

A View from the Arab World :Feb. 18 –24, 2004

By Rami G. Khouri, in Beirut, Lebanon

Foreign powers and friendly natives should do a joint venture for once The United States government is understandably frustrated by the fact that the Middle East has not shifted into Good Behavior and Friendly Natives mode after Washington has worked so hard to "drain the swamp" and help us become more normal, productive, peaceful societies. In the past 30 months the US has completed or launched wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the wider war on terrorism, regime changes in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Palestine, new laws or pending Congressional bills threatening Syria, Iran, Egypt and Saudi Arabia, the Middle East Partnership Initiative, Radio Sawa, Hi magazine, and Al-Hurra television, and assorted other attempts to transform the Middle East from a dangerous to a friendly place.

But the Middle East and parts of Asia remain actively hostile to American policy. So, the US is working on yet another plan to fix what is wrong with our countries. In June, Washington plans to announce the Greater Middle East Initiative to promote democracy, economic growth, women's rights, and other important goals. The initiative is expected to include economic, military, and other incentives from the US and Europe for Middle Eastern countries to make wide-ranging political, social, legal, educational, and market reforms.

What should the people and leaders of the Middle East make of this whole process, as we again find ourselves responding to an initiative to transform our societies and power structures, while we did not ask for, or help to formulate, the initiative, and certainly did not mandate the US to design and implement it? I expect that the dominant reaction from this region will be storm-force skepticism; but we would be better served to react to the American initiative with ideas to formulate a better Middle Eastern counter-initiative.

This region's skepticism about Washington's initiative will be firmly anchored in modern historical realities. Eight points stand out.

- The US is not mandated by the Middle East or the world to launch such efforts to transform our societies, and its unilateral actions look like benevolent neo-colonialism.
- The US has a very poor track record of seeing through such plans and ideas, whether related to economic and trade reform, Arab-Israeli peace-making, democratization, or other sectors. Its credibility is near zero.
- The impetus for the initiative stems almost totally from American concerns after Sept. 11, 2001. While these are legitimate concerns, they only heighten the perception that Washington only views Middle Eastern societies and people through the self-serving lens of its own well-being, and not through the lens of those societies' own rights and aspirations.
- The fundamental premise of the American approach includes racist and Orientalist elements. It assumes that something is indigenously wrong with Middle Eastern societies that requires radical fixing, while refusing to factor into the equation the fact that some aspects of Middle Eastern behavior reflect the consequences of and local reactions to American, Israeli and other countries' policies.
- The objects and beneficiaries of the initiative ? the Arabs and others in the

Greater Middle East ? do not appear to be widely consulted to date in formulating this initiative. An initiative to promote democracy that is designed in a non-democratic manner would seem to start life with serious handicaps.

- The peoples and societies of the Middle East have endured such foreign initiatives for several millennia. Foreign military powers (Greece, Rome, Persia, the Ottomans, Great Britain, France and a few others) could always use their military power to make changes in this region's power structures ? but those changes tended to last only while the foreign guns and money were here to enforce the new order. Structural changes, and, more importantly, changes in ordinary people's values in the Middle East, happened historically according to indigenous will, not foreign dictate.

- Addressing democracy and economic reform will not go far without resolving the Arab-Israeli conflict, which remains a major cause of anger and political tensions in the region.

- The US does not need fancy new initiatives to achieve the good goals it names as its objectives, especially democracy and economic growth, which we all aspire to. The US could make statements, launch policies, and take practical measures tomorrow that would induce Middle Eastern governments, private sectors, and civil societies to move in this direction, especially in countries where the US enjoys great influence due to its economic and military assistance, such as Egypt, Jordan, Tunisia, Kuwait, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, Oman and others. (Why not start today, literally? At his White House meeting Wednesday with Tunisian President Zein al-Abidine Ben Ali, who plans to run for a fourth term this year, President Bush could politely suggest that consecutive four-term presidents facing no real opposition will gradually lose the backing of the US. Washington can support this kind of sensible term limit today, and most Arab citizens would be pleased. Why does it not do so? What is it waiting for?) These are some of the legitimate questions facing Washington's new Middle East initiative. If it is more serious about this process than it was about the other Mideast initiatives that it has launched and dropped, Washington should start working with people in the Middle East to come up with a plan that is more credible because it was formulated by foreign powers and friendly local natives alike. Arabs and others in the Middle East for their part should also come up with counter-proposals to the American initiative, rather than only rejection. It would be good to have a joint approach for once, instead of the usual pattern of foreign proposals, skeptical Mideastern responses, a diplomatic dead end, and a worsening cycle of tension and violence.

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