

The Greater Middle East Partnership: A Work Still Very Much in Progress

by [Robert Satloff \(/experts/robert-satloff\)](/experts/robert-satloff)

Feb 25, 2004

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Robert Satloff \(/experts/robert-satloff\)](/experts/robert-satloff)

Robert Satloff is executive director of The Washington Institute, a post he assumed in January 1993.



Brief Analysis

The Bush administration has recently circulated to its G-8 partners the details of the Greater Middle East Partnership (GMEP) that Washington hopes will win endorsement at the group's May 2004 summit in Sea Island, Georgia. The GMEP is a core element of the administration's larger Greater Middle East Initiative, which has additional security and political components beyond those outlined in the GMEP. Last week, the English-language website of the London-based Arabic newspaper al-Hayat published what it called the "U.S. working paper for G-8 sherpas" (the latter term referring to the government officials responsible for preparing the event). If this eight-page document is in fact authentic -- a claim that no administration official has disputed -- then the president's "forward strategy of freedom" is likely to remain illusory.

Although the details of the G-8 GMEP proposal as laid out in the al-Hayat "working paper" include several insightful ideas, the proposal as a whole suffers from two major problems. First, too many of its initiatives emphasize form over content, offering support to any regional actors willing to play the electoral game without regard to their commitment to the values that undergird democracy. The unintended result could be further strengthening of Islamist forces precisely at a moment when they are on the retreat in many countries. Second, too few of the projects dedicated to "human development" actually address the primary obstacles to solving systemic problems. Consequently, such projects will have little impact on the true ailments of Arab societies. On the positive side is the fact that the administration seems keen on trying to enlist G-8 partners in what, over time, could develop into one of the most seismic initiatives of the post-Cold War era, perhaps even the mission that defines that era. On the negative side, the recipe proposed in the draft -- which amounts to two parts counterproductive, two parts irrelevant, and only one part truly useful -- is unlikely to either promote real reform or advance U.S. interests in the greater Middle East.

An Intellectual False Start

The logic of the GMEP derives from the two Arab Human Development Reports (AHDRs) drafted by a group of Arab scholars under the auspices of the UN Development Program in 2002 and 2003. Indeed, arguments, statistics, and recommendations from the two AHDRs are cited throughout the G-8 GMEP proposal. This endorsement of the AHDR provides a wobbly intellectual foundation for the GMEP. To be sure, the AHDR offers many useful analytical insights,

including the identification of three major "deficits": in freedom, knowledge, and women's empowerment. Yet, both reports -- especially the 2003 version -- are hotly politicized, poorly researched documents. Indeed, the latter cites the Arab-Israeli conflict as the main cause of the aforementioned deficits and places principal blame on the Bush administration for poisoning the environment for Arab freedom and education in the post-September 11 environment.

The authors of the G-8 proposal also seem to have borrowed an even more insidious aspect of the AHDR -- namely, placing all residents of the greater Middle East under a one-size-fits-all demographic construct. In the AHDR, all residents of Arab League countries are regarded as Arabs and are therefore given Arab solutions to their political and social problems. The reality, of course, is that more than a quarter of all residents of Arab countries are not Arab, whether they are Berbers in Morocco and Algeria, non-Arab Christians in Sudan, or Kurds in Iraq. The G-8 proposal goes one better: by its definition, the greater Middle East includes Pakistan, Iran, Turkey, Afghanistan, and Israel, making it a region in which Arabs are a distinct minority. Yet, virtually all of the proposal's analysis and recommendations are directed toward Arabs. Where is the recognition of the region's ethnic, cultural, religious, and linguistic mosaic?

Assessing Initiatives

The G-8 proposal presents three sets of initiatives: "promoting democracy and good governance, building a knowledge society, and expanding economic opportunity." (This essay focuses on the first two parts; a forthcoming PolicyWatch will address the economic component.) Together, they are designed 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." As presented, some initiatives are likely to meet that test; many others are not.

The democracy and governance initiative includes projects intended to provide technical assistance for holding elections; arrange parliamentary exchanges and training; create women's leadership academies; establish grassroots legal aid opportunities; support independent media; expand regional anticorruption efforts; and strengthen local and regional civil society organizations. Some, like the media program, are good ideas but timid in breadth and scope. The G-8 proposal's focus on training and exchanges is far too limited. All over the Middle East, forward-thinking journalists, editors, screenwriters, television producers, and film directors are eager to start up everything from newspapers to educational satellite TV stations; they need money and political support, not just training, but the G-8 proposal offers little of either.

Other ideas, such as the legal aid project, focus on the right issue but miss the big picture. For example, the GMEP's initial focus on providing defense attorneys for accused criminals is misplaced. More high-value targets for legal aid are women who, despite their numerous rights on paper (e.g., to property, divorce, child custody), often lack the means or the education to ensure that their rights are respected. In terms of the potential societal impact and the sheer number of people affected, focusing on women's legal rights rather than criminals' legal rights would be a much more effective strategy.

Other project ideas, especially parliamentary training, are simply bad policy. The reality in many Middle Eastern countries is that anti-American, anti-Western, anti-peace Islamists constitute large or even dominant blocs in local parliaments. An open-door policy of parliamentary training would only help such individuals become more effective critics of pro-American, pro-Western, pro-peace regional governments. It would also send a mixed message to local voters, convincing many that the United States and its allies have lost so much faith in local leaders that they have chosen to support Islamists as an alternative.

The missing element in almost all of the G-8 proposal's democracy and governance initiatives is values. Nowhere does the proposal state that the G-8 will support those leaders, reformers, and organizations that share the common

values of G-8 countries: liberalism, tolerance, openness, meritocracy, and respect for both the rule of law and personal freedoms of speech, assembly, religion, and conscience. Instead, the initiatives emphasize the important but merely technical aspects of democracy (e.g., voter registration). The proposal's commitment to expand direct funding of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), while significant, begs the question of which NGOs should receive such funding. Without a values component, the answer is unclear. Although a valueless proposal has less chance of provoking opposition around the Middle East, it also has less chance of actually promoting the reforms it aspires to foster.

Two aspects of the proposal's NGO section reinforce the impression that Washington is placing a higher priority on winning European and Arab approval than on pressing for urgent, substantive reform. First, the G-8 is asked merely to "encourage" governments to permit NGOs to operate freely, without even raising the potential of conditionality (e.g., suspending or limiting economic assistance to protest government intervention in the operation of local NGOs). This formulation effectively tells local leaders that G-8 support for civil society initiatives lacks spine. Second, the NGO section makes no reference to the recently instituted U.S. requirement that all NGOs receiving financial aid must pledge not to knowingly provide material support to terrorist groups. Is Washington signaling a willingness to suspend that requirement for NGO assistance that flows through the G-8?

On Knowledge -- The Tip of the Iceberg

The G-8 proposal presents a series of ideas designed to help local countries "address the region's education challenges and help students acquire the skills needed to succeed in today's global marketplace." These include a "basic education initiative" targeted at illiteracy and girls' education; a "discovery schools initiative" supporting high-technology schools for high-performance results; a "digital knowledge initiative" to expand computer and internet access, especially in rural areas; a "business education initiative" to link business schools in local and G-8 countries; a textbook translation program; and, to build support for the entire package, a Middle East Education Reform Summit, proposed for March 2004.

As statements of objective, these ideas are welcome and useful. Operationally, however, they miss a golden opportunity to present bold plans for confronting systemic problems. On girls' education, for example, the only idea proposed is the creation or expansion of teacher-training institutes targeting women, with the goal of developing a "literacy corps" of 100,000 new female teachers by 2008. Although this proposal sounds nice and is sure to facilitate the overall campaign for girls' education, it does not even begin to address the primary reasons why so few girls in Middle Eastern countries, especially in rural areas, attend school. Any initiative aimed at effectively promoting girls' education would need to include the following: (1) compensation to parents who rely on girls to do considerable labor; (2) construction of new schools, especially in rural areas, and updating of existing ones to ensure clean, modest facilities for girls (particularly bathrooms); (3) subsidizing of teacher salaries in rural areas -- these are usually the lowest rung of the national education ladder, and most teachers there do all they can to return to urban districts as quickly as possible; (4) engagement of local communities in school governance, so that local education is not solely the province of some faraway capital city; (5) investment in small enterprises in rural areas, such as local cottage industries, to show parents that there is a useful economic rationale for permitting their daughters to stay in school. This multifaceted formula is well known; for the wealthiest nations in the world to offer only a modest suggestion regarding teacher training institutes means that their willingness to invest resources and political will, while sincere, is not serious.

As with the omission of values in the proposal's democracy section, the proposal's education section has at least one core problem: the absence of any reference to English- or European-language education. If G-8 countries truly want to provide access for enterprising Arabs and other Middle Easterners to join the global marketplace (e.g., through the internet), then English- and European-language education is a prerequisite. Numerous initiatives could address this

need, including increased support for the American, French, British, and other foreign-language schools that already provide education to tens of thousands of Middle Easterners; the creation of low-cost English- and European-language training centers for adults; and the distribution of textbooks and provision of libraries throughout the region. It should also be noted that the proposal does not address the importance of expanding protection against internet censorship.

Conclusion

If the leaked U.S. working paper for the G-8 GMEP proposal is accurate, then the "sherpas" still have much work to do before their leaders meet in May. As currently drafted, the GMEP is designed to avoid offending European, Arab, and other Middle Eastern sensibilities; it fails to live up to the president's bold commitment to "a forward strategy of freedom." Although it might win essential allied support -- witness the important endorsement of transatlantic efforts on Arab reform recently offered by the German foreign minister -- it may not produce much actual reform. At times, it is too small-minded when it should emphasize grand strategy; at other times, it plays into the hands of the West's ideological adversaries, who see the instruments of democracy as a means of enhancing their own power. Although the summit is fast approaching, there is still time enough to imbue the GMEP with the values that animate the G-8's commitment to liberal democracy. These values can help the United States and its allies offer comprehensive solutions to some of the region's most daunting social, political, and educational problems.

Robert Satloff is director of policy and strategic planning at The Washington Institute. ❖

Policy #836

RECOMMENDED



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Bennett's Bahrain Visit Further Invigorates Israel-Gulf Diplomacy](#)

Feb 14, 2022

◆
Simon Henderson

(/policy-analysis/bennetts-bahrain-visit-further-invigorates-israel-gulf-diplomacy)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

Libya's Renewed Legitimacy Crisis

Feb 14, 2022



Ben Fishman

(/policy-analysis/libyas-renewed-legitimacy-crisis)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

The UAE Formally Ceases to be a Tax-Free Haven

Feb 14, 2022



Sana Quadri,
Hamdullah Baycar

(/policy-analysis/uae-formally-ceases-be-tax-free-haven)

TOPICS

Democracy & Reform (/policy-analysis/democracy-reform)

U.S. Policy (/policy-analysis/us-policy)