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S U M M A R Y

The Bush administration is preparing to launch a “Greater Middle East Initiative” at the G-8 summit meeting in June. The plan is to bring the United States, Europe, and the Middle East together around a set of commitments to help transform the region politically and economically. The time is indeed opportune for engagement on regional reform, but as planned, the initiative fails to establish a basis for genuine partnership and does little to address the real challenges of Arab democratization. The administration should rethink its approach and start a new process of genuine consultations to come to an agreement on how all three sides can work cooperatively to address the regional problems that threaten the security of Arab societies and the West. ■

The Greater Middle East Initiative: Off to a False Start

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Scrambling to give substance to President Bush’s ringing call for a democratic transformation of the Middle East, administration officials are preparing a “Greater Middle East Initiative” to be launched at the G-8 summit meeting at Sea Island, Georgia, in early June. The initiative, administration officials say, will bring together the United States, Europe, and the “Greater Middle East” (including not only the Arab world but also Afghanistan, Iran, Israel, Pakistan, and Turkey) around a far-reaching set of commitments aimed at helping transform the region politically, economically, and socially. The initiative is intended to be a vital, visionary complement to the war on terrorism.

Although plans for the initiative are still in progress, the emerging outline is clear, thanks to a leaked U.S. working paper prepared for the G-8 summit and off-the-record comments by U.S. officials. Building on the diagnosis of the Arab world’s shortcomings presented in the 2002 *Arab Human Development Report*, the initiative sets three reform priorities: promoting democracy and good governance, building a knowledge society, and expanding economic

opportunities. Cutting across the three areas is the goal of furthering women’s rights and empowerment. The proposal defines a series of measures, mostly aid programs, to be taken by G-8 members to help the Greater Middle East countries achieve progress on these fronts.

Although the administration has been touting the initiative as a pathbreaking endeavor, the plans to date suggest that it will likely not turn out to be so. Its many components—programs to promote women’s rights, legal aid, anticorruption, civil society, literacy, education reform, trade, and finance sector reform—are mostly already present in existing U.S. aid programs in the region. They also closely track the last ten years of extensive European engagement with some Middle East countries through what is known as the Barcelona Process (see box on page 4). It seems clear that the administration is unwilling to push the envelope and adopt a much more assertive policy toward nondemocratic and largely nonreforming but friendly Middle Eastern states. Despite all the talk about a new paradigm for U.S. policy in the region, U.S. policy makers are



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still effectively paralyzed by an old problem: the clash between their stated desire for a deep-reaching transformation of the region and their underlying interest in maintaining the useful relations they have with the present governments of many nondemocratic states there.

Although the plans point to a quite unassertive initiative, they are nevertheless already provoking strong negative reactions from Arab governments who feel that the United States is planning to foist on the region a grand plan arrived at without any regional consultation beyond piecemeal bilateral discussions. Egypt and Saudi Arabia have taken the lead in rejecting the plan as an attempt to impose Western values and views on the Arab world; the initiative will be discussed, and undoubtedly denounced, in late March at the Arab League Summit, which will also consider an Egyptian counterproposal. And European governments, though not rejecting the initiative, are voicing skepticism about the wisdom of launching a high-profile initiative rather than working quietly to achieve change. They are also warning that Arab countries need to be consulted and involved in a real partnership and that the Arab-Israeli conflict cannot be ignored. Unless the Bush administration revises its plans quickly, it could end up with the worst of both worlds—a sweeping initiative that fails to genuinely challenge the governments of the Middle East to take real steps for reform, yet offends and alienates them in the process. It might even be forced to abandon the initiative, thus giving anti-reform forces a victory of sorts (see box on page 5).

This would be a badly missed opportunity. Because of the growing threat of domestic terrorism and the increased international attention to the shortcomings of Arab states in the past several years, the overwhelming majority of Arab governments and politically engaged Arab citizens are aware that the Middle East needs significant reform in all sectors of life. To be sure, there is much disagreement about what kinds of reform are needed and how far they should go.

Incumbent governments have no intention of undermining their own power, although they are not averse to mild reform measures that improve their external image. Conservative Islamist groups interpret reform as a move toward pure Islamist values and political forms, rather than toward liberal states, market economies, and secular values. More liberal Islamists are willing to accept the principle that governments should be elected in free competitive elections and that a degree of political pluralism is desirable, but they insist that a true separation of state and religion is unacceptable, and that laws made by elected parliaments cannot contradict Islamic law. Even Arab intellectuals who personally embrace Western values caution about trying to impose Western models on Arab societies. Yet, despite these disagreements, the region is more ripe for serious engagement on reform than it has been in decades.

Helsinki Goes South

When the idea of a Greater Middle East Initiative was first raised last autumn, some U.S. policy makers envisaged a Helsinki Process for the region, interpreting Helsinki, misleadingly, simply as a pointed focus on human rights and democracy. The idea was soon put aside, and the initiative is taking shape as just an assortment of aid programs rather than a comprehensive Helsinki framework. Indeed, the administration now rejects the Helsinki analogy. What happened along the way?

The Helsinki model started taking the administration in a direction it did not want to go, that is, toward a regional discussion about security issues. Security was the core of the Helsinki Process, which started as a deal between the West and Warsaw Pact countries: The West recognized the new post-World War II borders of Europe; in return, the Soviet Union and its client states in Eastern Europe signed on to an initially modest human rights agenda. But as they started planning a Helsinki approach for the Middle East, U.S. policy makers ruled out any such deal—the United States is not willing to offer the states of the region anything on the security front in

exchange for significant commitments on political and economic reform. The administration was in fact determined to keep security issues off the table, knowing full well that the Arab countries would immediately insist on raising the Arab–Israeli conflict, which the administration did not want to put into the mix. As a result, the Helsinki analogy was quickly dropped.

This decision keeps the Arab–Israeli issue out of the initiative but does not make it go away. The assumption of U.S. officials that it is possible to launch a major political initiative about Middle East transformation without discussing the peace process is fundamentally flawed, a triumph of abstract logic over political reality. It is true, on the basis of abstract logic, that Arab states could introduce political reforms regardless of what happens between the Israelis and Palestinians. It is hardly necessary for a Palestinian state to come into existence for Kuwait to finally extend the right to vote to women or for Tunisia to give greater respect to human rights. Yet political logic is another matter—and it is as determining and sometimes irrational in the Middle East as it is here at home. For Arab states the peace process is an integral part of what they consider to be a just reform agenda that includes pressure on Israel rather than only on the Arab states.

Hollow at the Core

By abandoning the Helsinki analogy and opting for a soft-edged approach to promoting change in the Middle East, the administration has ended up with an initiative that is hollow at the core. It will address a wide range of social, economic, and political issues, but it will do little of consequence to advance what is at the heart of the regional transformation that the United States says it wants—democratization. The planned prodemocratic measures in the initiative almost perfectly match the standard template of democracy aid programs that the United States and Europe have been carrying out all over since the late 1980s. They are a nonassertive mix of efforts to strengthen election administration, train par-

liamentarians, reform judiciaries, professionalize journalists, fund nongovernmental organization (NGO) activists, and so forth. The standard template assumes that the will for democratic reform is real, a process of attempted democratization is under way, and that what is missing is knowledge and capacity, which the aid programs can provide.

But, as it has been made starkly evident in the former Soviet Union and many parts of Africa in recent years, the standard template is of little use in situations where entrenched power elites are determined to hold on to power and only interested in cosmetic reforms to gain international legitimacy and bleed off accumulating pressure for real political change. In such situations, which prevail in most of the Arab world, the central problem is not lack of knowledge and capacity about democratic reforms, it is the absence of any real interest or will on the part of powerholders to carry out changes that will threaten their own power or perquisites. Thus, though the standard template efforts will not do any harm, they will also not have deep-reaching effects.

What is missing from the political component of the planned initiative is any recognition of the kinds of crucial political steps that the nondemocratic countries of the region will need to take to launch genuine processes of democratization; also missing is some indication of what the G-8 countries are willing to do, in terms of either carrots or sticks, to help induce such steps. The key measures vary depending on the specific situation of individual countries, but some examples include (1) where political parties are not permitted (as in some Gulf states), legalizing political parties; (2) where some parties are allowed but others are still banned, working to broaden the process of political inclusion; (3) where national elections are not held, holding such elections; (4) where national elections are regularly held but nonelected parts of the government continue to hold most of the power, reducing the scope of that nonelected power; (5) expanding the powers of legislatures; and (6) taking concrete measures to increase the political independence of



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The Barcelona Process

Change Comes Slowly

The Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP), known as the Barcelona Process after the city that hosted the first meeting, was launched in 1995 to foster cooperation on political reform, economic liberalization, and social issues between the European Union (EU) and the countries on the southern and eastern rim of the Mediterranean (Algeria, Cyprus, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Malta, Morocco, the Palestinian Authority, Syria, Tunisia, and Turkey). Members are committed to implementing reforms and continuing dialogue.

The agreement calls for reform in three areas, known as the political, economic, and social “chapters.” Each chapter details general principles and a work program.

The political chapter focuses on security cooperation and conflict resolution. The economic chapter codifies EMP states’ commitment to free trade and contains a pledge from EU members to increase aid to soften the impact of economic liberalization through a 25 percent increase in the Mesures d’Accompagnement (MEDA) grant assistance. MEDA has funded structural adjustment, business training, and rural development programs. The social chapter emphasizes civil society exchanges, education, social planning, and fighting destructive ideologies, such as racism. Notably, the agreement also contains language, albeit vague, committing participants to political pluralism.

The Barcelona Process has made some limited progress toward the goals of the economic chapter, which contains specific trade liberalization requirements to culminate in the Euro-Mediterranean Free Trade Area by 2010. But Mediterranean countries have been slow in enacting reforms for fear of angering key domestic constituencies. And EU members have refused to reduce agricultural subsidies for the same reason.

There has been little or no progress on the goals of the political and social chapters, which are vague, somewhat ambiguous, and controversial. EU countries have not pushed hard for political and economic reform so as not to jeopardize progress on security and economic priorities. As a result, in these areas, the EMP does little more than host seminars, sponsor exchanges, and provide a forum for dialogue.

judiciaries. This is just an indicative list; many more measures could be discussed and defined. To have a real effect on the blocked, fundamentally nondemocratic nature of most Arab states, the initiative would have to tackle these issues and not limit itself to worthy but essentially secondary issues such as legal aid, women’s leadership, and civic education programs.

But the United States does not dare push the countries of the Middle East harder, in part because it is not certain of the consequences that a sudden opening of the political system might have in some countries. Rhetoric aside, the United States shares with many Middle East governments the conviction that while things are not good now, they could get a lot worse if radical Islamist groups took advantage of democratic openings and came to power. And there are good reasons for concern. The Middle East environment is not a benign one at present, and neither the United States nor Arab governments can be oblivious to the potentially serious consequences of sudden change.

Revisiting Helsinki

And yet, the United States appears to be unduly defeatist in limiting the initiative to a set of measures that will produce few notable results other than stirring the anger of Arab governments because of the lack of consultation. It could accomplish much more, but this would require rethinking the process, taking seriously the proclaimed goal of partnership with European and Arab countries, and returning to the original model: the Helsinki Process (see box on page 6).

The goal at the G-8 summit in June should not be to announce a finished framework and then labor to get the Arab states to sign on. Such an approach incorrectly assumes that the United States and Europe already share long-term goals and values with Arab leaders in the political, economic, and security domains and just need to agree with them on a path to get there. In reality, what the Arab countries share with the United States and

Europe is a common interest in stemming the rising tide of anger and violence that threatens the physical safety of all their citizens and the political stability of the Middle East. Thus, the summit goal should be to announce that for the first time, the United States and Europe propose to engage the Arab states over time in a series of broad, in-depth meetings to come to

The attempt to launch a new initiative without discussing the peace process is a triumph of abstract logic over political reality.

The Hard Path to Partnership

From the Middle East

The results on the Soviet Union we all know. It was broken up, it suffered economic deprivations, its people [were] the unhappiest people for at least two decades. So if this is presented as a lure to the Arab countries, we really don't see much lure in the Helsinki accords.

—Prince Saud-al-Faisal,
as quoted by Associated Press, February 19, 2004

There is no difference between what was said by the British, French, Belgian, and Dutch colonizers...and what the modern colonial empires are saying.

—Columnist Salaheddin Hafez, commenting on the initiative in Al-Ahram Weekly, cited by Agence France Presse, February 19, 2004

It is unacceptable to speak of any initiative or vision which ignores or relegates the Palestinian cause...and to discuss security questions without speaking of Israeli weapons of mass destruction.

—Hesham Yussef, Director of the Secretary's Office of the Arab League, reported by Agence France-Presse, February 19, 2004

Our objective is for this document never to see the light.

—Jordanian Foreign Minister Marwan Muasher,
cited in the New York Times, March 12, 2004

From Europe

If we were to adopt a paternalistic attitude, we would only inflict the first defeat upon ourselves. Instead, we must formulate a serious offer based on genuine cooperation, and offer to work together with the states and societies of the region.

—German Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer,
at the 40th Munich Conference on Security Policy,
February 7, 2004

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.

—French Foreign Minister Dominique de Villepin
in Le Figaro, February 19, 2004

The Helsinki Process

The Value of Reciprocity and Continuous Engagement

The Helsinki Process was launched in 1972 at the insistence of a Soviet Union anxious to win formal recognition of the post–World War II European borders. Preparatory discussions for the Conference for Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE), as the initiative was formally called, lasted nearly a year. Two more years of formal talks culminated in the Helsinki Final Act, signed by 35 countries in August 1975. Over the next fifteen years, the Helsinki accords turned into an important tool through which the United States and Western Europe pressured the Warsaw Pact countries to improve their human rights records and move slowly toward political reform.

The Helsinki Final Act consisted of three baskets. Basket I dealt with territorial and security issues and recognized the Soviet Union's presence in Eastern Europe. Basket II called for economic, scientific, and environmental cooperation. Basket III committed parties to support freer movement of information and people through family reunification, improved access to outside media, and exchange programs. The act included provisions on public compliance reviews, and these proved crucial to putting the accords into practice.

Progress was achieved slowly through many meetings, with the Soviet Union and Eastern European countries making some concessions on human rights issues to gain concessions on arms control issues. The United States used the first compliance review (Belgrade 1977–1978) to denounce the Soviet Union's failure to implement Basket III provisions. Nevertheless, the Soviets agreed to participate in another Basket III compliance review (Madrid 1980–1983), hoping for advances on disarmament and détente. The real breakthrough on human rights issues came during the Vienna review (1986–1989), in part because of growing domestic pressure for change in the Warsaw Pact countries. The United States exploited the Soviets' desire for arms control to pressure them to ease emigration requirements, release political prisoners, and allow Western radio stations to broadcast into the Soviet Union. The Vienna review also produced agreements to allow more open exchanges of ideas, ease restrictions on individual movement, and establish procedures to protect human rights.

The CSCE became a permanent institution in 1995, renamed as the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). It is now deeply involved in supporting democratic transitions in Central and Eastern Europe, the Soviet successor states, and the Balkans.

agreement on how all three sides can work cooperatively to address the problems and conditions in the region that threaten the security of both Arab societies and the West. Rather than calling for a so-called partnership that is just a sign-on process to a predefined agenda, the initiative should take seriously the challenge of creating a negotiating process to actually build such a partnership from the ground up.

Reaching agreement on such an agenda would not be a matter of days. It would require lengthy and frustrating negotiations. The goal should not be to agree quickly on a set of high principles—there are enough high principles in the constitutions of many Arab countries and the international charters they have already formally accepted. Rather, it is to identify concrete issues, as well as the specific steps that Arab countries are willing to take to solve them and that the United States and Europe are willing to support. Such an approach requires honesty, not only on the part of Arab countries but of the United States as well. It is easy to advocate democracy. It is more difficult to admit, for example, that Washington would be extremely concerned if the Egyptian government suddenly opened up the registration of political parties, allowing the Muslim Brotherhood to compete freely in an election.

In negotiating such a process, Arab leaders would undoubtedly set forth their own demands for what they would expect the United States, and to a lesser extent Europe, to do. One issue that would be undoubtedly put on the table is the Middle East peace process. This is something the United States simply cannot avoid. It is part of the political logic of the Middle East. If U.S. officials want to talk about what concerns them in the region, they have to be prepared to listen to what concerns Arab officials. Anything less is, by definition, not a partnership from the start. Discussing the Arab–Israeli conflict does not mean necessarily solving the problem. But if the United

States expects major new reform commitments from Arab states, it should accept the need to commit to a renewed, sustained engagement on the Israeli–Palestinian issue. Other security issues will also need to be discussed. The elimination of the Saddam regime has changed the balance of forces in the entire area, creating uncertainty for many countries. And many Arab governments see the policies of the Bush administration as a threat to the security of the region. If their concerns are ignored, the initiative will not go far.

successful partnership can be built. It does little to address the real challenges of democratization. Yet there is a real need for a long-term engagement with the Middle East and Europe to address common security problems and, by extension, to open up serious mutual discussion and cooperation on a number of key domestic issues in the Arab world. The United States should give up the idea of announcing a splashy initiative at the G-8 meeting and instead start a broad process of genuine, three-way consultations to slowly develop a new plan

The Bush administration could end up with the worst of both worlds—a sweeping initiative that fails to challenge the governments of the Middle East, yet offends and alienates them in the process.

In convening a Helsinki-like conference, the United States would be well advised to rethink its definition of the Greater Middle East. The countries now included correspond to the way the United States defines the region in relation to the war on terrorism, but they do not correspond to a meaningful entity in the mind of the political leaders of the countries involved. The initiative should concentrate on the Arab states and leave room for separate initiatives for the other countries, such as Afghanistan and Pakistan.

As conceived now, the Greater Middle East Initiative is off to a bad start. It has created resentment in the Arab world and skepticism in Europe. It is not a foundation on which a

to move forward. As President Bush has acknowledged, the political, economic, and social problems of the Middle East will require a generational engagement. The administration must not sell this critical imperative short with an initiative unworthy of the challenges it seeks to address. ■

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