

## **What will the Middle East Partnership Initiative look like in 2015? August 7, 2008**

Five years in, the Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI) continues to stimulate vigorous policy debate in Washington. Former Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Scott Carpenter argued that “MEPI should be given steroid injections,” while Georgetown University political scientist Dan Brumberg observed that issues of “credibility still remain” even as the program has grown out of its infancy. Carpenter and Brumberg spoke at a Middle East Program luncheon dedicated to discussing the future of MEPI.

Several participants in the discussion suggested that the ultimate goals of the program remain unclear. Is MEPI’s goal to strengthen and stabilize current governments, or to help usher in more democratic systems that will help ease incumbents out of power? Carpenter suggested that even within the Bush Administration, views differ. Carpenter and Brumberg agreed that whichever the case, political and social change has both a demand and a supply side. A U.S. government policy that seeks to increase the public’s demand for such change cannot be successful without being twinned with efforts to encourage governments to supply more political freedom and civil liberties.

There is little dispute that MEPI has had growing pains. Brumberg argued that MEPI was born in a highly politicized and ideological incubator, on the heels of September 11 and just preceding the war in Iraq. He charged that there was a “lack of clear thinking about what democracy promotion meant,” and the program was often led by “people on the ground who wanted to change the world, not analyze it.” In its inception, Brumberg asserted that those establishing MEPI systematically underestimated both the realities and complexities of the Middle East. In particular, the State Department had not thought rigorously about the durability and adaptability of the semi-autocracies in the region. In many countries, governments allow some public freedoms but vigorously challenge any effort at true political change. Reform rhetoric seems endemic, but actual reform is heavily managed and often ineffectual.

Carpenter was positive about MEPI, suggesting that it had helped achieve incremental reform and kept “civil society canaries breathing in the autocratic coal mines.” He enumerated a number of logistical bottlenecks within MEPI that need to be changed. In particular, the grant administration process needs streamlining, funding needs to be pushed out to regional field offices, and the pillars that initially underlay the program as conceptual guides need to be reworked so that they do not act as stovepipes. Carpenter advocated tripling MEPI’s programmatic funding and creating two more regional offices (up from the current two) that would be more responsive to local conditions, and which would have a strong representation of civil servants in addition to foreign service officers. He warned against moving MEPI out of the Near Eastern Affairs bureau at the State Department, however, arguing that its inclusion at State helps inject the issue of political reform into the normal course of U.S. bilateral relations. He warned against moving it

into USAID, suggesting that the scant USAID presence in many Middle Eastern countries, combined with an overly economic focus and a corporate culture that can seem driven by contracting officers rather than practitioners, would undermine the effort. Instead, he argued that the Deputy Assistant Secretary of State in charge of MEPI should have authority to coordinate both MEPI and USAID funding in regional countries.

Carpenter pointed out that MEPI successfully and productively operated with independence from the U.S. bilateral relationship with target countries, and that its activities have greatly broadened the range of reformers and civil society organizations that have contact with the U.S. Embassy in many countries. Cutting MEPI now would not only cut those relationships loose, but would also make it hard for the United States to restore ties after proving an untrustworthy partner.

Carpenter argued that MEPI's inability to "produce breathtaking results" is understandable given its short lifespan, limited funding, uncertain congressional support and persistent differences over strategy. He suggested that the best response is to strengthen MEPI rather than absorb its activities into other bureaucracies.

While MEPI continues with the rhetoric of reform, Brumberg argues the "regimes [of the region] are becoming better at autocracy." They are adept at exploiting tensions between religious and ethnic groups, often skillfully operating "protection rackets" whereby they protect vulnerable groups in society from attack in return for loyalty. In addition, they are extensively using technology to do to manipulate politics in their countries. Terrorism and the events in Iraq have allowed regimes to justify the enhancement of their control and power in the name of "stability and security." Brumberg also asserted that the United States had to work to make non-governmental organizations advocates of political society, not merely civil society.

In the present environment, MEPI's influence and capacity to create reform is limited. Governments have often been warm to the program's economic and educational policy agendas, but politely remove themselves from discussions of political reform. As Brumberg put it, "these regimes are very adept at taking these agendas and using them for their own purposes. The challenge is to find loopholes where we can assert ourselves so we have unintended consequences....Crass arm twisting...brings you only short-term kinds of changes."