pay off, and as U.S. diplomats become more acquainted with the local civil society landscape, local grants could potentially expand as a tool for targeted, direct U.S. government support for bottom-up, indigenous reform.

Training and Exchange Programs: A Consistent Overinvestment

In every year through FY07, training programs have constituted the largest portion of MEPI activities. Training and technical assistance together account for at least half of all MEPI programs each year, and in FY02 and FY06, these programs represented more than 75 percent of the total programs funded. Training programs also tend to require relatively more funds than other types of programs, as they often require bringing together participants from across the region to a central location for a period of time. Given the heavy investment by MEPI in training programs, these initiatives deserve scrutiny.

Training and technical assistance programs tend to focus on improving specific skills of participants, with the assumption that those receiving the assistance will be in an environment in which their new skills can be put to use. For NGOs and political parties, for example, technical assistance programs might focus on budgeting or regulatory compliance. While this type of training can be beneficial to civil society groups, much of MEPI's technical assistance programming is still focused on helping government functionaries carry out their responsibilities in a more effective manner or in a manner corresponding to their government's international obligations. Additionally, no matter who receives it, technical assistance can only have an impact on reform if the recipients are working in an institution or environment that supports their work. Neither local NGOs nor reform-minded bureaucrats can make full use of their training or technical assistance unless they have the freedom and opportunity to do the work they are trained to do. This point underscores the necessity for technical assistance programs to be accompanied by effective and consistent diplomacy with governments to sustain their interest in reform, define shared objectives, and persuade them of specific policy changes that can provide a more hospitable environment for reform.

MEPI demonstrated how its close links to U.S. embassies and its local grants program enabled it to use foreign assistance as a tool to serve key U.S. interests when rapid change on the ground necessitated a U.S. government response.

Ultimately, training and technical assistance programs reflect the basic limitation of all democracy assistance—that its effectiveness depends on the local government's readiness for reform. But this reality also highlights the importance of American democracy diplomacy as an integrated and consistent complement to democracy assistance. MEPI was designed precisely to provide this complement. The question, then, is whether MEPI has had success in this regard.

Assessing MEPI's Impact

As noted, embedding MEPI in the State Department's Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs was, in part, an experiment at integrating foreign assistance (specifically, democracy assistance, which is inherently political) more tightly with U.S. foreign policy. It was also an effort to induce U.S. diplomats to integrate democracy and human rights concerns more tightly into their day-to-day work. How well did this experiment succeed?

In two cases in recent years, MEPI demonstrated how its close links to U.S. embassies (made possible by the fact that it is embedded in the NEA Bureau) and its local grants program enabled it to serve key U.S. interests when rapid change on the ground necessitated a U.S. government response. The first case was in Egypt, after President Hosni Mubarak's surprise February 2005 announcement that Egypt would hold multiparty presidential elections. While USAID was still scram-

bling to identify program priorities, solicit proposals and release funds to address U.S. goals regarding the elections, MEPI was able to provide immediate assistance. MEPI's small grants to local election monitoring and civic education groups enabled them to jumpstart their election-year activities, educate their participants on their legal rights, and defy the government's plans to have a stacked elections committee ban citizen monitors from polling locations.[12] At the same time, MEPI also provided short-term funding in early 2005 to U.S.-based democracy groups to train local election monitors. In contrast, the USAID-funded election-related projects only hit the ground in August 2005, mere weeks before the presidential and parliamentary elections began.

The second case was in Lebanon, also in 2005, after the surprise assassination of former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri and the popular uprising that ousted Syrian forces from the country. Lebanon's government faced a radically changed environment for its planned June parliamentary balloting, and created a new commission to prepare for the country's first post-occupation elections. With powerful U.S. interests at stake in a successful election, MEPI's location in the State Department's regional bureau was central to the U.S. government's ability to assist the new electoral commission. MEPI also provided local grants to support civic groups conducting polling and monitoring of the electoral process and researching questions of transitional justice after nearly 30 years of Syrian occupation.

The two cases above suggest that MEPI demonstrated the value of integrating foreign assistance more closely with the regional policy bureaus of the State Department. But did the program help the NEA Bureau integrate democracy work into its diplomacy? As many commentators have noted, U.S. Middle East policy was for many years exceptional in its relative indifference to democracy and human rights concerns. President Bush's Freedom Agenda therefore created a sort of culture shock in the bureau, and MEPI may originally have acted as a form of shock therapy, by providing new tools and training for NEA officers, and by using the availability of assistance money to change their incentive structures with respect to democracy work. In interviews with U.S. embassy officials abroad in 2004, for example, some complained of new mandates emanating from Washington and the disruption to "normal" bilateral relations caused by MEPI's focus on non-governmental activists and on addressing weaknesses in Arab governance.

Over time, however, we observed a different mindset developing among U.S. diplomats in the NEA Bureau. In interviews in 2007 and 2008, some diplomats noted MEPI's utility in their work. Political officers and ambassadors related how MEPI's inclusion in the regional policy planning process led them to broaden their in-country contacts and improve their understanding of local political dynamics. Ambassadors also noted that, because of MEPI's integration into the regional bureau, its funds could be programmed flexibly and often relatively quickly, in coordination with posts abroad. This gave ambassadors an additional arrow in their quiver when dealing with host governments on difficult issues, and when responding to changes or opportunities in their local environments. They did not need to wait for a slow interagency process between State and USAID to catch up to events on the ground.

Despite the new-found support MEPI is receiving from some in the diplomatic corps, it is important to ask whether the nearly half-billion dollars in MEPI-funded programs have made a difference, either to the nature of U.S. democracy promotion, or to the prospects for democracy in the Middle East. The answer to this question has changed over time. In its first three years, many of MEPI's projects replicated extant USAID-, DRL-, and NED-funded programming in the region and had only tangential relations to democracy promotion. Only a limited amount of MEPI's funds in those early years went to support work by local Arab NGOs, and a significant proportion of the money supported government-to-government programs.[13] As a result, congressional overseers raised concerns about MEPI's coordination with and possible duplication of USAID programs in the region[14] Indeed, in those early years, MEPI even allocated funds to USAID to carry out projects.[15]

Our analysis above reveals that MEPI has overcome most of these problems in the past three years, and has developed a more coherent, deliberate strategy and more efficient implementation mechanisms. On balance, the program has demonstrated clear benefits to locating democracy assistance within a regional bureau and close to the ground. In particular, MEPI can claim two significant impacts:

1) *MEPI has helped build a network of Arab democracy advocates and activists who welcome American democracy assistance, and created a positive "brand" for U.S. democracy promotion efforts among this audience.*

   In the region, MEPI has (largely through cross-regional programs and through its two field offices) built up a network of Arab civil society activists with improved skills, and improved ties both to one another and to Washington. This network of activists—mostly English-literate, liberal, and avowedly pro-American in outlook and

orientation (though they do not all agree with U.S. foreign policy in the region)—are the natural locus of any future U.S. effort to support progressive political change in the Arab world.

Secular liberals are not, and will not be in the foreseeable future, the majority of the political opposition in the Middle East. But their voices are important, because they are the main transmitters and translators of democratic ideas into their home societies—and their voices are stronger and more influential for having U.S. support.

The impact of this network, of course, is ultimately limited by the repressive environment facing local democracy advocates, and by American diplomacy's limited ability to protect these activists from state retribution. But it is significant that Arab liberals continue to seek US political and financial support for their reform agenda.

2) *MEPI has improved the integration of democracy and human rights into daily U.S. diplomacy and has improved the Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs' institutional capacity to pursue a human rights agenda.*

MEPI's grant-making, especially local grants, has given ambassadors new tools in their diplomacy and new incentives to work on democracy and human rights issues. MEPI's regional offices have worked with U.S. ambassadors and their staffs to enhance their skills in advocating for democracy and human rights, and MEPI has worked with embassy staffs and desk officers to develop annual democracy strategies for each Middle Eastern country, translating the diffuse, long-term goal of democracy into measurable short-term goals for which diplomats can be held accountable.

Continued Deficit of Political Support

While in recent years MEPI has improved the focus of its programs and the way in which it interacts with U.S. policy, it still suffers from deficits that limit its impact and should be addressed by the Obama Administration. Some of its programs overemphasize public diplomacy, which is a means of advancing policy goals (including democracy), rather than an end in itself. This emphasis on public diplomacy has sometimes earned MEPI the resentment of local activists who have felt used or railroaded, instead of listened to. As noted, MEPI also retains a heavy emphasis on short-term training and exchange programs that may not have long-term impact on program participants, and may not address the hostile environment many participants face back home.

But the major factors limiting MEPI's impact are, in fact, outside MEPI's control. Most fundamentally, and especially since the Palestinian elections of 2006, MEPI has suffered from the ambivalence of senior officials about democracy promotion in the Middle East. As such, it has faced a challenge in attracting crucial diplomatic support for its work, and resolving key reform-related policy debates that require discussion and decision making in a high-level, interagency process. In the end, the best-designed programs to train and encourage local activists can have only limited impact if diplomatic efforts are not dovetailed with those programs, simultaneously pressing governments to create a more open political marketplace in which activists can build public support. Often, this pressure must come from the highest levels of the U.S. administration if it is to impact the attitudes of autocratic leaders.

Relations with some countries involve a complex mix of cooperation and contention on different issues. But for U.S. policy to be coherent and effective, the relative importance of political reform in certain key countries, such as Saudi Arabia and Egypt, must be explicitly debated and resolved within the interagency process. MEPI cannot seek or build such interagency consensus without support from the Secretary of State and the National Security Advisor. But with key democracy posts unfilled by the Obama Administration, the extent of political support for this agenda remains unclear.

Another external constraint on MEPI's impact is the varying size of its annual appropriations from Congress and the earmarks sometimes placed on those appropriations. The earmarking problem is no less evident than it was in 2006, although at least the recent earmarks are more related to MEPI's core mission than their earlier cousins.[16] Within a small operating budget, even small earmarks significantly compromise the flexibility and autonomy that are MEPI's comparative strength as a foreign assistance program.

The bottom line of our analysis is that MEPI has demonstrated the ability to learn from its six years of experience, shifting resources and attention away from less effective programs and policies toward those that produce greater impact. As a result, MEPI can now demonstrate some concrete results both in the region and in the U.S. government bureaucracy. As stated, these results derive largely from MEPI's unique location within its regional bureau, and from the resulting interaction between its policy function and its grant-making function. However, ambivalence at the highest levels of the U.S. government about democracy promotion in the Middle East, and bureaucratic wrangling

over budgets and programming authority, continue to limit the program's impact.

This evaluation has clear significance for broader proposals now being debated over how to organize U.S. democracy promotion efforts and U.S. foreign assistance. A number of proposals made over the past year to reform U.S. foreign assistance articulate goals such as consolidating lines of authority over assistance, giving the assistance tool a higher profile in policy discussions and decision making, and tightening the links between foreign policy and the provision of foreign assistance. MEPI's experience suggests that achieving these goals requires, in some manner, integrating foreign assistance into the work of the regional bureaus who oversee U.S. embassies and their day-to-day policy work.

How to Build Democracy Support into Regional Diplomacy

As the Obama Administration looks to organize its foreign policy efforts, competing ideas have emerged regarding the best way to structure U.S. support for democracy abroad. Some argue for consolidating all U.S. assistance programs, including democracy assistance, under USAID, to ensure maximum coherence and coordination across programs and to allow for stronger oversight of expenditures.[17] But locating democracy assistance programs within USAID is problematic, for several reasons. First, USAID does not operate in every country in the Middle East, but is concentrated in a few regional locations—in these countries, USAID takes the lead on democracy and governance already, whereas MEPI concentrates on other locations and on serving NGO actors. Giving USAID responsibility for cross-regional democracy programming would likely reduce the programming in countries without USAID missions and would certainly reduce the extent to which those programs are closely targeted to local conditions, because there would be no local field staff to stay in contact with civic actors and oversee program implementation. A request from USAID to embassy staffers to do this legwork would likely not produce the same response as a request from MEPI, which would come from within the regional bureau and convey the authority of the regional assistant secretary of state.

Second, USAID generally works through bilateral agreements with the governments of the countries in which it operates. For most of USAID's programming, this bilateral aspect is not only necessary, but central to the mandate of the agency—helping developing countries build their own capacity to achieve developmental goals. Trying to subsume democracy assistance to civil society and political parties under USAID is thus likely to compromise both the democracy programs—which may not meet with local government approval—and the core development programs—which local governments may view as a "cover" for American interference in domestic politics. This problem is particularly acute in countries that are autocratic allies of the United States—like Egypt, Jordan, or Morocco. Disentangling such conflicts may take too much of a toll on the core mission of America's international development agency.

Finally, in those countries where it is active, USAID has its own missions with local directors and staff who report to USAID's headquarters in Washington. This method of operation, which many in USAID prize as a way of "depoliticizing assistance," actually militates against close coordination between funding and diplomacy—a key element, our analysis suggests, of effective democracy assistance. Handing democracy assistance entirely to USAID, then, may well reduce both the coherence and the impact of U.S. democracy assistance, in the Middle East and elsewhere.

Another possibility is for democracy promotion—using diplomatic, foreign assistance, and other policy tools—to be concentrated in the State Department's Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor—the same bureau that reports annually on global human rights. While DRL already provides some democracy assistance in the Middle East and in other regions, it is sometimes hampered in its efforts to target programming and diplomatic support, because it has no presence in the field. In addition, because DRL is supervised by the Undersecretary for Global Affairs, whereas the regional bureaus are supervised by the Undersecretary for Political Affairs, DRL is separated structurally from the regional bureaus that largely control day-to-day policy matters affecting specific countries. Therefore, not only is communication and policy coordination between DRL and the regional bureaus poor, but regional bureau officers may not feel that they are accountable for implementation of democracy-related policy issues championed by DRL. This longstanding structural problem would likewise hamper the effectiveness of any increased DRL efforts to pro-vide democracy assistance in specific countries or regions. Moreover, should MEPI's programmatic budget and decision making be simply transferred wholesale to DRL, programming would lose the link to embassies and the close acquaintance with local conditions that have helped make it relevant.

To address the bureaucratic wall between DRL and the regional bureaus, Congress passed the ADVANCE Democracy Act in 2007. The law mandates, *inter alia,*

that regional bureaus produce annual democracy strategies and appoint democracy liaison officers to work with DRL and represent democracy and human rights issues within their bureau. The law also directs the secretary of state to increase training and incentives for foreign service officers to work on democracy and human rights issues in their careers. If implemented across the State Department, this law could help to improve the coherence of America's democracy diplomacy, and improve coordination between DRL and the regional bureaus. But regardless of such bureaucratic tinkering, the secretary of state, undersecretaries, and assistant secretaries must all signal their strong desire to integrate democracy concerns into regional policy, and hold their staffs accountable for making it happen.

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What to Do

Some argue that U.S. democracy promotion efforts in the Middle East must be rebranded, preferably by toning them down significantly for some period of time.[18] Dismantling MEPI would certainly "press the reset button" on America's democracy diplomacy in the Middle East, but it might also suggest to regional governments that they can begin to repress with impunity. It would send a negative signal to those regional activists who have come to embrace, and even to rely on, the program, and would set back an agenda that, even under a new brand, is unlikely to be wholly abandoned by President Obama and Secretary Clinton. A new effort, however structured, would then have to repair and rebuild relationships and trust with a community of Arab civic activists already suffering from whiplash from the force of U.S. policy shifts on democracy. More broadly, dismantling MEPI would overturn a specific, relatively successful effort to more tightly integrate foreign assistance with U.S. regional policy, signaling to Washington policy audiences a reversal of the trend toward coordination that most observers argue is necessary.

So what should be done? In the final analysis, bureaucratic heft and budgetary resources are closely related. If the Obama Administration wants to ensure that its diplomats attend to democracy promotion in the course of their day-to-day duties, there is nothing quite as effective as providing them with some programming funds and asking them to account for how they spend the money. Even in its flushest days, MEPI still represented a small raindrop in the foreign assistance funding pool. Having a flexible tool to shore up U.S. diplomacy at key moments and in key places in a volatile region seems worth MEPI's modest price tag, even in times of budgetary austerity.[19]

At the same time, it remains clear that MEPI's impact is ultimately dependent on the degree of political support the program and the reform agenda it champions receive from Congress and senior U.S. officials. The MEPI programming that has arguably made the biggest difference to Arab democracy activists on the ground, and that has harmonized most strongly diplomacy and democracy assistance, has been the lowest-cost and the closest to the local level—the MEPI local grants. Perhaps the final lesson the MEPI experience teaches is that clear guidance from the president and the secretary of state can leverage a small investment of taxpayer funds to pay real dividends in the advancement of America's interests in a more stable, progressive, and prosperous Middle East.

[1] The White House, "First Inaugural Address," January 20, 2009, available at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/blog/inaugural-address/>.
[2] The White House, "Remarks by President Obama at Strasbourg Town Hall," April 3, 2009, available at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/Remarks-by-President-Obama-at-Strasbourg-Town-Hall/>; U.S. Department of State, "New Beginnings: Foreign Policy Priorities in the Obama Administration," Opening Remarks before the House Foreign Affairs Committee, April 22, 2009, available at <http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2009a/04/122048.htm>.
[3] U.S. Department of State, "New Beginnings: Foreign Policy Priorities in the Obama Administration."
[4] Richard Haass, *The Opportunity* (New York:: PublicAffairs, 2005). For a discussion of multilateralism, see pp. 17-20. For a discussion of the importance of indigenous demands for democracy, see pp. 71-74. Also on multilateralism, see Thomas Carothers, "Repairing Democracy Promotion," in Think Tank Town, *Washington Post*, September 14, 2007, available at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/09/13/AR2007091302241.html.>.
[5] Steven Simon and Ray Takeyh argue that "Washington faces a bleak choice: It can push its values or realize its interests. It cannot do both" in "We've Lost. Here's How to Handle It," *Washington Post*, June 17, 2007, p. B1, available at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/06/15/AR2007061502078.html>; See also, Martin Kramer, "Democracy Promotion: Plan B," Sandbox blog, comment posted on December 6, 2006, available at <http://sandbox.blog-city.com/democracy_promotion_plan_b.htm>.
[6] For a comprehensive evaluation of Bush's Freedom Agenda, see Tamara Cofman Wittes, *Freedom's Unsteady March: America's Role in Building Arab Democracy* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2008).
[7] See for instance Tamara Cofman Wittes and Sarah E. Yerkes, "What Price Freedom? Assessing the Bush Administration's Freedom Agenda," Analysis Paper no. 10, Saban Center for Middle East Policy at Brookings, September 2006, available at <http://www.brookings.edu/~/media/Files/rc/papers/2006/09middleeast_wittes/wittes20060901.pdf>.
[8] MEPI funding figures and programming data are derived from MEPI-published data, from Notifications to Congress of MEPI expenditures, from public websites, and from interviews. Complete information on FY07 and FY08 expenditures and activities is not publicly available; the data here are the best available as of publication. MEPI program data were supplemented by dozens of off-the-record interviews with local Arab civic activists (including those who do and do not benefit from MEPI funds), MEPI program participants, senior U.S. officials, MEPI staff, US embassy staff, and NGO implementers of MEPI-supported programs.
[9] This practice of drafting democracy strategies is now mandated for all regional bureaus under the ADVANCE Democracy Act, passed by Congress in 2007 (Title XXI of PL110-53).
[10] Under President Bush, the senior National Security Council staffer on democracy policy was a deputy national security advisor.
[11] Tamara Cofman Wittes and Sarah E. Yerkes, "What Price Freedom? Assessing the Bush Administration's Freedom Agenda."
[12] Gamal Essam al-Din, "U.S. Throws $1 Million into the Fray," *Al-Ahram Weekly*, March 10-16, 2005, available at <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2005/733/eg2.htm>.
[13] Tamara Cofman Wittes and Sarah E. Yerkes, "The Middle East Partnership Initiative: Progress, Problems, and Prospects," Middle East Memo No. 5, Saban Center for Middle East Policy at Brookings, November 29, 2004, available at <http://www.brookings.edu/papers/2004/1129middleeast_wittes.aspx>.
[14] Subcommittee on the Middle East and Central Asia of the Committee on International Relations, *The Middle East Partnership Initiative: Promoting Democratization in a Troubled Region Hearing*, 108th Cong., 1st sess., March 19, 2003, pp. 25, 36.
[15] United States Government Accountability Office, "Foreign Assistance: Middle East Partnership Initiative Offers Tools for Supporting Reform, but Project Monitoring Needs Improvement," August 2005. Also, United States Department of State and the Broadcasting Board of Governors, Office of Inspector General, "Review of Middle East Partnership Initiative Coordination and Implementation," Report Number ISP-I-06-18, March 2006.
[16] Tamara Cofman Wittes and Sarah E. Yerkes, "What Price Freedom? Assessing the Bush Administration's Freedom Agenda," p. 16.
[17] J. Brian Atwood, M. Peter McPherson, and Andrew Natsios, "Arrested Development: Making Foreign Aid a More Effective Tool," *Foreign Affairs*, Nov/Dec 2008; Michael A. Cohen and Maria Figueroa Küpçü, *Revitalizing U.S. Democracy Promotion: A Comprehensive Plan for Reform* (Washington: New American Foundation, April 2009).
[18] Thomas Carothers, *U.S. Democracy Promotion During and After Bush,* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, September 2007).
[19] Indeed, President Obama's FY2010 budget request to Congress, released on May 7, 2009, requests $86 million for MEPI, suggesting that the new administration recognizes the program's value.