

Interview with Elizabeth Cheney, U.S. Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs

The issue of reform in the Middle East seems to have a higher profile in President Bush's second term. Does this reflect a shift in policy, a change in players, or a response to events in the region?

Dedication to the promotion of freedom has been part of U.S. foreign policy in the Arab world, particularly since September 11. What's different now are the very important events in the broader Middle East: elections in Afghanistan, the Palestinian Authority, and Iraq. I think the Iraqi election on January 30 had a profound impact across the region; everybody who watched on TV that day was moved by the bravery and power of the Iraqi people. What we're seeing I think are people feeling inspired and a beginning of a lifting of the burden of fear. You sense it when you talk to people; you see it in the bravery of the Lebanese people gathered in Martyrs' Square. It's a new sense of what is possible to talk about and to do. There is tremendous progress in the region and we want to do whatever we can to help support it.

President Bush has said that the United States will support reformers in the Middle East, but many Arab activists and intellectuals say that U.S. involvement hurts rather than helps. How can the United States support reformers who reject its assistance?

We are guided in all of what we do by individual people in countries who are working for freedom. We provide support to people who want the support. I also think there is a bit of a misconception. President Bush has—in a more public and direct way than any previous American president—put the United States on the side of people fighting for democracy in the Arab world. We are very sincere in that. We want people to judge us by our actions and we want to provide support where we can. But what is interesting to me, coming back after a year or so away, is that we are now responding to the quick pace of developments in the region. It isn't a situation where the United States is setting the agenda or timetable.

What position does the United States take regarding the participation of Islamists in political life?

It's important to look at Islamists as we would other political parties. There are some standard red lines that the international community applies to political groups. Groups that use violence or advocate the use of violence clearly put themselves outside democratic political processes, whether they're Islamist or not. Regarding non-violent Islamist groups, it's important to look at their platforms and what they would be likely to do once elected. You can't lump all Islamist groups together. Would they respect the rights of others, including women, minorities, and non-Muslims? I don't see it as Islamist versus secular parties, but rather of applying standard guidelines and rules about securing a democracy and making sure that violence isn't part of the political process.

Some groups, for example, the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, have not been involved in violence in many years and have said they would respect a democratic process, yet they remain illegal.

For a long time in many countries, the only two voices that have been heard have been the government or extremist groups. I am confident that the vast majority of people in the Arab world, as everywhere, are not extremists. What's important is to open up these systems so that other voices can be heard and people have a real choice to make. People need to have access to media and an ability to campaign and get their messages out. It's very difficult to judge the true strength of these groups in the current environment.

The 2004 Arab Human Development Report was issued last week. What concerns did the United States have about the report, and why did it ask for the report's revision before it was launched?

We were briefed on the report a few days ago, and I think it will be on the whole a good report. There are policy differences, and I'm sure the report will talk about some issues in ways that we would not, but I think it will be an important report, as the others have been. We are looking forward to it. It is simply not the case that the U.S. urged the deferral of this report. We welcome it.

The administration has recently been calling publicly for Egypt to undertake political reforms. Which other countries in the region present opportunities for U.S. attention to and pressure for reform?

We don't look at this as "where can we put pressure next?" It's more about the march of events across the region and how the U.S. can provide all assistance necessary to people who are working for change. I would be hesitant to say that this or that was caused directly by U.S. pressure. What President Mubarak did was bold; he surprised many by calling for a constitutional amendment before the next election, leading to multiparty elections. Now the world will watch and see how that unfolds, and hope it means real reform. We are not trying to target efforts on two or three places but rather taking each country and looking at where they are, what challenges they face, to what extent our programs meet the needs there.

The United States in recent years has put more emphasis on Palestinian reform than on restarting Israeli-Palestinian negotiations. Is it possible to reform a Palestinian state that does not yet exist?

It's very possible and very important to do. The most effective time to address issues such as corruption and transparency, for example, is while the institutions of a state are being developed. Polls show that Palestinians want a judicial system that will set the rules of the game and protect the participants. We've seen with Abu Mazen and ministers such as Salaam Fayyad a dedication to doing that. The President has said that the Palestinian people need to be represented by a government that serves them well and lives up to the standards they deserve. Obviously reform has to include security issues as

well to guarantee the safety of the state of Israel. You cannot talk about the establishment of a Palestinian state, or two states living side by side in peace and security, without the necessary reforms.

The Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI) has been criticized as being under-funded, but also for not expending its funds wisely. How do you see it?

Some of the criticism I've seen has been based on faulty information or misimpressions about how the MEPI money is expended or where it goes. You can't judge MEPI as being under-funded if you look at it in combination with our bilateral aid programs. It's also important to look at the idea behind the Partnership Initiative, which was really to reach out at a grassroots level to fund democratization projects and small-scale economic reform and assistance projects. At the end of the day, promoting democracy is not about how much money you have to spend. It doesn't matter how much you have to spend if the will isn't there for change. MEPI has been effective at helping to train people as they participate in their own political processes, helping to bring reformers together, sending a signal that the United States government is going to put money behind these activities. It was MEPI grants recently that were the first grants we signed in Egypt with NGOs directly. The shape of MEPI will evolve as well, according to developments in the region.

What about suggestions that the Initiative would be more effective if it were a non-governmental organization akin to the Asia Foundation?

There is an important role for a foundation to play. I wouldn't want the U.S. government to be in a position where it didn't have any money to spend on these programs directly. It is very important for us to be able to say—for example to women across the region—"we're inspired by your courage and we want to help you," and then to have the resources to put behind those discussions. But I think the idea of a foundation is an excellent one, and there are a lot of things a foundation could do that the U.S. government cannot do. In many instances it's easier for NGOs to take money from a foundation. We are looking now at how such a foundation might best be structured.

Might most MEPI funding eventually go through a foundation?

We've looked at the scale of other foundations to see what level of annual assistance is necessary to make this work. It would probably make sense to try to have contributions to the foundation from European governments, Arab governments, and Arab individuals as well. I do think it is important for the U.S. government to retain enough money to fund programs quickly and directly, so I would probably not advocate taking all the money out of the U.S. government to put it into a foundation.

What is the function of the Broader Middle East Initiative announced at the 2004 G-8 summit and how does it relate to MEPI?

The easiest way to understand it is that MEPI is our bilateral assistance fund, the money we allocate directly for democracy, economic reform, education, and women's empowerment in the region. The Broader Middle East Initiative is a multilateral effort, a way to channel and signify multilateral support for change across this region and a way to come together and talk about these issues.

Any other points you would like to make to *Bulletin* readers?

We always welcome input and ideas, and if people who are reading the *Bulletin* have ideas about interesting projects or about how we can accomplish our mission more effectively, we would welcome those. There is contact information on the MEPI website (<http://mepi.state.gov/mepi/>). We really are sincere about how important the advance in freedom is. It's obviously a shift in U.S. policy from the last 60 years and one we didn't make lightly, but we are absolutely committed to standing with people fighting for freedom.