

# Powell on Democracy in the Muslim World: Assessing the Latest Exposition of U.S. Policy

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

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## 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

U.S. policy on promoting democracy in Muslim-majority countries took two steps forward and one step back last week with Secretary of State Colin Powell's major address unveiling the new Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI). On the positive side was the simple fact that democratization merited such cabinet-level focus, along with the details of MEPI itself -- a promising set of small-scale, big-bang-for-the-buck, incubator-style projects targeted at critical groups (women, youths, educators) that deserve attention and support. On the negative side were a series of political messages within the speech -- both explicit and implicit -- suggesting that the active promotion of democratic change in Muslim countries, especially U.S. allies in the Arab world, may not be such a priority after all.

## Bridging the Gaps

In his December 12 address to the Heritage Foundation, Powell outlined Bush administration priorities in the Middle East as "winning the war on terrorism, disarming Iraq, and bringing the Arab-Israeli conflict to an end"; he then acknowledged that "we must broaden our approach if we are to achieve success." After citing many of the Arab Human Development Report's dismal findings about Arab societies and economics, he concluded that "hope" was the missing ingredient. "It is time to lay a firm foundation of hope," he said. "Hope is what my presentation today is about. America wants to align itself with the people of the Middle East, moving forward on the basis of hope. . . . To that end, I am announcing today an initiative that places the United States firmly on the side of change . . . on the side of hope."

To help Arabs "face the future with hope," Powell described the three pillars on which MEPI is based: economic reform and private-sector investment to "bridge the jobs gap"; strengthening civil society organizations and promoting political participation to "close the freedom gap"; and working with parents and educators to address the "knowledge gap." In many respects, the most important element of this effort is its consistent emphasis on women, from targeting girls' education and female literacy to supporting enhanced roles for women in parliament, local governments, and nongovernmental organizations. Overall, a review of the MEPI fact sheet that accompanied Powell's speech shows an array of innovative programs that could, over time, have a catalytic effort in addressing

key areas of underdevelopment.

Funding for MEPI, however, pointed to a fourth "gap": the chasm between rhetoric and resources. To pay for this massive injection of hope, Powell announced the allocation of just \$29 million, in effect offering less than a dime per Arab in the current fiscal year (or, as some press stories pointed out, less than the Saudi royals spent on their summer holidays in Marbella). Reports suggest that the Bush administration will seek as much as a tenfold increase in MEPI funding when Congress returns. The real problem is not so much funding MEPI -- which is probably better served by a lean start-up budget, minimal bureaucracy, and the ability to distribute grants to worthwhile projects with speed and agility -- but rather the disconnect between Powell's rhetorical flourish and the meager sums that accompanied it.

#### Powell on Democracy

Apart from announcing MEPI, Powell offered important, if disappointing, comments on U.S. policy toward democratization in Muslim countries. While rejecting the notion that "there is any region of the world that cannot support democracy," he retreated to the standard fare of the 1990s in calling only for "a stronger political voice" for the "peoples of the Middle East." Indeed, the "freedom gap" pillar of MEPI is not specifically intended to promote democracy, just to "strengthen civil society, expand political participation, and lift the voices of women."

If the region's autocrats were fearful that, after promoting democratic change in Iraq and the Palestinian territories, Washington planned to focus its democratization efforts on them as well, Powell brought them welcome news: "It will be a challenge for each and every one of those nations to find the proper way forward. And I think that each and every one of them will find a model that is unique to their culture, unique to their history, unique to their experience, and unique to the aspirations of their people. It's not going to be a Jeffersonian model that is imposed in each one." Ironically, these words ran directly counter to the final communique of the U.S.-championed Community of Democracies conference that met in Seoul last month, during which the United States and a hundred other countries (including a handful of Muslim states) endorsed the "universality" of "democratic principles" that included freedom of expression, press, religion, and conscience; the holding of periodic elections based on secret balloting and universal suffrage; and the right to form independent political parties.

Perhaps more interesting, Powell's comments did not affirm the commitment to democratization made just the previous week by his own policy planning chief, Richard Haass, whose speech at the Council on Foreign Relations broke new ground in lamenting a "democratic exception" that had existed for decades in U.S. policy toward Muslim countries and promising that the United States would be "more actively engaged in supporting democratic trends in the Muslim world than ever before." Although Powell reaffirmed the caveats from Haass's speech -- which correctly tempered prodemocracy commitments with recognition of the Hippocratic principle "do no harm" -- the secretary seemed to forget the larger message.

#### Looking to the Future

If all eyes are currently on the looming confrontation with Iraq, Powell's speech provides insight into the potential direction of U.S. Middle East strategy in a postwar period. Reading between Powell's lines, democratization -- or, more broadly, regional transformation -- is unlikely to be one of his highest priorities. Although he noted that "democracy and free markets will benefit all countries in the Middle East," Powell said his preferred tools to promote these goals are "education and persuasion," with no reference to the possible use of sticks (e.g., withholding foreign aid supplementals) to complement carrots (e.g., MEPI's increased funding or the multibillion-dollar Millennium Challenge Account). Real democratic change, he said, necessitates "the countries in the region taking a look at the situation they find themselves in individually." He was realistic in noting that such a laissez-faire strategy will not produce significant results "in one year or five years." In contrast, Powell was decidedly animated on the issue of

ending the Arab-Israeli conflict. "We would do anything to find a solution," he said in answer to a question. "And to some extent, we are held accountable for the problem until the solution is found." A clearer message about postwar prioritization is difficult to find.

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

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