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## THE BROADER MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA INITIATIVE: IMPERILLED AT BIRTH

### I. OVERVIEW

The U.S. Broader Middle East and North Africa Initiative (BMEI), in preparation since President George W. Bush announced seven months earlier that Washington was adopting a “forward strategy of freedom” and would no longer accommodate friendly but authoritarian regimes in the region, will be launched at the G-8 summit of major industrialised nations on 8-10 June, then expanded upon at U.S.-European Union (EU) and NATO summits later in the month.<sup>1</sup> Its content has been much reduced since the proposal as first floated received a sceptical reaction in Europe and a mostly hostile one in the region. Unless Washington works harder and in a new way, especially at pursuing a balanced Israel-Palestinian peace process, the BMEI, promising as it may have been, is likely to be overwhelmed by the rising tide of Middle Eastern violence and anti-Americanism.

It would be unfortunate if the initiative does lose momentum. New policies are needed to attack the democracy and related structural deficits identified by Arabs themselves, prominently but by no means only in the pair of reports released in 2002 and 2003 by the United Nations on Arab Human Development. Debate about reform is expanding in the region, driven by independent intellectuals, still weak civil society

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<sup>1</sup> The initiative was originally called the Greater Middle East Initiative (GMEI) by the U.S. Europeans and some in the region objected to the name and suggested various alternatives such as “wider”. The latest version appears to be an American accommodation, though as discussed below, differences remain on the actual geographic scope of the initiative. The term Broader Middle East and North Africa Initiative and the short form (BMEI) will mainly be used in this Briefing, though the original name and short form will be retained when they appeared in titles or other materials that are quoted verbatim.

organisations and Islamic groups. Governments are joining in, but as the difficulty the Arab League experienced before finally issuing a limp statement on “development and modernisation” at its own summit in May 2004 suggests, most want simply to co-opt it.

The BMEI may at least apply some balm on a Transatlantic relationship that has been rubbed raw by differences over Iraq. Both sides of the ocean would welcome the growth of more democracy in a vital region, though the degree of their cooperation to achieve that common goal is uncertain given residual suspicions in Brussels about Washington's desire to piggyback on well-established (if by no means fully successful) programs into which the Europeans have poured more money than the U.S. seems prepared to match.

Despite the rhetoric with which the U.S. embarked on its new policy, there are few indications it is prepared to put established relations with authoritarian but cooperative Middle Eastern states at risk and pin its future on civil society and political opposition movements. There is even less indication it is willing to test the increasing professions of political Islam in the region that it is committed to the ground rules of democracy.

Reformers throughout the region are hard pressed to say kinder things about the U.S. initiative than that the message -- the need for more democracy -- should not be disregarded because the messenger, especially in the post-Iraq war world, is suspect. They are uncertain whether the new emphasis from Washington will give a bad name to their own efforts or create a little more room with governments to pursue their goals.

If the BMEI is to have any possibility of producing a generation-long partnership of Western states and regional reformers to attack the genuine needs of

the Middle East, the U.S. will simply have to take significant steps to change the highly unfavourable wider political context in which the initiative is launched.

## II. "A FORWARD STRATEGY OF FREEDOM"

The BMEI's origin is commonly given as a speech George W. Bush delivered in November 2003.<sup>2</sup> The U.S. President told the National Endowment of Democracy in Washington that:

Sixty 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. As long as the Middle East remains a place where freedom does not flourish, it will remain a place of stagnation, resentment, and violence ready for export. And with the spread of weapons that can bring catastrophic harm to our country and to our friends, it would be reckless to accept the status quo.

Therefore, the United States has adopted a new policy, a forward strategy of freedom in the Middle East. This strategy requires the same persistence and energy and idealism we have shown before. And it will yield the same results. As in Europe, as in Asia, as in every region of the world, the advance of freedom leads to peace.<sup>3</sup>

The new strategy was clearly part of the re-evaluation of American policy produced by the terror attacks on New York and Washington of 11 September 2001, and its context was the effort to redefine the stakes of the war in Iraq.<sup>4</sup> The initiative

that has been developed from it and that is to be unveiled in June 2004 is closely tied, therefore, to the two great crises the U.S. has faced during the Bush presidency and which have persuaded it that new and more assertive measures must be taken abroad to assure its security. Its origins, however, go back at least a decade, to the "enlargement of democracy" policy that the Clinton administration proclaimed.<sup>5</sup>

The BMEI borrows from its predecessor the buoyant self-confidence that is never far from the American approach to the world and may have been at its height in the decade after Soviet-inspired communism collapsed and before the fall of the Twin Towers produced an unaccustomed sense of vulnerability. The Clinton democracy program, however, whatever its rhetoric, was far from ambitious. In implicit acceptance of the accommodations to regional realities that his successor would insist were no longer prudent, it spent only a little more than \$250 million<sup>6</sup> in the Middle East over its lifetime on a variety of low-key measures designed to advance political reform.<sup>7</sup>

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increase dangers to the American people, and extinguish the hopes of millions in the region. Iraqi democracy will succeed -- and that success will send forth the news, from Damascus to Tehran -- that freedom can be the future of every nation. The establishment of a free Iraq at the heart of the Middle East will be a watershed event in the global democratic revolution". Elements of the new strategy had been presaged in language used in preceding months by Mr Bush's National Security Adviser. See Condoleezza Rice, "Transforming the Middle East", *The Washington Post*, 7 August 2003, and remarks to the Chicago Council on Foreign Relations, 8 October 2003. Even earlier, in an interview in the *Financial Times*, 23 September 2002, Dr Rice had provoked an angry response in the Arab press with her comment that the U.S. was committed not only to removing Saddam Hussein in Iraq but also to "the democratisation or the march of freedom in the Muslim world".

<sup>5</sup> Tony Lake, Mr Clinton's first National Security Adviser, wrote, "The successor to a doctrine of containment must be a strategy of enlargement of the world's free community of market democracies", "Confronting Backlash States", *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 1994. Lake suggested that trade, economic considerations and the promotion of democracy would henceforth replace political and military factors as the dominant principles of foreign policy.

<sup>6</sup> All "dollar" figures in this paper refer to U.S. dollars.

<sup>7</sup> Amy Hawthorne, "Do We Want Democracy in the Middle East? The 'democracy dilemma' in the Arab world: How do you promote reform without undermining key United States interests?", *Foreign Service Journal*, Washington, D.C., February 2001. Marina Ottaway, "Promoting Democracy in the Middle East: The problem of U.S. credibility", Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Working Papers, N°35, March 2003. The Clinton administration projects were

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<sup>2</sup> ICG conducted research for this briefing through its offices in Brussels, Washington, and the Middle East, including Amman and Cairo. Because the U.S. initiative about which they commented was evolving daily in sensitive diplomatic negotiations, many of the U.S., European and regional officials and others with whom we spoke did not wish to be identified.

<sup>3</sup> Remarks by President George W. Bush at the twentieth anniversary of the National Endowment for Democracy, Washington, D.C., 6 November 2003.

<sup>4</sup> In the passage immediately prior to that in which he announced the strategy, Mr Bush had said, "The failure of Iraqi democracy would embolden terrorists around the world,

As the Bush administration, post-11 September, began to focus on regime change -- acting in Afghanistan and talking increasingly about Iraq -- the U.S. State Department prepared a program some of whose sponsors believed might provide an alternative approach for addressing the Middle East's democracy deficit.<sup>8</sup> On 13 December 2002, Secretary of State Colin Powell announced the U.S.-Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI), whose initial tasks, he said, would be to promote entrepreneurship in Arab countries, encourage free trade in the region, fund the education of Muslim girls, and support citizens who were "claiming their political voices". While he called it "one of the most challenging undertakings that we and our friends in the region have ever considered", the MEPI pursued many of the same types of regime evolution, good governance, civil society capacity-building projects with which the Clinton administration had been content, and at funding levels that were not dramatically higher.<sup>9</sup>

A close student of U.S. efforts to promote democracy in the Middle East during the Clinton years had written:

... U.S. efforts to promote Arab democracy seemed but an afterthought to the main objectives of U.S. policy in the region. Pro-democracy initiatives remained at the level of "low policy", meaning that they were neglected or undermined at the more influential diplomatic level when they conflicted with core "high policy" interests such as regional security, oil and terrorism among others.<sup>10</sup>

The "forward strategy of freedom" enunciated by President Bush appeared to promise something quite different: high-level political emphasis, direct connection to the most fundamental U.S. foreign policy and security interests, a wider geographic

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bundled into traditional development programs, whose long-term goals included economic and social reform, but without an explicit public concept embracing the reform objective

<sup>8</sup> ICG interview with former U.S. National Security Council official, May 2004.

<sup>9</sup> "Powell Announces New Partnership Initiative with Arab Countries", CNS News, 13 December 2002; "Fact Sheet: U.S. Middle East Partnership Initiative", U.S. Department of State, 12 May 2003. MEPI was allocated \$29 million in Fiscal Year 2002, \$100 million in Fiscal Year 2003, and \$90 million in Fiscal Year 2004. As discussed below, the 2004 funds are to be reallocated to the new BMEI.

<sup>10</sup> Hawthorne, "Do We Want Democracy in the Middle East?", op. cit.

scope -- Pakistan, and Afghanistan, not merely the Arab world and Iran -- more transformation than evolution and a shortened time-frame.

It was quickly apparent that, as often in Washington, presidential pronouncement of a big idea had preceded detailed consideration of how it could be implemented. Nevertheless, nervousness grew among U.S. allies in Europe and within the targeted region as bureaucrats attempted to stitch together a credible policy.<sup>11</sup> A cottage industry of think-pieces developed in the press and learned journals, frequently with the sub-theme that because the U.S. and Europe so obviously shared interests in the spread of democracy and a stable, prosperous Middle East, the new initiative could help close the Transatlantic chasm that had opened over the war in Iraq. The statement of a group of U.S. and European scholars, several with experience in their own governments, was typical:

The enthusiasm for reform marks a paradigm shift in policy. In the past, other interests, like securing a steady flow of oil or obtaining cooperation against terrorism, have too often taken priority over political reform. But despite the flourishing rhetoric about promoting democracy, it is still not backed with concrete action plans. If we want a serious strategy, we must do three things: increase support for democrats in the region; create a better regional context for democracy policies abroad and reorganise ourselves at home to pursue and sustain pro-democracy policies abroad.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> An EU official told ICG in February 2004, for example, that a European delegation had been unable to learn much in Washington at the beginning of the year. His impression was that its American interlocutors were still searching for ideas that might match the scope of the president's speech.

<sup>12</sup> "A Joint Plan to help the Greater Middle East: A trans-Atlantic plan for democracy", appeared in the *International Herald Tribune* on 15 March 2004. Its authors -- Urban Ahlin, Ronald Asmus, Steven Everts, Jana Hybaskova, Mark Leonard and Michael Mertes -- described themselves as "a trans-Atlantic group sponsored by the German Marshall Fund of the United States". Other contemporary articles on the Greater Middle East include: Francois Heisbourg et. al., "What strategy for the Greater Middle East?", Centre for European Policy Studies-International Institute for Strategic Studies, Security Forum Paper N°15, December 2003; Dalia Dassa Kaye, "Bound to Cooperate? Transatlantic policy in the Middle East", *The Washington Quarterly*, winter 2003-2004; Ludger Kuenhardt, "System-opening and cooperative transformation in the Greater Middle East", *Euromesco*

One of the most frequently speculated-upon propositions was that the U.S. sought a new Helsinki Process, in order to repeat, this time with militant Islamism as the target, the history of the final decade and a half of the Cold War, when Soviet and Eastern European communism had fallen away not least before the human rights principles enshrined in the Final Act of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE).<sup>13</sup> Paul Wolfowitz, the Deputy Secretary of Defence, was reported to have told European interlocutors that the BMEI needed to be a reprise of Helsinki, while a State Department official said, “there is a belief that [Helsinki] contributed to bringing Europe together and played a significant role in tearing down the Soviet Union. In the same way, this idea would tear down the attractiveness of [Islamic] extremism”.<sup>14</sup>

A second area of speculation was that the U.S. would seek to use NATO to advance its initiative by devising a Middle Eastern version of the Partnership for Peace program that has been used successfully for more than ten years to prepare former Warsaw Pact states and former Soviet republics for membership in the North Atlantic Alliance. Arab commentators noted, for example, that shortly before

President Bush's speech, in October 2003, U.S. Ambassador to NATO Nicholas Burns had told a conference in Prague that:

NATO's mandate is still to defend Europe and North America. But we don't believe we can do that by sitting in Western Europe, or Central Europe, or North America. We have to deploy our conceptual attention and our military forces east and south. NATO's future, we believe, is east and south. It's in the Greater Middle East.<sup>15</sup>

Vice President Richard Cheney dropped hints at the Davos World Economic Forum which further heightened anticipation that the U.S. was indeed about to launch what a senior State Department official suggested to journalists was “a sweeping change in the way we approach the Middle East”.<sup>16</sup>

### III. “THE SOLIDITY OF A HOT-AIR BALLOON”?

After such a build-up, the surprise was the greater when the first view of the initiative's actual contours suggested something much less exalted. The London-based English language Arab newspaper *Al-Hayat* published on 13 February 2004 the leaked verbatim text of a U.S. “working paper for G-8 Sherpas” describing the proposed “G-8 Greater Middle East Partnership”.<sup>17</sup> The document indicated that

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*Papers*, N°26, November 2003; Martin Ortega, “The Achilles heel of transatlantic relations”, in Gustav Lindstroem (ed.), *Shift or Rift: assessing U.S.-EU relations after Iraq*, European Union Institute for Security Studies, November 2003; Volker Perthes, “America's Greater Middle East and Europe”, Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik Comments, Berlin, February 2004; and Alvaro de Vasconcelos, “Europe and the Greater Middle East”, *O Mundo em Portugues*, N°54, March 2004.

<sup>13</sup> The Helsinki Final Act, signed in August 1975, concluded the nearly three-year negotiation in the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE). At a series of “follow-up” or “review of implementation” meetings, the states of the Warsaw Pact were placed under increasing diplomatic pressure to fulfil their commitments on human rights and fundamental freedoms and improved human contacts. The Helsinki Final Act itself and the review process encouraged the spontaneous development of groups inside the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe that pressed their governments for compliance, which in turn contributed both to the efforts of Mikhail Gorbachev to reform the communist system and to that system's ultimate collapse. For early CSCE history, see John J. Maresca, *To Helsinki: Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe, 1973-1975* (Durham, 1985).

<sup>14</sup> Wolfowitz, cited in *Liberation*, 11 March 2004, State Department official quoted in Robin Wright and Glenn Kessler, “Bush Aims for 'Greater Mideast' Plan: Democracy Initiative to be Aired at G-8 Talks”, *The Washington Post*, 9 February 2004.

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<sup>15</sup> Burns quoted in Mohamed Sid-Ahmed, “On the Greater Middle East”, *Al-Ahram Weekly Online*, 26 February-3 March 2004. See also, Anthony H. Cordesman, “The Transatlantic Alliance: Is 2004 the year of the Greater Middle East?”, Centre for Strategic and International Studies, Washington, D.C., January 2004, and Daniel Vernet, “L'Irak, L'OTAN et le 'Grand Moyen-Orient'”, *Le Monde*, 4 May 2004.

<sup>16</sup> Cheney told the Davos gathering: “Our forward strategy for freedom commits us to support those who work and sacrifice for reform across the greater Middle East. We call upon our democratic friends and allies everywhere, and in Europe in particular, to join us in this effort”, Wright and Kessler, op. cit.; State Department official quoted in *ibid*.

<sup>17</sup> “Sherpa” is the colloquial name given to a senior official of a participating government who does the preparatory work for the G-8 summit, that is, one who makes possible a successful sojourn on the mountain top, like the famous Nepalese porters who ply their trade in the Himalayas. The G-8 is the group of eight leading industrialised nations -- U.S., UK, France, Germany, Canada, Italy, Japan, Russia, plus representatives of the European Union (EU) -- who have been meeting annually since 1975 to discuss and attempt to coordinate policies on major political and economic issues.

Washington had in mind a set of relatively small programs built around addressing three “deficits” -- freedom, knowledge, and women's empowerment -- that had been identified in 2002 and 2003 in a pair of well-regarded and widely publicised studies prepared by Arab scholars: the United Nations Arab Human Development Reports (AHDR).<sup>18</sup>

The U.S. proposed that the G-8 agree on “common reform priorities”:

- promoting democracy and good governance;
- building a knowledge society; and
- expanding economic opportunities

These, it argued, were “the key to the region's development: democracy and good governance form the framework ... which development takes, well-educated individuals are agents of development, and enterprise is the engine of development”. The working paper urged the G-8 to “forge a long-term partnership with the Greater Middle East's reform leaders and launch a coordinated response to promote political, economic and social reform in the region”. While it offered a half dozen specific suggestions in each of these areas, most appeared to be identical, or an evolutionary follow-on, to the activity that Washington as well as the European Union (EU) had been pursuing for a number of years.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> The U.S. paper, in *Al-Hayat* (London), 13 February 2004. On AHDR, see “Self-doomed to failure: an unsparing new report by Arab scholars explains why their region lags behind so much of the world”, *The Economist*, 4 July 2002; Fiona Symon, “UN report criticises Arab states”, BBC, 2 July 2002. The reports themselves can be found at [undp.org/rbas/ahdr](http://undp.org/rbas/ahdr).

<sup>19</sup> The working paper suggested that the G-8 could select from a palette of possible programs and activities. Thus under the heading of promoting democracy and good governance: a free elections initiative involving technical assistance to countries holding presidential, parliamentary or municipal elections between 2004 and 2006; parliamentary exchanges and training; women's leadership academies; grassroots legal aid; an independent media initiative including exchanges, training and scholarships for journalists; transparency and anti-corruption efforts, and encouragement of civil society. Under the heading of building a knowledge society: an education reform initiative, a literacy corps, a digital knowledge program, and a business education initiative. Under the heading of expanding economic opportunities, a finance-for-growth initiative including microfinance, a Middle Eastern finance corporation and development bank, a partnership for financial excellence, and a trade initiative including assistance for eventual World Trade Organisation (WTO) accession,

A typical reaction on the western side of the Atlantic came in a Carnegie Endowment study, which concluded that:

It seems clear that the administration is unwilling to push the envelope and adopt a much more assertive policy toward non-democratic and largely non-reforming 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 still effectively paralysed 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.<sup>20</sup>

Europeans appeared similarly underwhelmed, though less because the U.S. proposal was not radical than because it was deemed insensitive to the difficult political contexts -- in the Middle East but also within the EU -- in which it was being launched. A close observer concluded that:

This is the first U.S. initiative of its kind and, on the face of it, should therefore be welcomed. However, the paper suffers from four serious defects. First, its prescriptive tone and style -- particularly when read in conjunction with the U.S. National Security Strategy of September 2002 -- is insensitive and unlikely to be welcome in the region. Second, it makes a one-line reference to the “Euro-Mediterranean Partnership”, notwithstanding the extensive efforts made by the European Union over many years through its “Barcelona Process”. Third, it was not preceded by any substantial

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trade hubs, business incubator zones, and economic opportunity forums.

<sup>20</sup> Marina Ottaway and Thomas Carothers, “The Greater Middle East Initiative: Off to a False Start”, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Policy Brief, 29 March 2004. Other reactions were even more sharply critical, for example, Zbigniew Brzezinski, “The Wrong Way to Sell Democracy to the Arab World”, *The New York Times*, 8 March 2004, which argued that, “even a good idea can be spoiled by clumsy execution. Worse still, the idea can backfire -- particularly if people come to suspect that ulterior motives are at work. This is precisely what is happening with President Bush's ‘Greater Middle East initiative’”.

consultation. Fourth and most serious, it fails to address the Arab-Israeli conflict.<sup>21</sup>

The response from the region was largely critical, and at a pitch that suggests the reaction was as much to the build-up in the months following the Bush speech as to the relatively modest content of the working paper.<sup>22</sup> The Americans were accused in press commentaries and by political figures of arrogance for seeking to transform the Middle East in their own image without the grace of having discussed their plans with the intended beneficiaries -- and repeatedly chastised for ignoring the Israel-Palestinian conflict. The kindest comments that could be found were to the effect that the Arab Middle East was indeed in need of reform, even if it was a U.S. administration pursuing unpopular policies that was loudly saying so:

It would, of course, have been ideal if the countries of the region had embarked at the right time on a course of democratisation and reform. But since they did not, there are no signs that they are about to, and since the region is indeed sinking deeper into backwardness and undemocratic practices, why should its leaders complain about foreign prodding....On the contrary, a helping hand extended by another

country or a group of countries should, in fact, be welcome under the right circumstances. Unfortunately, it is not the right circumstances in this case.<sup>23</sup>

Some of the harshest criticisms came from Nader Fergany, the head of an independent Egyptian research centre and the principal author of the UN AHDR studies from which the U.S. working paper had borrowed so heavily. Fergany reaffirmed that the region needed "a long social struggle that comes with a price, that begins with thought and research and ends in politics. We need to change the essence of authority in the Arab region". But, he said, the impetus would have to come from within, not from "the current U.S. administration" with its "arrogant attitude in respect of the rest of the world, which causes it to behave as if it can decide the fate of states and peoples".<sup>24</sup>

Fergany accused Washington of misusing the UN reports "in an unethical manner ... which ignored all references made to U.S. and Israeli policy in the region and AHDR's clear criticism of those policies". The leaked working paper, he said, had relied on the UN reports "like a drunk leans against a lamppost so he does not fall over, and not for illumination".<sup>25</sup>

"The Bush administration's new initiative to encourage democracy and reform in the Arab world", a Western observer summed up with an equally colourful image, "has all the solidity of a hot-air balloon. It's floating grandly toward Planet Arabia while down below the people who would be affected by it are variously

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<sup>21</sup> Stanley Crossick, "The U.S. Greater Middle East Initiative: What is its added value?", The European Policy Centre, Brussels, April 2004. Crossick's judgment was that: "While the objectives of the U.S. initiative may be laudable, the unilateral approach and style has ensured its poor reception. A commitment to work together with those who -- in Europe and in the region -- have been working for some years on the project would be very welcome. The plan as such appears to have little added value". On the EU's Euro-Mediterranean Partnership and Barcelona Process, see below.

<sup>22</sup> Marina Ottaway at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace asked in connection with the Arab reaction to MEPI a question that is relevant for BMEI as well: "...what importance can be attached to the articles in the Arab press. Do such articles represent anything more than the views of some discontented intellectuals? Do they reflect the policy of their governments?". Her answer, which can also be extended to the present case, was that "answering such questions for countries with repressive regimes is never easy, but there is enough information from disparate sources to conclude that this outpouring of articles hostile to the United States and to the Bush administration's talk of democracy promotion in the Middle East should not be dismissed as unrepresentative or inconsequential....The views expressed in the newspapers ... do not appear to be at odds with those of the public". While not reflected in the press, some observers in the region believe that the initiative struck responsive chords among some groups, for example, some Syrians, Kurds, and Maronites in Lebanon.

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<sup>23</sup> Hasan Abu Nimah, "Reaction to 'Reform' Is Missing the Point", *Jordan Times*, 10 March 2004. For a snapshot of regional reaction, see "Greater Middle East Initiative: 'essential reforms cannot be imposed'", U.S. Department of State, Foreign Media Reaction, 11 March 2004. ICG interviews with government and international organisation officials from the region in April and May 2004 largely confirmed the tenor of the press response.

<sup>24</sup> Nader Fergany on "a long social struggle", quoted in Fatemah Farag, "Facing up to Failed Development", *Al-Ahram Weekly Online*, reporting on a Fergany speech at the Bibliotheca Alexandrina. Fergany on "arrogant attitude", quoted in "Critique of the Greater Middle East Project; the Arabs sorely need to refuse a reform from abroad", *Al-Hayat* (in Arabic), 19 February 2004.

<sup>25</sup> Nader Fergany, in "Critique of the Greater Middle East Project", op. cit. For another critique of the initiative from a strong proponent of reform in the region, see Ghassan Salamé, address to the annual meeting of the Arab Ministers of Finance (in Arabic), Beirut, 18 May 2004.

taking pot-shots, running for cover or scratching their heads in confusion".<sup>26</sup>

#### IV. DIPLOMATIC REPAIRS

U.S. diplomats have been active in the nearly four months since the leak of their initial working paper, and some of the early damage has been repaired. In particular, extensive consultations have been conducted with both Europeans and regional states. Suspicions remain on all sides but it appears likely that enough common interest -- or at least common words and procedure -- have been identified to allow the BMEI to play out reasonably smoothly during the busy diplomatic month of June 2004.

With Europe, the effort was primarily to demonstrate sensitivity to the EU conviction that a democratisation initiative required linkage to the Arab-Israeli crisis. A number of EU member states, including Germany, whose foreign minister, Joschka Fischer, has repeatedly declared himself interested in reform issues, were insistent on this to the point of proposing draft language for the projected G-8 declaration. It was relatively easy for Washington to repair this omission in the working paper by accepting a reference to the problem, though not one that implied any change in either the substance or the intensity of the U.S. policy.<sup>27</sup>

A second repair exercise required the Americans to address a deep-seated EU suspicion that, in a phrase heard frequently around Brussels, "they want us to write the cheques and leave the policy direction to them".<sup>28</sup> The U.S. has appeared to want both parties to place their ideas and programs on the table to be examined for complementarity or duplication, after which they would be moved under a single, BMEI umbrella and focussed more explicitly on core reform issues in a manner that would make the total

greater than the sum of its parts.<sup>29</sup> There are, however, disparities in the resources the U.S. and the EU have devoted to these purposes. While U.S. spending under the MEPI since 2002 and projected spending at least in the initial phase of the BMEI is at most in the low hundreds of millions of dollars, the EU has pursued its Barcelona Process, or Euro-Mediterranean Partnership, with the littoral states since 1995. During that period it has spent more than the U.S. on technical and financial measures -- and with a single, integrated concept -- to promote economic, social and political reform, though, as discussed below, often with disappointing results.<sup>30</sup>

Against this background, the Europeans were naturally cautious that they not compromise such political standing in the Middle East as their major efforts over a decade have brought them.<sup>31</sup> EU officials insist that they have resisted and will continue to resist anything that implies loss of independence for their policy instruments. The final results will not be known at least until the various summits are concluded, but it appears the Americans have had to pull back from any idea they may have once entertained of merging programs and sharing management or even strategic decisions to the softer

<sup>26</sup> David Ignatius, "Arab democracy is meaningless unless it begins at home", *Lebanon Wire*, 13 March 2004.

<sup>27</sup> On German interest and draft language linking reform and the Israel-Palestinian confrontation, ICG interview with EU official, May 2004.

<sup>28</sup> This is a complaint by no means limited to the Middle East. It has frequently been voiced, for example, with respect to issues involving the Balkans, at least since the EU initiated its Common Foreign and Security Policy in 1993 with the entry into force of the Maastricht Treaty, coincident with the Bosnia war.

<sup>29</sup> ICG interview, U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) official, Washington, May 2004.

<sup>30</sup> Barcelona participants include Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, the Palestinian Authority, Lebanon, Syria, Turkey, Cyprus and Malta, which became members of the EU on 1 May 2004, were also original participants. The EU spends just under €1 billion annually to support political, economic and institutional reforms and sustainable development through its MEDA financing mechanism. That figure increases to nearly €3 billion annually if European Investment Bank loans are added. Of course, both the U.S. and EU devote additional sums, especially for development, to the Middle East, not least the very substantial foreign assistance Washington gives to Egypt, Israel and, to a lesser extent, Jordan. Annual U.S. development aid in the region, not including Israel, totals approximately \$1 billion. The U.S., particularly since 11 September, has also provided large amounts of assistance, some of which fits into reform furtherance categories, to Afghanistan and Pakistan. For information on U.S. assistance programs, see [http://www.usaid.gov/policy/budget/cbj2004/asia\\_near\\_east/m\\_e\\_summary.pdf](http://www.usaid.gov/policy/budget/cbj2004/asia_near_east/m_e_summary.pdf). But no matter how calculated, it is clear that the Europeans have had an overarching concept behind their reform programs longer and at greater expense.

<sup>31</sup> Even Arab observers have suggested that the U.S. might be seeking to "piggyback" on European programs. Khatoun Haidar, "A visionary or divisive reform initiative?", *Lebanon Wire*, 15 March 2004; Nader Fergany, in "Critique of the Great Middle East Project", op. cit.

ground of pledges for more regular information exchange.<sup>32</sup>

A third topic requiring diplomatic finesse has been the geographic extent of the BMEI. All appear to agree that it should be more extensive than the boundaries of the EU's Barcelona Process, which does not (yet) include Libya, much less other obvious members of the classical Middle East such as Iraq and Iran. The EU is sceptical of the utility of adding Afghanistan and Pakistan, as the U.S. desires, pointing out that those two countries have political dynamics that are distinctive from the more traditional Middle East and only one fundamental characteristic in common -- religion. They argue sensibly that joining them to the initiative on this narrow basis would strengthen suspicion in the region that the BMEI is directed against Islam.<sup>33</sup> The likeliest solution will be that the area of coverage will be left undefined, purposely blurred at the edges.<sup>34</sup>

U.S. diplomats made up for lost time by taking extensive soundings within the region. The operational purpose was to elicit a statement of interest in reform that could then be used to explain subsequent policy announcements at the G-8 and elsewhere as, in effect, a response to a home-grown endeavour, if not a specific request. The kind of essentially empty rhetorical flourish about the peace process that was offered to the Europeans was obviously of no more than minimal value with the Arab states. The suspicion must be that the primary assurance on offer was to the effect that the U.S. would move cautiously in promoting reform and would not put at risk its relationship with non-democratic but cooperative governments.

This would have been a welcome message to many governments in the region, who quickly set about to capture the reform issue in their own way. Initial

efforts were disappointing to all sides. The Arab League summit scheduled for late March 2004 was postponed at the last moment primarily because of differences over a statement on reform. Two additional months of behind the scenes activity, however, finally produced such a document when the organisation convened on 22-23 May in Tunis.

The thirteen-point statement that was approved linked reforms to a just settlement of regional conflicts, in particular the Israeli-Palestinian, and said that Arab leaders were determined to intensify political, economic, social and educational reform but that this would be subject to national and cultural requirements, religious values and their own "possibilities".

Reaction was varied. The Tunisian foreign minister proclaimed that "we are deadly serious about the implementation of that paper. It is not at the request of anybody. It has been done in a way that is a home-grown process". Another minister insisted "the consensus that emerged was very good given the political and social scene in the Arab world". Others were less charitable. One participant described the document, which lacks specific details about how to achieve more respect for human rights, freedom of expression or an expanded role for women, as "wishy-washy". Most outside observers agreed, noting that only four leaders were left in Tunis when agreement was finally hammered out, and the word "reform" was largely avoided in favour of a stress on the less charged terms "development and modernisation".<sup>35</sup>

The fairest assessment may turn out to be that made in advance by Fergany, the scholar who took the lead on the UN reports of 2002 and 2003. He had predicted that U.S. pressure might cause some regimes to adopt "shallow reforms", but:

I'm afraid what will come ... will be superficial, cosmetic reforms to respond to outside pressure, and that will delay deep and profound change. This has been one of the mechanisms of authoritarian regimes -- if you speak of human rights, they go and set up their own

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<sup>32</sup> ICG interviews with EU officials, Brussels, May 2004.

<sup>33</sup> Indeed, Arab leaders have objected to the geographic scope of the initiative on precisely that basis. ICG interview, senior Jordanian statesman, Amman, May 2004.

<sup>34</sup> In testimony before the U.S. Senate on the initiative on 2 June 2004, Under Secretary of State Alan Larson said, "We believe that it is important to have an open architecture on a concept like this because we found in other regional organisations when it's successful, others want to join. So we haven't wanted to draw very sharp lines, excluding some and including others. But we certainly imagine the countries of North Africa, the Levant and the Gulf and some adjacent countries. We think that the geography will vary somewhat depending on the topics under discussion".

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<sup>35</sup> Neil MacFarquhar, "Arab leaders adopt agenda endorsing some change", *The New York Times*, 24 May 2004. "Arab leaders embrace reform plan", *Arab News*, 24 May 2004. Megan K. Stack, "Arab crises prove to be too big for league to handle: Leaders skim over reform, skirt the Iraq and Palestinian issues, and bemoan bloodshed", *Los Angeles Times*, 24 May 2004.



human rights organisation ... we end up with facades that don't represent genuine reform.<sup>36</sup>

For the present, however, the Arab League has done enough, if just barely. Five heads of state have accepted invitations to participate at Sea Island to present the document to the G-8, though Egypt's President Mubarak, who has been among the most sceptical about the BMEI, turned down the opportunity.<sup>37</sup>

## V. THE SCHEDULE

The indefatigable sherpas continue to debate language as well as substance even as they begin to move from base camp toward the first of the June summits. Precise details will not be available in advance of any of those gatherings. On the eve of the first event, however, the prospects are as follows.

### **The G-8 Summit, in Sea Island, 8-10 June 2004.**

This will issue a declaration that welcomes the Arab League document and “responds” with a handful of specific measures, possibly including:

- a “Broader Middle East and North Africa Forum for the Future” at which those governments that so wish, as well as business and civil society leaders, could meet, probably annually, to discuss reform goals and programs;
- a new “Broader Middle East and North Africa Foundation for Democracy”, to which the U.S., the Europeans and others might contribute;

- a “Broader Middle East and North Africa Democracy Assistance Group” to serve as a potential mechanism for coordinating or, more likely, sharing information about, the programs of U.S., European and other foundations,<sup>38</sup> including the above new one, with respect to such measures as election aid, transparency and furtherance of civil society;
- a “Broader Middle East and North Africa Literacy Corps”; and
- a microfinance pilot project to fund new small businesses in the region so as to help democracy thrive by expanding the middle class.<sup>39</sup>

### **The Annual U.S.-EU Summit, in Dublin, 26 June 2004.**

This statement will likely emphasise the common objective of supporting reform and democratisation in an imprecisely defined Middle Eastern region and place discussion of the two parties' respective programs in support of that objective on the annual summit agenda as well as on the agendas of lower level bilateral meetings. EU officials have indicated reluctance to go beyond that to assume a more frequent and operational responsibility for implementing the BMEI initiative as such.<sup>40</sup>

### **The NATO Summit, in Istanbul, 27-29 June.**

NATO has conducted a Mediterranean Dialogue since 1994. Present participants are Algeria, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Mauritania, Morocco and Tunisia. The Dialogue operates primarily on a bilateral basis -- what NATO calls the 26 (members) + 1 formula. It has been low key and not especially productive, not least because of fundamentally differing interests of the two sides in its purposes.<sup>41</sup> Consultations in

<sup>36</sup> Nader Fergany, quoted in Roula Khalaf and Guy Dinmore, “Reforming the Arab World”, *Financial Times*, 22 March 2004.

<sup>37</sup> Heads of state who will be in attendance are King Abdullah II of Jordan, King Hamad of Bahrein, President Bouteflika of Algeria, President Salih of Yemen and President Karzai of Afghanistan. President Mubarak may have had other reasons to decline the invitation, including residual unhappiness at the manner in which his most recent trip to the U.S. left him in an awkward position at home when it was followed immediately by President Bush's controversial support of Israeli Prime Minister Sharon's Gaza withdrawal plan. However, he was clearly unhappy that a number of his proposals for limiting and structuring the Arab League's response to the U.S. initiative were not accepted at Tunis and that the U.S. maintained its insistence on including countries beyond the Arab League in the initiative. The leaders of Saudi Arabia, Morocco and Tunisia also declined invitations.

<sup>38</sup> Existing foundations whose participation would be hoped for include, for example, the U.S. National Endowment for Democracy and those of the several German political parties.

<sup>39</sup> ICG interviews with U.S. officials, Washington and EU officials, Brussels, May 2004; Tamara Cofman Wittes, “The New U.S. Proposal for a Greater Middle East Initiative: an Evaluation”, The Saban Centre at the Brookings Institution, Washington, 10 May 2004.

<sup>40</sup> ICG interviews, Brussels, May 2004.

<sup>41</sup> An observer has explained that “while Europe and the U.S. seem to believe that political dialogue, discussions and information exchange must be the starting point for a relationship to build confidence and stimulate constructive cooperation, Arab countries by contrast prefer to start with hard issues, including especially those relating to the Arab-Israel conflict”. Mohammed Kadri Said, “Assessing NATO's Mediterranean Dialogue”, *NATO Review*, April 2004. NATO's consultations related to the BMEI have revealed

the region about deepening content and expanding participation began somewhat later than with respect to the G-8 and the EU, and not all results are in, but indications are that nothing ambitious is likely, certainly nothing like the Partnership for Peace with Eastern Europeans and others that was initially considered a near model.<sup>42</sup>

While NATO's interest in expanding practical and technical cooperation in a number of areas, including terrorism, is reciprocated to different degrees by participants in the Dialogue,<sup>43</sup> most Arab states would want to discuss big security issues -- especially those relating to Israel -- before committing themselves to much more. Such expansion of the Dialogue as does occur will be on a country-by-country rather than regional basis but a good indication of lowered expectations for the summit is probably NATO's decision to drop the idea of inviting several Arab states to Istanbul.<sup>44</sup>

## VI. A FEW MODEST ACHIEVEMENTS

Many in the media and most observers have long since concluded that such a package is a defeat for the Bush administration. It does represent a considerable climb down from the lofty ambitions proclaimed in the President's November 2003 speech, and a "drastic" narrowing even of the initial goals suggested in the original, leaked working paper.<sup>45</sup> One well informed early observation was that:

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something of the same division of interest. ICG interview with NATO official, May 2004.

<sup>42</sup> Partnership for Peace was attractive for former Warsaw Pact and other European states that were eager to prepare themselves for membership in what is viewed as one of the West's premier clubs. The attitude toward NATO, and especially the willingness of publics to envisage a closer relationship, is quite different, of course, in the Middle East

<sup>43</sup> Algeria, Israel and Jordan have generally been the most interested, Egypt the most sceptical. ICG interviews, May 2004.

<sup>44</sup> ICG interviews with NATO officials, Brussels, May 2004. "[NATO's] ambitions to develop its own Greater Middle East Policy have been lowered as Washington dilutes its grand plans for the region. Summit invitations to leaders from north Africa and the Middle East have been dropped". Judy Dempsey, "Afghan Troubles Will Test NATO's Quest for New Role", *Financial Times*, 27 May 2004.

<sup>45</sup> Guy Dinmore and Roula Khalaf, "U.S. Offers Scaled-Back Version of Mideast initiative Draft Plan", *Financial Times*, 26 April 2004.

The planned pro-democratic measures in the initiative almost perfectly match the standard template of democracy aid programs that the United States and Europe have been carrying out since the late 1980s. They are a non-assertive mix of efforts to strengthen election administration, train parliamentarians, reform judiciaries, professionalise journalists, fund nongovernmental organisation activists, and so forth. The standard template assumes that the will for democratic reform is real, a process of attempted democratisation is under way, and that what is missing is knowledge and capacity, which the aid programs can provide.<sup>46</sup>

The problem with this, the critique continues, is that "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 a case, which well describes much of the official Middle East today, "though the standard template efforts will not do any harm, they will also not have deep-reaching effects".

There will undoubtedly be efforts at Sea Island, Dublin and Istanbul to assert that much more has in fact been achieved. Nevertheless, it is hard to quarrel with the preliminary assessment of a major American newspaper that had welcomed the professed intention "to make democracy promotion the centrepiece of [the administration's] policy in the Middle East" and to "use 'soft power' rather than military force to tackle some of the problems that underlie Islamic extremism and terrorism":

Much of the impetus is already gone. Sadly, the Greater Middle East Initiative has become a victim of the administration's other failures: of the growing violence in Iraq, the accumulated poison in transatlantic relations and the backlash of Mr Bush's decision to endorse Israel's unilateral redrawing of its borders. The goals of the initiative have been steadily scaled back....Administration officials once envisioned a program that would rival the cold War-era Helsinki process, which successfully promoted human rights in the Soviet Union and its satellites. But the latest draft of the administration's position paper reflects its

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<sup>46</sup> Ottaway and Carothers, "The Greater Middle East Initiative: off to a false start", op. cit.

defensiveness and weakening authority with both Arabs and Europeans....the substance now pending is pretty modest too. Not much could be expected from these new institutions in the near future....But as the administration's new draft rightly observes, "this initiative is a long-term generational effort". It's worth making a start at it, even if it's only a modest one.<sup>47</sup>

And a case can, after all, be made for the BMEI. While a senior U.S. official acknowledged that Washington has been "sailing against the wind" with the initiative,<sup>48</sup> it has, if nothing else, put reform on the A-list of issues that come up whenever Western governments discuss the region among themselves and with Middle Eastern leaders. "Nothing now preoccupies the Arab world as much as 'reform'", notes a Saudi commentator. "You cannot open a paper or listen to a radio station or watch a satellite TV station without finding the word 'reform' peering at you in one way or another". In a region long dominated by autocrats and social stagnation and whose relations with the U.S. and Europe has been characterised by pragmatic deals over oil and military matters, this is progress, even if the same observer adds that, "perhaps the most common way this word appears is in the form of fury at U.S. reform initiatives".<sup>49</sup>

A second achievement that can already be booked for BMEI is that it has helped Europe revitalise its own approach to the Middle East. As noted, the EU considers that it has conducted a reform-oriented policy toward at least the Arab states of the Mediterranean littoral since the Barcelona Process was inaugurated in 1995. Through 2006, it will have spent nearly € billion for this purpose, not counting loans made through the European Investment Bank. It has concluded association agreements designed to expand trade with all the states except Syria and signed an agreement in 2003 with Egypt, Jordan and Morocco that takes a major step toward regional trade and economic integration.<sup>50</sup> Pursuant to Barcelona, it

runs a multitude of cooperative programs in areas as varied as combating drugs, organised crime and terrorism, and social integration of migrants, and provides a framework within which some civil society cooperation can occur.

Nevertheless, the EU has been aware for some years that the high hopes with which the Barcelona Process was launched have largely gone unfulfilled. As early as August 2000, the Commission issued a communication on "Reinvigorating the Barcelona Process". This has led to a number of changes that should make it possible to escape Barcelona's multilateral, progress-at-the-rate-of-the-slowest strait-jacket.<sup>51</sup> The EU is also moving forward on several projects that could tie in closely with BMEI, including the decision taken in 2002 but still largely unimplemented to expand university cooperation and student exchanges (the Tempus and Erasmus programs respectively) to Mediterranean states and the Euro-Mediterranean Foundation for the Dialogue of Cultures.<sup>52</sup>

EU officials acknowledge that, while most of these developments were in train before the Bush November 2003 speech, the BMEI gave them new impetus. The prospect that the U.S. was about to go into high gear with an initiative of its own that would inevitably divert Middle Eastern attention caused Europeans to be more appreciative of a process they had allowed to become too bureaucratized, with too little high level political follow-through.<sup>53</sup>

There is no guarantee that such creative Transatlantic synergy will continue. There are, as has been indicated, multiple doubts on the European side about American intentions in speaking of a BMEI partnership and in defining the nature of that

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signed in Amman on 11 January 2003 and entered into force on 24 February 2004.

<sup>51</sup> The new program, pursuant to which "action plans" are to be developed for individual states, is called the "European Neighbourhood Policy". An interim report approved at the 25-26 March European Council emphasised that, "Political, economic and social reform is required in order to meet these challenges" [those identified by the UN reports of 2002-2003]. The conclusions should be approved in the document "EU Strategic Partnership with the Mediterranean and the Middle East" at the Dublin European Council in mid-June 2004.

<sup>52</sup> The new foundation, established at the Euro-Mediterranean ministerial meeting in Naples in December 2003 and scheduled to become operational in 2004, has reportedly attracted attention as a specific idea that could be linked to BMEI in some fashion. ICG interviews, Brussels, May 2004.

<sup>53</sup> ICG interviews, Paris and Brussels, May 2004.

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<sup>47</sup> "A start on democracy" (editorial), *The Washington Post*, 28 April 2004.

<sup>48</sup> ICG interview, Washington, May 2004.

<sup>49</sup> Abdelmoneim Said, writing in *al-Watan* (Saudi Arabia), quoted in *Mideast Mirror*, 22 March 2004.

<sup>50</sup> EU negotiations with Damascus for an association agreement are well advanced and are not expected to be hampered by the recent imposition of unilateral sanctions on Syria by the U.S. The so-called Agadir Agreement with the North African states and Jordan for a free trade area was

endeavour. Friction is almost as likely as balm to result over the next few years from the separate but potentially complementary concentrations on Middle East reform, especially if the allies continue to have significant differences in approach to major regional political issues.<sup>54</sup>

Nor is EU activity in the region fully free of restraints resulting from those political issues. Barcelona's difficulties can be attributed substantially to the Israel-Palestinian deadlock. Given the power discrepancies, the Euro-Mediterranean partnership that Brussels speaks of tends to be seen by Arab states more as a form of soft hegemony, an impression buttressed by sometimes insensitive language in EU pronouncements. Nor are Middle Eastern governments likely to be much more enthusiastic about reform projects preached from Brussels than those from Washington. When issues "relating to reform and democratisation" and to the U.S. BMEI initiative arose at the recent meeting of EU and Mediterranean foreign ministers, the discussion reportedly was largely a monologue.<sup>55</sup>

Nevertheless, active EU involvement, regardless of the degree of coordination that BMEI ultimately achieves with American efforts, can help keep reform an important agenda topic for discussion with Middle Eastern states and insulate it to a degree from the feelings in the region about controversial U.S. policies.

## VII. KEY QUESTIONS

If the BMEI is to have a chance to make a major difference in the region -- a chance, that is, to help address the very real deficits identified in the UN reports and highlighted in the initial U.S. working paper -- the right answers will need to be found to a number of questions.

<sup>54</sup> "Contrary to the fondest wishes of transatlantic enthusiasts, Middle Eastern reform may not be a good issue through which to bridge the post-Iraq chasm between the United States and Europe; it may even widen it". Wittes, "The new U.S. proposal for a Greater Middle East Initiative", op. cit.

<sup>55</sup> "Presidency conclusions", Euro-Mediterranean Mid-Term Meeting of Ministers of Foreign Affairs, Dublin, 5-6 May 2004. ICG interview with EU official, May 2004.

### A. HOW MUCH STAYING POWER IS THERE?

All sides say they accept that political reform in the Middle East is a matter for a generation, not a few years. The U.S. working paper noted the need for a "long-term partnership". The EU speaks of "long term and sustained engagement".<sup>56</sup> But there are many examples of such pledges being forgotten as soon as the next big issue grips the imagination of political leaders. Europeans routinely consider Americans susceptible to excessive optimism about what can be achieved by dint of their efforts and naive about how long it might take. An EU official tells of discussing the need for patience on BMEI with a U.S. Congressional staffer. Their conversation went like this:

*Congressional staffer:* This isn't a one-shot project. We need to stay with it consistently for two-three years.

*EU official:* I was thinking more like 40 years.

*Congressional staffer:* Yes, you're right -- at least four years.<sup>57</sup>

The anecdote is good enough to be apocryphal, but it says something of the different ways the putative BMEI partners view the time frame for their respective portions of the task. If the search is for a quick fix and an identifiable political triumph within the career span of any current leader, the venture is almost certain to founder in disappointment and recrimination.

<sup>56</sup> "Interim report on an EU strategic partnership with the Mediterranean and the Middle East", op. cit. An American academic familiar with Bush administration thinking says its leaders insist they will devote as much staying power to the BMEI as two generations of bipartisan U.S. political leadership devoted to the containment-of-communism policy inaugurated at the beginning of the Cold War or that a generation of bipartisan political leadership devoted to supporting human rights and fundamental freedoms in the Helsinki process with the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. ICG interview, Brussels, May 2004. Of course, such comparisons, however sincerely they may be meant, raise problems in the Middle East because they imply an analogy between communism and Islam, at least political Islam, as forces to be overcome.

<sup>57</sup> ICG interview, Paris, May 2004.

## B. CAN POLITICAL INTEREST BE MAINTAINED?

Closely related to the previous question, this involves not only how long the U.S. and Europeans are prepared to work with the region on reform and democratisation but at what degree of intensity. That the specific measures likely to be agreed at the three summits of June 2004 will not individually or collectively be spectacular is not necessarily a bad thing since early, demonstrable achievements are not to be expected. They are the sort of measures that can be enveloped comfortably within the ongoing work of the bureaucratic institutions of government agencies. This has both a positive and a negative side. It can produce what a close observer has referred to as:

... embedding ... small-bore programs in a network of new institutions with their own funding and capacity. Such institutions, once created, might begin to take on a life and logic of their own, and with luck can insulate the project of democracy promotion in the Middle East from the swings of political fortune that have doomed similar efforts in the past.<sup>58</sup>

However, it can also mean that the initiative is quickly lost from view as the multiplicity of its small parts is deemed insufficiently attractive politically to be worthy of the time and attention of leaders. Bureaucratisation is both a protection for program longevity and a threat to meaningful results. The threat increases if the initiative carries with it little independent money and is consequently dependent upon the regular appropriation process in which it must compete with a myriad of other programs, each with built-in supporters and rationale, and some with ties to whatever is the year's newest hot issue. U.S. officials attempting to launch the BMEI have said that money is "the least of our problems" but the fact is that while EU programs have been heavily financed for a decade under the Barcelona Process, the BMEI has the promise only of receiving the relatively modest amounts that would otherwise be directed to the rather lightly regarded MEPI program started by the State Department in 2002. The unknown variable is whether presidents -- George W. Bush but also his successor's successor's successor -- will maintain sufficient interest at the top to keep the bureaucracy energised and ensure a fair share of funding.

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<sup>58</sup> Wittes, "The new U.S. Proposal for a Greater Middle East Initiative", op. cit.

## C. WHAT KIND OF REFORM?

The BMEI's sponsors have made gestures toward Arab intellectuals and others who seek to promote civil society, but the focus to date has been on governments, most notably the campaign to get a statement at the Arab League summit that the G-8 could play off when launching its initiative. Yet, as has been noted, there is considerable reason to suspect that most governments in the region want to participate in the BMEI more to limit reform than to advance it. It will not be long before "the debate over reform ripens within the Middle East [and] the G-8 proposals may run up against an increasingly wide gap between the reform visions articulated by Arab liberals and those articulated by some of the more hidebound Arab governments".<sup>59</sup> The same can be said, of course, with respect to reform visions articulated by two other groups -- nationalists and Islamists -- to whom neither regional nor Western governments are likely to be instinctively sympathetic.<sup>60</sup>

While President Bush sharply criticised decades of accommodation to authoritarian regimes, the manner in which the U.S. initiative has been steadily cut back and tailored to gain acceptance from many of those same regimes does not indicate that the new policy is likely to be fundamentally different from the old. As a former senior U.S. National Security Council staffer said, the current administration is discovering, as it tries to balance the reform issue with the need for cooperation from Arab governments on a range of issues from terrorism, through Iraq, to oil, that there were practical reasons for many of the past accommodations.<sup>61</sup> After 11 September as before, there is "strong pressure to find a consensual path to government-led reform and give a secondary position to the still marginal voices of Arab liberal activists".<sup>62</sup> And there is little indication that where consent from otherwise helpful governments is not forthcoming, either the U.S. or Europe is prepared to do much to induce a change of attitude.

There is no inherent reason why political reform cannot succeed in the region -- there is some history

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> On the relevance of Islamists to reform, see below. On nationalism and reform, see ICG Middle East and North Africa Briefing, *Islamism in North Africa I: The Legacies of History*, 20 April 2004.

<sup>61</sup> ICG interview, Paris, May 2004.

<sup>62</sup> Wittes, "The new U.S. Proposal for a Greater Middle East Initiative", op. cit.

and there is a popular desire -- but there are at least practical political reasons and perhaps some cultural attitudes as well for why this is unlikely to happen quickly. It is possible to construct constitutions, laws, elections, parliament and other trappings fairly expeditiously. Many countries already have at least some of these; not all, however, are necessarily very democratic. The kind of reform that regional governments will find attractive and acceptable will most likely be what might reasonably be called more liberalisation than true democratisation, with an emphasis on the formal, outward aspects.<sup>63</sup>

A democratic society, however, can be argued to be as much about attitudes, patterns of essentially instinctual behaviour, mutual respect and tolerance, compromise, and social activist inclinations in a vibrant civil society, as it is about the machinery of government. These take time to nurture fully. How much time depends on the starting point, which will differ from case to case.<sup>64</sup> Government has a part to play in that nurturing process, of course, including by strengthening the institution of parliament, introducing more accountability and reducing the role of the military in political and civil matters. If the process is to take root, however, it must be furthered also by independent activists and groups.

Such individuals and bodies exist in the region. Though their weight and representative quality is open to question, they are making efforts to advance the goals that both the UN reports and the BMEI have identified. A number of them have attracted

international attention, perhaps most notably through the so-called Alexandria Statement issued in March 2004, which addressed critically the need for political, economic, social and cultural reform and drew favourable notice from both the U.S. and the EU.<sup>65</sup>

It is inconceivable in the real world of power politics that either the U.S. or the EU would ever choose to cut themselves loose entirely from friendly but authoritarian governments in order to throw their full support behind such non-governmental actors, however. It is unlikely that such a radical alternative would even be the best thing for indigenous reformers, who must continue to work within societies dominated by the current power structures. But it is quite probable that there will be an increasing number of occasions when its sponsors will need to make difficult choices if the BMEI is to prove itself a meaningful instrument for reform.

Moreover, the BMEI will need to address an issue that it has thus far largely avoided: its attitude toward political Islam. Remarkably, Islam was not even mentioned in the initial, leaked U.S. working paper. While President Bush has gone out of his way to emphasise by visits to mosques and statements that he respects Islam as a great world religion, the widespread impression is that Washington and, to a lesser extent, Brussels see any engagement by it in the political realm as a threat. The U.S. attempt to define the geographic area of its initiative to include Pakistan and Afghanistan -- states and societies that except for a common religion are substantially different from the traditional Middle East -- is generally considered to reveal an intention to combat political Islam.<sup>66</sup>

And yet, Islam is today the Middle East's single most dynamic political force. There are certainly strands within it that are extremist, anti-democratic and inclined to violence but most of politically conscious Islam in the region is speaking a different

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<sup>63</sup> For an interesting discussion of the differences between a policy of democratisation and one of political liberalisation in the Middle East, see Daniel Brumberg, "Beyond Liberalisation?", *Wilson Quarterly*, spring 2004. Brumberg writes: "Democracy and political liberalisation are not the same thing. Democracy rests on rules, institutions, and political practices through which voters regularly and constitutionally replace or modify their leadership by the exercise of representative political power. Political liberalisation, by contrast, is about promoting a freer debate and competition in the media, civil society, and political parties. It's a necessary but far from sufficient condition for democracy. The distinction between liberalisation and democracy goes to the heart of the debate about the kinds of change the United States can or should promote in the Arab world".

<sup>64</sup> Enthusiasts within the Bush administration sometimes speak of the positive experience after the Second World War with encouraging democracy in Germany and Japan. If compared with those countries, which had substantial, though flawed, parliamentary and democratic experiences to call upon, however, much of the Middle East is democratically underdeveloped.

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<sup>65</sup> "Arab Reform Issues: Vision and Implementation", Bibliotheca Alexandrina, 12-14 March 2004. The conference paid particular attention to standards by which the progress of political reform in the region might be monitored and measured. Some reformers considered its final statement too general. Others criticised the gathering as too closely tied to the Egyptian government and government-sponsored NGOs rather than truly autonomous civil society groups. Summary of a discussion among reform activists in the region made available to ICG in draft.

<sup>66</sup> Washington argues that economic and trade issues also link Pakistan and Afghanistan to the region.

language, one of respect for human rights and democracy, and indeed often demanding these from U.S.-supported governments.

These are tender shoots, by no means yet the certain winners in the major debate that is occurring around the Middle East. To the limited extent outsiders can play a role, they will need to exhibit patience and sophistication if they would nurture those tender shoots. What can be said at this stage is:

- The West should be suspicious when non-democratic governments in the region try to persuade all who would listen that they are bulwarks against Islamist extremists. That Saudi Arabia, for example, has a serious problem with such people is undeniable. It would be a mistake, however, to accept at face value the implication that all dissidents who oppose the present structure and profess a democratic orientation do so to establish a new authoritarian theocracy, under the motto “one man, one vote, one time”.<sup>67</sup> In the same vein, the Muslim Brotherhood has a chequered record in Egypt, but its present professions of commitment to democratic principles should not be rejected out of hand.<sup>68</sup>
- The U.S. and the West generally need to educate themselves better about the tremendous diversity of Middle Eastern political and religious thinking. The flat assertion by the head of the U.S.-led Coalition Provisional Authority

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<sup>67</sup> Prince Bandar bin Sultan, Saudi Arabia's ambassador to the U.S., BBC News, 30 May 2004, commenting on the just concluded hostage crisis in Khobar, which he blamed on groups that the West had called dissidents until taught the lesson of 11 September.

<sup>68</sup> For discussion of the Muslim Brotherhood and the situation more generally with respect to political Islam in Egypt, see ICG Briefing, *Islamism in North Africa I, The Legacies of History*, op. cit., and ICG Middle East and North Africa Briefing, *Islamism in North Africa II, Egypt's Opportunity*, 20 April 2004. The Muslim Brotherhood released on 3 March 2004 a lengthy document, “General Guide of Muslim Brotherhood Launches an Initiative on Reform in Egypt”, which described the group's views on political, judicial, electoral, economic, educational and other reforms and its attitude toward such subjects as the status of women. Reform activists in the region recently discussed the proposal inconclusively. Some were critical of what they considered a document that lacked specificity; others were distrustful of the record and motivation of such an Islamist movement, while yet others considered there were opportunities to engage those movements on political reform. Summary of a discussion among reform activists in the region made available to ICG in draft.

in Iraq, Jerry Bremer, that he would veto any attempt to write into the interim constitution that Islam was the chief source of the country's law is the kind of unsophisticated and insensitive approach that angers many in the Middle East and makes them unwilling to accept that the West can help determine their institutions.<sup>69</sup>

- Arabs will not take the BMEI seriously unless it becomes bold enough to encourage conservative governments not only to open up their political systems to the small sector of moderate secularists but also to begin to engage with the self-proclaimed democrats within their large Islamist movements. The more open the political system and the more possibilities there are for a wide variety of parties, including multiple parties with an Islamic bent, to compete, the less risk there will be that a single movement will monopolise the opposition space as happened with tragic results in the case of Algeria and the FIS in the 1990s.

#### **D. A HELSINKI PROCESS WITHOUT SECURITY AND A PEACE PROCESS?**

As negotiation and compromise have cut back steadily on the programs and institutions likely to be associated with the BMEI in June 2004, there has been less open talk in Washington of a Helsinki-like pulpit from which to preach a Western doctrine of human rights and democracy. The occasional lapse back into Helsinki language when categorising elements of the initiative (the political basket, the economic basket and so forth) and the hopes attached to the Broader Middle East and North Africa Forum for the Future, the first of which might be convened as early as the last quarter of the year, suggest this idea has not been abandoned.<sup>70</sup>

This reflects misapprehension both of what attracted the Soviet Union to Helsinki in the first instance and then kept it involved and of what makes many in the Middle East sceptical or even hostile about the current exercise. The old CSCE was often referred to as the Helsinki Human Rights process but that missed an essential element. It was the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe, and the

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<sup>69</sup> “Bremer will reject Islam as source for law”, Associated Press, 16 February 2004.

<sup>70</sup> ICG interviews with U.S. officials and academics, Washington and Brussels, May 2004.

security component was what made it last long enough to succeed.

Without it, the Soviet Union, which wanted to formalise the political division of Europe that had resulted without a peace treaty from the Second World War, never would have campaigned to convene the conference. Without strong linkages to other first rank political and security issues, including disarmament negotiations, Moscow would have broken away once the West -- with Europe in the lead and the U.S. a relatively late convert -- succeeded in converting the main focus of the rolling Helsinki negotiation and review to human rights. If there was genius in the West's Helsinki strategy it was mostly the result of embedding its sensitive freedom issues inside a larger diplomatic endeavour that included the big security subjects that mattered greatly to the Eastern participants.<sup>71</sup>

The painful negotiations by which the Arab League came to its modest statement on "development and modernisation" and the coolness that has greeted NATO's efforts to expand its role in the region, show that there is nothing like an equivalent Middle Eastern interest in BMEI. A major reason for this is that the BMEI so clearly lacks the kind of security component that could give it a wider attractiveness. The Forum for the Future is supposed to talk about elections, parliaments, women's rights and better education, but not about Israel's occupation of territory conquered in the 1967 war, the stalled efforts to establish a Palestinian state, U.S. policies in Iraq, or military balances in the region.

A new Helsinki Process that did address those issues would be difficult to keep on track and might well be practicable only after the most contentious of the Arab-Israeli disputes and Iraq problems have been cleared away or at least set on a more promising diplomatic track. But it is the only kind that might have the balance and depth to bring in and hold Arab governments while civil society organisations in the

region gather the cohesion to push their indigenous reform agendas.<sup>72</sup>

Whether or not the U.S. and Europe rethink the Helsinki parallel and seek to develop a truly balanced forum, there is reason to believe that Western efforts to encourage reform and democratisation, and perhaps even those deserving objectives themselves, stand little chance unless something radical is done to improve the political climate of the region. At the core of the violence, bitterness and suspicion of, especially, Washington's motives, of course, is the failed Israeli-Palestinian peace process.

The Bush administration has tried hard to argue that this need not be so. After all, as its representatives say, regardless of the situation in the occupied territories or Iraq's status, women still need a better deal in Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Jordan should have elections with freer, wider and more meaningful choices,<sup>73</sup> and there is a problem with educational standards and poverty everywhere in the region.<sup>74</sup> All logical, to be sure. Reform is a worthy goal in and of itself and one that were it to be achieved in large measure would surely make the solution of many political problems easier. Nevertheless, as the EU strategists have recognised:

Progress on the resolution of the Middle East conflict cannot be a pre-condition for

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<sup>71</sup> G. Jonathan Greenwald, "The Vienna CSCE Follow-Up Conference", *Aussenpolitik* (1987). Warsaw Pact states had other major political interests beyond ratification of the European post-World War II divide. Eastern European governments believed in CSCE and worked hard to maintain the Soviet commitment to it, at least in part because they considered it offered them more room for manoeuvre independent of Moscow. The Soviets, of course, were also reluctant to leave the process because that would have been tantamount to acknowledging the failure of what had originally been their initiative.

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<sup>72</sup> For a recent article that calls for the U.S. to work for a genuine reprise of the Helsinki experience, one that would involve 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 issues in the Arab world", see Ottaway and Carothers, "The Greater Middle East Initiative: Off to a False Start", op. cit. The authors assert that, "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".

<sup>73</sup> See ICG Middle East Briefing, *The Challenge of Political Reform: Egypt after the Iraq War*, 30 September 2003, and ICG Middle East Briefing, *The Challenge of Political Reform: Jordanian Democratisation and Regional Instability*, 8 October 2003.

<sup>74</sup> The press reported that after "some European governments threatened to block the proposal if it was not accompanied by a greater effort to resolve the Israel-Palestinian conflict", a subsequent U.S. working paper acknowledged: "We do not see this reform paper as a substitute for progress on Arab-Israeli peace. However, we cannot allow reform to be held hostage to the peace process. We believe we must pursue both separately". Paul Richter, "Bush to Pitch a New Mideast Reform Initiative to Region", *Los Angeles Times*, 3 May 2004.



confronting the urgent reform challenges facing the countries of the region, nor vice versa.<sup>75</sup> But it is clear that it will not be possible to build a common zone of peace, prosperity, and progress unless a just and lasting settlement of the conflict is in place. The lack of clear prospects for peace is already making it harder for reformers in the region to succeed.<sup>76</sup>

Some who reject the BMEI undoubtedly use the worsening confrontation between Israelis and Palestinians or the glaring contradiction between U.S. conduct at the Abu Ghraib prison and the new initiative's professed objectives as pretexts to reject what they have no desire for under any circumstances. Others, who are agreed that the region requires reform, believe that Washington's standing is so toxic at the moment that its close association with that enterprise burdens an already difficult struggle.<sup>77</sup> And a great many in the region, including those whose commitment to reform is widely considered genuine, have difficulty reconciling U.S. zeal to work at transforming their societies with U.S. patience at what they consider an intolerable situation for Palestinians. As one put it brutally, "As long as Sharon is killing civilians and demolishing houses, I won't listen to the United States on democracy".<sup>78</sup>

A Western commentator summed up Washington's dilemma:

The dominant political characteristic of the Middle East remains stagnation. The idea of a purely internal process of change, unsupported

by external pressure, is not realistic. Democracy is not the inevitable outcome in the Arab world for the foreseeable future. There is need for sustained external pressure and encouragement. However, to be successful, pressure must come from credible sources. At present, the United States lacks credibility in the Arab world.<sup>79</sup>

## VIII. CONCLUSION

The 2003 UN Arab Human Development Report quotes a survey that shows Arabs believe democracy is the best form of government in even higher numbers than Europeans and Americans and are three times as likely to hold this attitude as East Asians. The problem, as a senior European statesman has pointed out, is that "The Arab world does not mind American and European values, but it cannot stand American policies and by extension the same policies when embraced or tolerated by Europeans".<sup>80</sup>

As hard as that is to accept, especially for the Bush administration, it is a basic truth that must be internalised and acted upon if there is to be any chance to realise something of BMEI's real potential. Another European official, who is engaged with the peace process, acknowledges that the Americans are on to something significant in attempting to focus high level attention on underlying societal and structural problems that have contributed importantly to the Middle East's volatility. "These are things we should be doing", he said, of the new initiative".<sup>81</sup>

But democratisation and reform require a generation of constant effort, and 90 per cent of their prospects for success or failure rest in indigenous hands. The responsibility of the Americans and Europeans -- as a practical matter, in the first instance, especially for the former -- is to take political actions that might produce the calmer regional environment in which indigenous efforts would have the necessary twenty or so years to operate and Western help on the remaining 10 per cent would be welcomed. Unless this responsibility is seized, the pessimistic judgment of a European academic following a day's discussion

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<sup>75</sup> The second half of this sentence -- that progress on reform cannot be a precondition for progress in the peace process -- is an oblique reference to an initial fear that the U.S. proposed the BMEI at least in part to justify passivity on the peace process. That concern was stirred by the fact that President Bush's sole reference to the Palestinian issue in his November 2003 speech was the comment that, "For the Palestinian people, the only path to independence and dignity and progress is the path of democracy". U.S. diplomats have been at pains to deny such a condition.

<sup>76</sup> "Interim Report on an EU Strategic Partnership with the Mediterranean and the Middle East", op. cit.

<sup>77</sup> A very senior Arab diplomat who is active in attempts to introduce more concern for reform issues into pan-Arab institutions made this point to ICG in April.

<sup>78</sup> Taher al-Masri, former prime minister of Jordan, quoted in Jonathan Steele, "The Middle East needs its democracy home-grown", *The Guardian*, 29 March 2004. Masri was appointed in 2002 as the Arab League's commissioner for civil society, a project which, he admits, has not gotten off the ground and has received no funding from that body.

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<sup>79</sup> Ottaway, "Promoting Democracy in the Middle East", op. cit.

<sup>80</sup> Chris Patten, European Commissioner for External Relations, "Islam and the West -- at the Crossroads", lecture delivered at the Oxford Centre for Islamic Studies, 24 May 2004.

<sup>81</sup> ICG interview, Brussels, May 2004.

of the BMEI -- "I think it will be forgotten the day after the Istanbul summit ends"<sup>82</sup> -- is likely to be close to the mark.

Not solely to save BMEI but also for that purpose, therefore, there is need for progress in Iraq<sup>83</sup> but especially for heavy reengagement on an Israeli-Palestinian peace -- the problem that for most Arabs transcends foreign policy and has become a deeply personal matter, a standard by which almost all else is judged.<sup>84</sup> Of course, mere activism is no guarantee for success. No administration could have been more engaged than the Clinton administration, and in the end it failed. But on their own, Sharon, Arafat and the current group of Israeli and Palestinian leaders appear fully unable to break out of the vicious circle that traps them. Western neglect has never been less likely to prove benign. It is necessary to learn from past mistakes and move forward again.

ICG has consistently argued that if this is done, it should not be to recycle the stalled Roadmap. Like its predecessor, the Oslo Process, that document has a deep structural flaw. It demands that the parties take reciprocal or unilateral steps -- halt the settlement building enterprise for Israel, clamp down on the violent extremists for the Palestinian Authority, to cite the most prominent examples -- that are beyond their respective physical or political powers in order to begin to build the confidence necessary for them to eventually negotiate the ultimate issues of borders, security, Jerusalem and refugees. Each pre-programmed failure increases distrust and makes the next step on demand even more inconceivable.

International reengagement should rather be on behalf of a radically different concept -- not the kind of unilateralism toward which Prime Minister Sharon appears to want to move and which tempts the Bush

administration, but one in which the international community, led by the U.S., puts forward the blueprint of a comprehensive final settlement and makes clear what it is prepared to do to help implement that settlement. ICG provided such a detailed outline in its *Endgame* series.<sup>85</sup> The irony is still that the terms of any two-state settlement are widely understood;<sup>86</sup> the problem is to devise the way in which those terms can be agreed and implemented. In present circumstances, only the international community can cut through the accumulated despair, change the environment and confront the parties with the need for a single large decision to end the conflict and reach an agreement for which it would be worthwhile to take the political and physical risks that no interim step would seem to them to justify.

That, or something equally bold, is needed if the acid of the Israeli-Palestinian confrontation is not to corrode the BMEI before it has time to work.<sup>87</sup>

**Brussels/Amman, 7 June 2004**

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<sup>82</sup> ICG interview, Paris, May 2004.

<sup>83</sup> While this Briefing has concentrated on the relationship of the Israeli-Palestinian peace process to the reform initiative's prospects, Iraq is clearly a close second in importance. As the influential U.S. Senator Joseph R. Biden, Jr. said in commenting on the initiative during Senate hearings on 2 June 2004, "I do not have any problem with us placing reform prominently on the agenda of the Sea Island summit. But I am baffled that the twin elephants in the room are not at the top of the agenda: Iraq and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Iraq, at present, is serving as more of a dead-weight on regional reform than it is a catalyst, as some had predicted".

<sup>84</sup> Patten, "Islam and the West", op. cit., citing the findings of a Zogby poll commissioned in 2002 by the Arab Thought Foundation.

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<sup>85</sup> ICG Middle East Report N°2, *Middle East Endgame I: Getting to an Arab-Israeli Peace Settlement*, and ICG Middle East Report N°3, *Middle East Endgame II: How a Comprehensive Israeli-Palestinian Peace Settlement Would Look*, both 16 July 2002.

<sup>86</sup> The Geneva Initiative, a document negotiated by private Israelis and Palestinians and signed in the Swiss city in December 2003, as well as the ICG series, provides a good example. The Geneva and ICG texts were developed essentially from where the Camp David/Taba negotiations of 2000 and early 2001 left off, with adjustments also to take account of certain developments on the ground in the interim.

<sup>87</sup> Less sweeping but in many cases still difficult political strategies will also need to be crafted for many other specific country situations since reform is unlikely to proceed on a consistent regional basis. Pakistan and Afghanistan present their own unique requirements, whether or not the U.S. insists on retaining them in BMEI over European reservations. In Afghanistan, for reform and democratisation to succeed, NATO must fulfil its promise to provide more security outside Kabul, and the international community must help the central government make a stronger effort to come to grips with the entrenched power of militia leaders and underlying ethnic tensions. In Pakistan, the primary requirement is to hold President Musharraf to his pledge to restore that civilian government which, true to Winston Churchill's famous phrase, has been the country's worst -- except for all the [military] others. If this happens, there will be better opportunities to deal with the structural deficits that Pakistan indeed does share with the Arab Middle East, including education, empowerment of women, and poverty.