

Arabs Should Seize upon G8 Reform

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Articles & Testimony

In recent days, US Undersecretary of State Marc Grossman has discussed a new G8 initiative for regional reform with officials in Morocco, Egypt, Jordan, Bahrain and Turkey. The initiative, known as the Greater Middle East (GME) Partnership, whose guidelines were set out in a "US Working Paper for G8 Sherpas" leaked to Al-Hayat two weeks ago, has unleashed a wave of discontent grounded in charges of neoimperialism and neglect of the Palestinians.

While a free exchange of ideas is healthy, such criticisms are nonstarters from a policy perspective. Arab reformers, stifled by the glacial pace of change in their own countries, should seize upon the world's wealthiest nations' newfound interest in Arab reform. Arab, American and European interests would be better served if reform-minded Arabs offered critiques of the document's substantive failings rather than tired cliches. Beyond the howls of "democratic colonialism," many in the Arab world have yet to grasp the long-term effects of the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks. The internal affairs of Egypt and Saudi Arabia effectively spilled over and Middle Eastern reform became a national security interest in Washington, London and Paris. Indeed, the G8 working paper asserts that the Arab world's freedom, knowledge and women's empowerment deficits (as discussed in the UN Arab Human Development Reports) "threaten the national interests of all G8 members."

To be clear, this position is not just American-held. German Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer recently emphasized European support for Middle East reform in a Feb. 7 speech in Munich. He stated: "Neither the US nor Europe and the Middle East itself can tolerate the status quo in the Middle East the epicenter of the greatest threat to our regional and global security."

Just as the accusations of neoimperialism are of little use, so too is the notion that all the issues of the Arab world are hostage to Palestinian-Israeli peacemaking. Arab human development cannot wait until those two sides resolve their differences: 43 percent of Egyptians over the age of 15 are illiterate, while Yemen has an estimated unemployment rate of 30 percent. The lack of a Palestinian state has no effect on an illiterate rural Egyptian or an unemployed Yemeni. Across the Arab world there are 65 million illiterate adults, while the exact number of the millions of unemployed can only be estimated. Were there a viable Palestinian state created tomorrow, illiterate and unemployed Arabs would remain illiterate and unemployed. Political, economic and educational reforms are not in lieu of a resolution of the Palestinian conflict; they are part of a larger policy.

The Palestinian-Israeli conflict is not mentioned in the G8 working paper because it has no place there. Palestinians belong in the paper in the same way that Tunisians and Saudis do, namely in the context of how the G8 can support efforts that give them greater political freedom and enable them to seek new economic opportunities.

Actually, the document makes few country-specific distinctions. While the initiative is meant to tackle reform issues in the greater Middle East, from Morocco to Pakistan, it does not distinguish between the disparate needs of different countries, cities and communities. Though the document contains good ideas, from supporting micro-finance institutions to providing technical assistance programs for WTO ascension, it has other substantive shortcomings that warrant detailed criticism.

For example, the document fails to narrow grand schemes to a practical level of achieving tangible benefits for targeted audiences. Nowhere is this clearer than in the paper's proposal for a "digital knowledge initiative" that would "bridge the 'digital divide' between the Greater Middle East and the rest of the world." The initiative intends to wire rural schools and post offices to the internet in countries like Pakistan and Syria with the "lowest internet penetration."

A computer at the Tadmor post office is not going to be money well spent for an unemployed and illiterate 25-year-old Syrian. Young men there need specific technical training that makes them employable and able to marry. Such a computer would be better placed in a 6th-grade classroom of a Baqaa refugee camp school in Jordan. This type of focus is conspicuously absent from the working paper.

Despite the paper's pitfalls, the leak of the draft, Grossman's visit and future visits that will occur before the G8 summit in June represent an incredible opportunity for reform-minded Arabs to step forward in public and private forums and shape the initiative. The document's critics should not be deceived; boycotting the initiative will not kill GME reform. Rather, efforts for reform will be diverted in ways that do not yield positive results. Other parties will take advantage of the G8's own "knowledge deficit" and use American and European programs to bolster their own purposes ? be that maintaining the status quo or strengthening Islamist parties.

At best, Americans and Europeans can play a supportive role in propelling Middle East reform. They can offer financing, technical expertise and ideas. For GME to succeed, however, local reformers in countries across the Middle East must take an active role in constructing a framework that suits their specific needs and the needs of their neighbors in the region.

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