



# SPECIAL REPORT

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## ABOUT THE REPORT

The Arab world has remained remarkably closed to the wave of democratic transformation that has touched much of the rest of the world. Indeed, Freedom House, in its annual 2003 Survey of Freedom in the World, noted that over the past thirty years, the Middle East and North Africa have registered no significant progress toward democracy. Recently, many in the region have proposed a variety of reform platforms. The Arab League, individual governments, and nongovernmental organizations all have issued statements or declarations on the need for reform. While some of these initiatives seem more cosmetic than genuine, the net effect has been to open an unprecedented dialogue on reform.

This report reviews and analyzes the components of reform as proposed by those in the region. The paper ends with some overarching conclusions on Arab reform efforts as well as recommendations for U.S. policymakers. A recently published companion paper, *Promoting Middle East Democracy: The European Dimension* (Special Report #127), assesses the significance of European democracy promotion efforts in the Middle East and the potential for transatlantic cooperation in this area.

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**The views expressed in this report do not necessarily reflect those of the United States Institute of Peace, which does not advocate specific policy positions.**

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## CONTENTS

Introduction	2
Defining the Challenge: The Arab Human Development Report	3
“People Power”: Nongovernmental Reform Initiatives	5
Constituent-based Reform Initiatives	9
The Word from on High: Government Reform Initiatives	11
Multilateral Initiatives: The Tunis Declaration	14
Conclusions and U.S. Policy Recommendations	14

*Mona Yacoubian*

## Promoting Middle East Democracy II

### Arab Initiatives

#### Summary

- The 9/11 attacks shattered the conventional wisdom that the Middle East's stability—anchored by the region's authoritarian governments—could endure indefinitely and would come at little cost to U.S. interests. Energized by external calls for democratic change, numerous elements in the region—nongovernmental, government, and multilateral—have generated reform initiatives.
- The most interesting reform proposals have emerged from human rights and democracy nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). Many of them have advocated forcefully for political reform. The creation of “national pacts” that could bridge secular and Islamist demands for reform, and possibly galvanize the reform movement, emerged as one of the most innovative recommendations.
- Other constituencies (e.g., the business community) also have put forward their own visions of reform for the region. These initiatives may not be as comprehensive or target as broad an audience as other reform proposals, but their significance lies in their demonstration that reform is a key priority across diverse sectors of Arab society.
- Nearly every Arab government has promoted some type of political reform package. These government-sponsored initiatives vary significantly in scope and intent from country to country. In addition, the Arab League issued the first Arab multilateral pledge for reform in the organization's history. The substance of these reform proposals represents rather tentative movement toward democratic opening; nonetheless, the proposals offer important entry points for a broader dialogue on reform.
- U.S. engagement on reform promotion should be quiet yet consistent. However, given flagging U.S. credibility in the region, any public endorsement of specific initiatives could doom them to failure. Indeed, restoring and strengthening U.S. credibility in the region should be *the* primary objective for U.S. policymakers.
- For now, the United States should seek to buffer its direct engagement on reform promotion by working in closer cooperation with European allies and through the establishment of a quasi-public Middle East foundation. As well, U.S. officials should employ quiet yet forceful diplomacy to pressure governments to roll back repressive

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measures such as arresting reformers, banning opposition parties, and censoring the media.

## Introduction

In the aftermath of 9/11, international and regional interest has focused intensely on the Middle East's urgent need for reform. The region's stagnation dates back decades, yet, until the 2001 attacks, these long-standing ills received scant attention from governments in the region and their global counterparts. The 9/11 attacks and subsequent terrorist operations (Casablanca, Riyadh, Istanbul, Madrid) shattered the conventional wisdom that the region's stability—anchored by its authoritarian governments—could endure indefinitely and would come at little cost to U.S. interests. Precisely the opposite conclusion has become apparent: Middle East reform is critical for long-term stability and regional security. Absent change, the status quo will only breed greater popular disaffection and provide fertile ground for the continued growth of extremism.

Given the linkage between Middle East reform and the region's long-term stability, the United States and its European allies have accelerated calls for reform in the region. Entering its second term, the Bush administration has signaled its continued emphasis on Middle East reform as a top priority in its foreign policy agenda. Indeed, President George W. Bush repeatedly underscored his administration's pledge to support democratic movements in the Middle East during both his second inaugural speech and State of the Union address.

While the United States has engaged more directly over the past few years to promote reform through the Middle East Partnership Initiative launched in December 2002 and the Broader Middle East and North Africa Initiative unveiled at the June 2004 G-8 summit, its efforts have been directed primarily toward a relatively narrow constituency of liberal, secular, pro-Western elites who do not represent the region's grassroots majority. However, numerous Arab reform advocates—from Islamists to businessmen—have proposed a rich array of reform initiatives that merit U.S. policymakers' attention. Indeed, U.S. policymakers largely have ignored moderate Islamist voices for reform, even though Islamists retain a strong, populist following in various countries throughout the region. Ultimately, successful Arab reform efforts must bridge secular and Islamist demands for change. In its quest to promote reform in the region, the United States will need to work with moderate Islamists and ruling regimes in the region. It must sell both on the notion that sustainable reform should be implemented via a gradual process of change that creates transparent and accountable institutions and respects the rule of law.

Certainly, the need for democratic change in the region has been well-documented. In July 2002, a UN-sponsored Arab Human Development Report, authored by a well-respected group of Arab scholars, found that Arab countries have the lowest level of political freedom of any region in the world. Specifically, the report states that critical deficits in freedom, women's empowerment, and knowledge plague the region. The study concludes with an impassioned plea for transforming the region through comprehensive political, economic, and social reform.

Yet the Arab world's democracy deficit should not be misinterpreted as a rejection by its citizens of greater opening and reform. Indeed, surveys and polling conducted in the Arab world reveal an intense desire for democratic freedoms. For example, a 2002 poll conducted by U.S. pollster James Zogby, head of the Arab American Institute, surveyed 3,200 people in eight Arab countries. Between 90 and 96 percent of respondents rated "civil and personal rights" as their highest priority among a list of potential concerns that included personal economic conditions, health care, and moral standards.

The intense international interest directed at the need for Middle East reform has helped to initiate an unprecedented dialogue about reform in the region. From Morocco

to Saudi Arabia and beyond, governments, nongovernmental groups (both secular and Islamist), the media, and others have joined an often freewheeling discussion about the need for change. Further, the debate has penetrated popular discourse from television call-in shows to Internet chat rooms and weblogs, injecting a populist element into the dialogue.

This Special Report examines the numerous reform initiatives emanating from the Arab world. Specifically, it reviews reform platforms at the nongovernmental, national, and multilateral levels and assesses their potential for promoting positive change in the region. The report concludes by providing some recommendations as to how the U.S. government should respond to these Arab world reform proposals.

## **Defining the Challenge: The Arab Human Development Report**

In July 2002, less than a year after the 9/11 attacks, a UN-commissioned panel of thirty Arab experts from a variety of disciplines issued the first Arab Human Development Report (AHDR) (<http://www.undp.org/rbas/ahdr/english2002.html>). The report offers a grim study on the state of the Arab world. Although planning for the report predated 9/11, the attacks imbued the document with a greater sense of urgency. The report, published in Arabic, English, and French, laid the groundwork for many of the Arab-initiated reform proposals that succeeded it by articulating the political, economic, social, and demographic challenges facing the region.

In blunt language, the AHDR issues a probing, self-critical look at what has gone wrong in the Arab world. Because of its Arab authorship, the study had great resonance, providing an instance of introspection that many outside the region complained had been lacking. While noting achievements such as an increase in life expectancy and a reduction of abject poverty, the report also points to ominous “warning signals.” For example, it states that only sub-Saharan Africa had lower per capita income growth over the past twenty years. It also highlights low and declining labor productivity. With 38 percent of its population under the age of fourteen, the region’s demographic pressures, spurred by demands for jobs and housing, will only intensify. The sense of hopelessness among Arab youths is underscored by the team’s finding that 51 percent of older adolescents wanted to emigrate from the region.

The report qualifies poverty in the region as “poverty of capabilities and poverty of opportunities.” Ultimately, it finds that the Arab world’s ills are rooted in deficits of freedom, women’s empowerment, and knowledge and that the region’s shortcomings in these three areas impede the Arab world from reaching its true potential, effectively isolating it from the rest of the world.

The report dissects each of the three key gaps in detail. Regarding political freedom, the Arab world is noted as having the lowest level of political freedom of any region in the world. Using a variety of indicators that measure political participation, civil liberties, political rights, and civil society, the region falls short, indicating a lack of “voice and accountability.” On women’s empowerment, the AHDR highlights Arab women’s lack of political and economic participation; women occupied only 3.5 percent of parliamentary seats as compared to 11 percent in sub-Saharan Africa and 12.9 percent in Latin America. Finally, the report chronicles the region’s “knowledge deficit,” noting, among other statistics, that the Arab world has the lowest level of information and communication technology access of any region in the world, that only 0.6 percent of the population uses the Internet, and that only 1.2 percent own personal computers. The report also notes the dearth of scientific research and innovative thinking originating from the region. In addition, the entire Arab world translates about 330 books annually, one-fifth of the total number translated by Greece. (A subsequent 2003 Arab Human Development Report is devoted to this knowledge gap; see <http://www.undp.org/rbas/ahdr/english2003.html>.)

***The first Arab Human Development Report laid the groundwork for many of the Arab-initiated reform proposals that succeeded it by articulating the challenges facing the region.***

***The Arab world’s ills are rooted in deficits of freedom, women’s empowerment, and knowledge.***

The report concludes with a clarion call for reform, saying the Arab world is at a “crossroads,” casting the region’s choices in stark terms: its governments can either continue with the status quo, producing ineffective policies that will not meet the region’s challenges, or they can strive for an “Arab renaissance, anchored in human development that will be actively pursued.” The report also urges “free, honest, efficient and regular elections” and the right for opposition parties to exist. It advocates greater checks on executive power by assigning oversight responsibilities to the legislative branch, as well as the need for an independent judiciary. It recommends the empowerment of civil society through the lifting of administrative obstacles and restrictions. It calls for the rule of law and guarantees for basic citizens’ rights, particularly freedom of expression and freedom of association. It also encourages the fostering of free and responsible media. Finally, it recommends the removal of gender bias in the labor market and greater emphasis on research and development in the “knowledge sciences.”

***The Arab Human Development Report defines the challenge from an Arab vantage point, sketching the key areas for reform in painful detail.***

The Arab Human Development Report is not a reform initiative per se. Rather, it seeks to establish the parameters for a reform dialogue, both within the region and internationally. Indeed, the AHDR played a key role in triggering the ongoing debate in the region on reform. The 170-page report defines the challenge from an Arab vantage point, sketching the key areas for reform in painful detail. It has provided U.S. and European policymakers with an important grounding for their own reform proposals and an Arab “voice” to reference when designing reform promotion policies. For example, then-Secretary of State Colin Powell, in his speech announcing the Middle East Partnership Initiative, quoted from the report, emphasizing that the words “[are] not my words . . . they have come from Arab experts who have looked deeply into these issues.” And, not insignificantly, the report and subsequent Arab reform initiatives provide some cover against charges that the United States is attempting to impose reform on the region from the outside.

***Islamists constitute perhaps the single most influential grassroots force in the region.***

While the report’s candid self-assessment provides a critical baseline, it suffers from two major drawbacks. First, the report largely evades a key issue, the role of Islam in Arab politics and society, and offers an implicit criticism of the role of Islamists through its references to an intolerant social environment. This explicit omission likely was intentional, as religion’s role in politics constitutes a lightning rod in the debate over reform. However, Islamists constitute perhaps the single most influential grassroots force in the region. As a result, the report does not establish the basis for a clear dialogue for reform that reaches across the secular-Islamist divide.

Second, the report fails to resonate with the Arab “street.” Its authors principally hail from the Arab world’s Westernized, liberal elite, a group with limited influence at the popular level. Indeed, the report engendered a hostile reaction from many in the Arab world, as opposed to the glowing response it received from the West. Yet, grassroots sentiment in the region is not inherently antidemocratic; many key themes articulated by reformers, such as the need for transparency and accountability, are echoed in Islamist discourse. However, in a somewhat predictable circle-the-wagons response, negative reaction in the Arabic-language press often stemmed from assertions that the report was overly gloomy in its assessment of the Arab world and that the West would exploit the report to impose its will on the region.

Underlying the popular rejection of the report resides a deeper issue, namely the ability of democratic reformers to connect with the broader Arab public. Liberal-minded, secular reformers often articulate a vision of reform that comports with Western ideals of democratic change. Yet, this view typically gets lost in the anti-Western diatribe that has come to dominate Arabic-language media and other popular outlets of expression. To some extent, the concepts of reform and democracy have become sullied by their association with U.S. foreign policy in the region. During the June 2004 Doha Conference (see below), for example, one participant bemoaned “the fact that the language of democratic reform in the Arab world has become the stock-in-trade of one of the most globally despised U.S. governments in history.”

As such, Arab reform initiatives risk losing all popular credibility as long as they are associated with deeply controversial U.S. policies toward Iraq and the Palestinians. Indeed, the region's Westernized liberals form an elite minority, often estranged from the grassroots and viewed by many as pawns of the West. To the extent that it is identified with this relatively small Westernized intelligentsia, the Arab Human Development Report's long-term impact on Arab public opinion may be somewhat limited. Certainly, without a mass following demanding attention to the problems highlighted in the document, Arab governments have managed largely to ignore the report.

## **"People Power": Nongovernmental Reform Initiatives**

The boldest and most detailed reform proposals originating in the Arab world have emerged from nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). While NGO-sponsored conferences on democratic reform date back twenty years, when a group of seventy-one Arab intellectuals met in Cyprus—no Arab country would host them—and established the Arab Organization for Human Rights at a conference entitled "The Arab World's Democratic Crisis," the past eighteen months have witnessed a significant surge in discussion and conferences devoted to democratic reform in the region.

Indeed, beginning in January 2004, a diverse array of groups ranging from the Arab Business Council to the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood has published a variety of reform initiatives. The platforms vary, at times significantly, in degree of specificity, scope, seriousness, and independence. Some have been published in partnership with government, whereas in other cases the host government's role is less visible; others are fully independent. Most significantly, many of these reform initiatives have advocated forcefully for political reform. A number of these initiatives are examined here, in order of their relative significance (determined by content and degree of independence), beginning with those that hold the most promise for pushing the reform agenda forward.

### ***Arab NGOs Beirut Summit Letter, March 19–22, 2004***

(<http://www.apfw.org/indexenglish.asp?fname=news\english\12437.htm>)

(Arabic: <http://www.apfw.org/indexarabic.asp?fname=news%5Carabic%5C12808.htm>)

The Arab NGO summit, also known as the Civil Forum, is among the most compelling nongovernmental reform initiatives. The forum comprised fifty-two Arab NGOs from thirteen countries and was timed to precede the Arab League summit devoted to the question of political reform. Banned from holding their conference in Tunis, where the Arab League summit was scheduled to take place, the four-day forum was held in Beirut. (Due to squabbling among Arab governments, the summit was ultimately postponed until May 2004.)

Asserting its independence from any Arab government, the forum issued its final communiqué as a letter addressed to Arab kings and presidents. The fourteen-page letter underscores the importance of political and constitutional reform for the region's future, lamenting that in the eyes of many in the world, the Middle East has become little more than a haven for terrorism and violence. The forum determined that the Arab world's internal problems—regardless of external pressure—demand that the region embark on a path of reform or risk facing long-term instability and chaos.

The letter then lists several "general demands" for political reform. These include repealing emergency laws, abolishing exceptional courts, releasing political prisoners, ending torture, lifting restrictions on forming NGOs, and ensuring basic freedoms. The letter also raises the need for constitutional reform and calls for devolving more power away from the executive branch to legislative sources of power, specifically to municipal councils.

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Most significantly, the letter highlights the importance of initiating a religious dialogue within the Muslim Arab community. The document calls on governments to review both religious and nonreligious educational curricula in order to inject more innovative thinking. By the same token, it appeals to Islamic scholars (*ulama*) and thinkers to debate the theological underpinnings of terrorism, extremism, and violence. The document also urges those in academe and the media to examine and open forums for discussion of the work of “religious innovators” (*mujaddadun diniyun*) in Arab society.

The Civil Forum letter is significant in several respects. First, the document is comprehensive and detailed, covering nearly every aspect of reform. While some of the demands are somewhat vague—for example, “take prompt measures toward administrative and financial reform”—many are quite specific. Further, the letter situates these demands within a broader framework of basic principles including respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, acceptance of pluralism, and the renunciation of the use of violence.

Second, unlike many other reform initiatives, the Civil Forum letter directly addresses the role of Islam within the region and offers constructive suggestions for promoting dialogue on this critical matter. The initiative appears to make an important distinction between radicals and moderates. Its recommendations look to marginalize violent, extremist elements while allowing for the participation of peaceful moderates. In its preamble, the letter warns against adhering to dated interpretations of Islam—an implicit reference to the growing popularity of the *salafist* trend in Islam that calls for a return to the practice of Islam as it was during the time of the Prophet Muhammad. At the same time, it underscores the right of political participation for all citizens, regardless of national, religious, or linguistic “inclinations,” thereby offering an opening for moderate Islamist political participation.

Later, the forum devotes an entire section to the renewal of religious discourse. Rather than signaling the total exclusion of the Islamist political strain, it demonstrates in the letter a wish to reach an understanding among the Islamists who eschew violence. The forum seeks to embark on a dialogue to renew (reform) Islam with the full participation of all its adherents: clerics, scholars, imams, Muslim thinkers, journalists and academics. The letter highlights the important role debate and dialogue will play in addressing critical issues related to violence, extremism, and terrorism.

Third, the groups composing the Civil Forum reflect regionwide viewpoints, as well as the interests of human rights organizations, women’s groups, and press freedom organizations. Collectively, they appear to be truly independent of any government in the region. As such, they represent a genuine alternative to government representatives and could be well-placed to promote popular aspirations for change, a critical element in any reform equation.

Fourth, the Civil Forum has identified an important follow-up mechanism, namely, the holding of parallel NGO conferences to coincide with Arab League summits. Pegging their conference to the Arab League meetings will help to ensure both continued follow-up and broader public attention to their reform proposals.

### ***Doha Declaration for Democracy and Reform, June 3–4, 2004***

(<http://www.npwj.org/modules.php?name=News&file=article&sid=1715>)

***The Doha Declaration for Democracy and Reform offers a bold formula for reforming the Arab world.***

The Doha Declaration for Democracy and Reform, although not as detailed or comprehensive as the Civil Forum letter, offers a bold formula for reforming the Arab world. The declaration was issued at the end of a two-day conference conceived by Egyptian reformer Saad Ed-Din Ibrahim and hosted by Qatar University’s Gulf Studies Center. The Qatari government also supported the conference. More than one hundred participants from across the Arab world, representing a broad spectrum of journalists, activists, and politicians, signed the declaration.

The Doha Declaration opens by stating that “democratic change has become a non-negotiable choice which cannot be postponed.” The statement asserts that no inherent contradictions exist between Arab culture, Islam, and democracy, noting that two-thirds of the world’s 1.4 billion Muslims already live in democracies. It also admonishes against “hiding behind the necessity to resolve the Palestinian question before implementing political reform.” It later calls on Arab governments to cease their exploitation of the Iraq and Palestine questions to postpone political reform.

The proposal’s key demands include calls for constitutional reforms that will transform absolute monarchies into constitutional monarchies and circumscribe presidential powers in republics. The declaration also calls for free and fair elections; the abolition of emergency laws, special courts, and extrajudicial procedures; an independent judiciary; guarantees for the freedom of expression and association; greater political participation for women; and unrestricted freedom to form political parties. The proposal also demands the withdrawal of Arab militaries from politics, underscoring the need for civil-military transition. The initiative’s follow-up mechanisms include the slated establishment of an Arab Democracy Watch based in Qatar. The group will monitor and follow-up on Doha Declaration proposals as well as other Arab reform initiatives such as those of Beirut (see above), Alexandria, and Sana’a (see below).

The initiative is notable for two key innovations that, if implemented successfully, may make significant contributions toward Arab reform promotion. First, the Doha Declaration calls for the creation of “national pacts” that would delineate the principles of political participation, establishing rules of engagement for the political arena. Fear that Islamist opposition groups will exploit any genuine political opening to seize power via elections and to implement antidemocratic measures (e.g., *shari’a* law) constitutes a key obstacle to moving forward with serious political reform. Essentially, these charters or pacts could lay out the “rules of the game” and establish an agreed-upon set of values and guarantees endorsed across the political spectrum, thereby opening the way for freer political participation within the confines of these universal guarantees. Equally important, these pacts could help consolidate and strengthen reform advocates, bridging the divide between secular and moderate Islamist reformers. By rallying these disparate pro-reform elements, the region’s inchoate reform movement could gain important momentum. While the national pact concept is still quite vague and in need of further development, it nonetheless offers an innovative approach to a key challenge for reformers.

Second, the declaration provides an important opening for addressing the issue of civil-military transition, a pivotal question for many of the region’s governments as they embark on the path of reform. In many Arab countries, particularly those with military-backed governments, the role of the army as defined by their respective constitutions has been kept purposefully vague. In countries such as Algeria or Syria, the military and its related security services typically serve the narrowly defined interests of the regime in power. The army is often used to ensure against the rise of a powerful domestic opposition rather than to safeguard national sovereignty against foreign threats. By raising the issue of the military’s role in the political arena, the Doha Declaration could help to initiate a much-needed dialogue within countries on defining the future role of the military.

Finally, the Doha conference’s participants included a number of representatives reflecting a broad range of political views and issues. Women’s groups, media organizations, human rights groups, and a variety of political parties and other civil society organizations attended the conference. The conference also placed particular emphasis on the participation of both women and youth, two key constituent groups who will be critical to the success of any reform effort in the region.

***The Doha Declaration calls on Arab governments to cease their exploitation of the Iraq and Palestine questions to postpone political reform.***

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***While the national pact concept is still quite vague and in need of further development, it nonetheless offers an innovative approach to a key challenge for reformers.***

## ***Alexandria Charter, March 12–14 2004***

(<http://www.arabreformforum.org/English/Document.htm>)

(Arabic: <http://www.arabreformforum.org/ar/Files/ArDocument.pdf>)

The Alexandria Charter—perhaps the most publicized of Arab reform efforts—was drafted by a group of 150 Arab intellectuals, former diplomats, and businessmen (100 Egyptians plus 50 from other Arab countries) at the Alexandria Library in March 2004. The Alexandria Charter adopts a multidisciplinary approach, addressing political, economic, social, and cultural reform. This quasi-governmental conference was opened by Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak, and over three days the group hammered out a comprehensive—albeit politically timid—reform proposal.

Its political reform proposals reference the need for a transfer of power, free elections, and term limits. It calls for the abolition of emergency laws, explaining that regular laws can adequately address all offenses. The charter endorses the freedom to form political parties *within the framework of existing laws and the constitution*, as well as the need for a free press *via the laws regulating the publication of newspapers*. Finally, the document encourages the amendment of restrictive laws governing the establishment of civil society institutions.

***The Alexandria Charter is notable for its broad scope and its regionwide representation.***

The Alexandria Charter is notable for its broad scope and its regionwide representation. It also promotes some bold political reforms such as free elections and the lifting of emergency laws. The charter also includes provisions for follow-up, including the establishment of an Arab Reform Forum, based at the Alexandria Library, that would facilitate ongoing dialogue. Additionally, the charter recommends holding national reform conferences in individual countries. A second multinational conference slated for spring 2005 will focus on sharing best practices, drawing on reform success stories from across the region.

However, the charter falls short in key areas. Less daring than the Beirut or Doha Declarations, the Alexandria Charter offers a “lite” version of reform. The participants signed the document as individuals rather than as representatives of specific organizations, leading some to question exactly whom the charter represents or how much weight it carries. Further, the document offers caveats to its recommendations by insisting that they fall within the purview of existing laws—many of which are restrictive and contribute to the region’s closed political atmosphere. The resulting proposals are fairly dilute. As noted above, its proposal to lift restrictions on political parties is qualified by asserting that these parties must be within the confines of existing laws and the constitution. In Egypt, like many countries in the region, religious-based parties are banned, effectively sidelining some of the most potent political forces. Similarly, the charter advocates the need for a free press, but qualifies the proposal by endorsing the continuation of a press code regulating the media.

More generally, the document largely avoids the question of Islam, sidestepping another key issue that the region must confront. Indeed, Islamists, as well as other civil society groups, were largely excluded from the conference. Of the 150 participants, only one or two were considered to represent an Islamist viewpoint. Some have suggested that religion was purposefully excluded in order to define political legitimacy by citizenship rather than religion. The charter’s cultural reform section touches on the role of religion, calling for the “eradication” (*qada’a*) of any form of religious extremism in school curricula, mosques, and the media. The stark language used appears to signal an unwillingness to reach out to more moderate Islamist elements.

***Ultimately, the Alexandria Charter falters due to its lack of independence.***

Ultimately, the Alexandria Charter falters due to its lack of independence. The Egyptian government’s influence is clearly discernible. Some Egyptian observers charge the conference was essentially hijacked by the Egyptian government, which wanted to control its outcome and ensure against any proposals that would be viewed as a threat to the Egyptian state. In any event, Mubarak’s speech opening the conference conveyed a strong

symbolic message—the conference was organized with the blessing of the Egyptian government. Participants, therefore, could not easily rock the boat.

### ***The Sana'a Declaration, January 10–12, 2004***

(<http://www.caabu.org/press/documents/sanaa-declaration-html.htm>)

The Sana'a Declaration emerged from a conference of 820 participants representing fifty-two countries and included representatives from governments as well as a variety of civil society organizations and political parties. Cosponsored by the Yemeni government, the declaration, although vague, calls for elected legislatures, an independent judiciary, respect for the rule of law, women's empowerment, and a free and independent media. The document also underscores the important role to be played by the private sector as a key partner in any reform effort.

The most salient aspect of the Sana'a Declaration is its emphasis on the need to strengthen the partnership between government and civil society. While such a partnership risks leading to the co-option of nongovernmental organizations by strong governments, some element of partnership and dialogue is necessary for the successful promotion of reform in the region. The conference offered government officials and civil society activists an important opportunity to exchange views. As part of its follow-up, the conference established an Arab Democratic Dialogue Forum as an instrument to promote dialogue between "diverse [public and nongovernmental] actors."

As one of the first Arab reform initiatives following the publication of the Arab Human Development Report, the Sana'a Declaration marked an important first step. However, subsequent initiatives, such as the Civil Forum letter and the Doha Declaration, offer more detailed and substantive recommendations. The Sana'a Declaration's proposals lack specificity, often relying on vague generalities, rather than concrete policy recommendations. Finally, the declaration's reference to the Palestinian question serves to dilute the document by digressing from reform and raising an issue often exploited by Arab governments to distract public attention away from the need for political change.

## **Constituent-based Reform Initiatives**

In addition to the numerous nongovernmental reform initiatives, some more narrowly defined constituencies have put forward their own vision of reform for the region. These initiatives are not as comprehensive and do not target as broad an audience as other reform proposals. However, their significance derives from their connection to reform proponents who hail from diverse sectors of Arab society. Two specific constituencies—the business sector and the Islamists—will be highlighted briefly in this report.

### ***The Arab Business Council Declaration, January 2004***

([http://www.weforum.org/pdf/ABC/ABC\\_R1.pdf](http://www.weforum.org/pdf/ABC/ABC_R1.pdf))

Established in June 2003 as part of the World Economic Forum, the Arab Business Council focuses primarily on global competitiveness issues, seeking to elevate the Arab private sector in order for it to compete at a global level. The council's January 2004 document, therefore, is directed at economic-reform priorities in the Arab world. The declaration underscores the need for good governance as a critical element in enhancing competitiveness.

Specifically, the Arab Business Council Declaration calls for respecting the rule of law and enhancing transparency and accountability. The document also highlights the need to address corruption and to ensure an independent judiciary and calls for the establishment of a public-private partnership, fostering the role of civil society in the reform process.

***The most salient aspect of the Sana'a Declaration is its emphasis on the need to strengthen the partnership between government and civil society.***

***The Arab Business Council focuses primarily on global competitiveness issues, seeking to elevate the Arab private sector in order for it to compete at a global level.***

While limited in scope, the Arab Business Council Declaration is significant in that it represents another important constituency for reform. Although collaboration on reform between the business sector and civil society has been minimal to date, private-sector interests intersect with those of the nongovernmental sector with regard to promoting good governance. (However, deeply entrenched business elites are often vested in the status quo and may be averse to reform measures.) The council's declaration does not offer recommendations for follow-up mechanisms. Nonetheless, it remains an important statement for the record, placing Arab business interests squarely on the side of reform promotion.

### ***Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood Reform Initiative, March 13, 2004***

(Arabic: <http://www.afaqarabia.com/asp/Article.asp>)

The Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood (MB), Egypt's most powerful opposition force, issued its own comprehensive reform platform in March 2004. The MB's reform initiative is fairly detailed, addressing several types of reform, including political, electoral, judicial, economic, social, educational, and religious. The platform also features a section devoted to the status of women.

In a preamble to the proposal, the MB's general guide, Muhammad Mahdi Akef, rails against foreign intervention, decrying the "persistent and continuing attempts to impose change on the region from outside," specifically accusing the United States of trying to impose its hegemony on the region. He also characterizes the "small doses of reform" by the Egyptian government as too little and too gradual.

Regarding political reform, the eleven-page document asserts the MB's adherence to a "democratic and constitutional parliamentary republic within the realm of Islamic principles." It then calls on all political parties to agree to a national charter (*mithaq watani*) that would guarantee basic freedoms, as well as the unfettered transfer of power through free elections. (Clearly, this is a response to charges that if elected, Islamists would institute a theocracy resulting in "one man, one vote, one time.") It also calls for universal suffrage, presidential term limits, the right of both men and women to serve in parliament, and the withdrawal of the military from political life. It demands the abolition of emergency laws, the release of political detainees, and an end to torture.

The reform initiative seems to signal the MB's commitment to democratic principles (including equal rights for women) and appears to diminish the importance of the more controversial elements of its Islamization program. However, many important questions remain unanswered. Principally, how will the group reconcile its position on the implementation of *shari'a* law with its professed commitment to democratic reform? The Brotherhood's current position on *shari'a* law remains purposefully vague in the document. Additionally, is the Brotherhood's reform initiative a tactical maneuver designed to exploit the region's current focus on reform, or does it represent a genuine shift in thinking? Given the movement's illiberal tendencies, a strong dose of skepticism is warranted.

Despite these key questions, the MB initiative is a significant document that could represent an important opening for bringing moderate Islamists into the dialogue on reform. Specifically, the Brotherhood's proposal for a national charter agreed on by all political parties has merit. It offers a key opportunity to engage all elements of the political spectrum in a dialogue to determine a set of shared democratic values and principles to which all parties can adhere. Establishment of such a charter would constitute a significant first step on the path toward reform.

Indeed, credible reform must be inclusive. Although the MB platform is Egypt-specific, it raises the bigger issue of the Islamist role in reform promotion. Islamists represent perhaps the most powerful populist force in the Arab world today and are usually best poised to exploit political openings. However, while reform is often viewed as a potent antidote to extremism, the prospect of moderate Islamists in politics is colored by fears

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***The MB initiative is a significant document that could represent an important opening for bringing moderate Islamists into the dialogue on reform.***

that Islamists coming to power via free elections would overturn a democratic system. The alternative notion of a peaceful evolution of Islamist politics that results in Islamists working within a system has not been fully considered. (Here, the case of the Justice and Development Party in Turkey is instructive.) The MB platform, if genuine, could offer a useful model for other Islamist groups in the region who seek to play a constructive role in the reform process.

## The Word from on High: Government Reform Initiatives

Reform initiatives have been proposed not only by Arab nongovernmental initiatives but also by the region's governments. Following the international outcry over Islamist terrorism in the wake of the 9/11 attacks, many Arab states have promoted some type of political reform package. Indeed, governments ranging from the religiously conservative absolute monarchy in Saudi Arabia to Syria's staunchly secular regime appear to be jumping on the reform bandwagon.

The government-sponsored initiatives vary significantly in scope and intent from country to country. An emerging tension between antiterrorism measures implemented by governments in the region and calls for reform is also evident. Often, government reform efforts are largely cosmetic, designed to relieve pressure for change bubbling from below without implementing substantial and deep-rooted reforms. In some instances, government reform policies have translated into an expansion of political space, allowing an outlet for the expression of opposition. In fewer cases, government promises of reform have led to relatively free and fair elections. In nearly every case, political openings have been tenuous and fragile, subject to the whims of those in power. However, even if government calls for reform are superficial rather than genuine, they offer a potential entry point for the promotion of genuine change.

The following section offers a brief sampling of the reform efforts from each of the Arab world's subregions: North Africa, the Levant, and the Gulf, as well as Egypt. The examples chosen reflect either the significance of the reform initiatives (Morocco and Jordan) or the pivotal importance of the states promoting the reform package (Egypt and Saudi Arabia).

### Morocco

Considered by many observers to be among the most open of Arab countries (despite the king's near-absolute authority), Morocco has implemented some important political reforms over the past few years. In 2003, the Moroccan parliament approved changes to Morocco's family code, yielding one of the most progressive laws on women's rights in the Arab world. In addition, the 2002 legislative elections were widely considered to be free and fair. The Moroccan parliament boasts a diverse group of members: female MPs make up more than 10 percent of the body and the opposition Islamist Justice and Development Party represents the third-largest bloc. The 2003 municipal elections were also considered to be largely transparent, despite isolated reports of fraud.

The government has also held a series of hearings on its past human rights violations, generating significant popular interest. Established in January 2004, the Equity and Reconciliation Commission is investigating government human rights violations committed between 1956 and 1999, earning praise from numerous human rights groups. In addition, the Moroccan media is considered relatively open and has a variety of outlets. Morocco also holds claim to a vibrant NGO sector, and the Berber language, once outlawed, is now taught in schools.

However, controversial antiterrorism legislation, passed in May 2003 following terrorist attacks in Casablanca, may signal a rollback of Morocco's nascent political opening. (Indeed, an October 2004 Human Rights Watch report warned that "important elements

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of progress [on human rights] may now be endangered" following the Moroccan authorities' response to the attack.) The law allows police the right to hold suspects for up to twelve days without charging them or allowing them access to a lawyer. It also allows authorities to intercept phone, mail, and Internet communications and to search homes and businesses without a warrant. The Moroccan press has also been increasingly subject to greater restrictions, somewhat compromising its relatively open status. Meanwhile, Amnesty International reported a sharp increase in reported cases of torture, while Moroccan human rights groups have questioned the fairness of a number of terrorism trials held in the wake of the Casablanca attacks.

The Moroccan government's reform agenda appears to be in a holding pattern, if not in a backslide. Security concerns now trump demands for continued political opening. As a result, the kingdom's policies weigh in favor of antiterrorism measures and are presented as Morocco's contribution to the global war on terror.

### ***Jordan***

Wedge between the turmoil in Iraq and the bloody Palestinian-Israeli conflict, Jordan has emerged as a relatively tolerant country. Over the past two years, Jordan's reform plan has comprised several components, including parliamentary and municipal elections, the creation of a ministry for political development, and the establishment of a new Human Rights Center. However, more recently the Jordanian government has shifted away from allowing greater political freedoms and has focused instead on less-threatening administrative reform. Indeed, the kingdom's reform efforts are captive to popular sentiment over Iraq and Israel and seem somewhat tenuous, serving essentially as a pressure reliever. Therefore, any genuine political opening in Jordan remains vulnerable to a change in government policy.

After an electoral hiatus, the kingdom held parliamentary and municipal elections in 2003. The elections were deemed to be largely fair, with no significant reports of fraud. However, government gerrymandering favored tribal candidates who support the monarchy. Even so, the parliament includes some opposition elements, including the Islamic Action Front. Jordanians are also still contending with the impact of more than two hundred temporary royal decrees that were passed between 2001 and 2003, when parliament was dissolved. The decrees have dampened freedoms of expression, the press, and assembly and have been used to quash dissent. In a crackdown on September 9, 2004, thirty-eight Islamic leaders and activists were rounded up for violating a decree that prohibits political commentary inside mosques.

Despite its claim that political reform is a key priority, the Jordanian government's future political reform plans were thrown into question following an October 2004 cabinet reshuffle. The cabinet change was accompanied by a government announcement that administrative reform, namely streamlining the bureaucracy, would become a top priority. This new emphasis on largely technical administrative issues could signal a troubling shift away from more meaningful reform measures. Indeed, as part of this administrative reform plan, King Abdullah unveiled in January 2005 a plan to establish elected local councils to oversee the development and budget of local public services. However, this initiative toward decentralization may be a diversion from real, deep-rooted political reform that would allow for a genuine shift in political power.

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### ***Egypt***

Typically, reform proposals in Egypt, largely channeled through the ruling National Democratic Party (NDP), have been somewhat cosmetic and often motivated by the Egyptian government's desire to appear responsive to external (largely U.S.) pressure to reform. However, President Mubarak's surprise announcement in late February calling for multicanidate presidential elections is significant. While additional steps are needed to ensure a fair vote—slated for fall 2005—the announcement could herald a historic move toward

democracy in Egypt. Other Egyptian government measures are also noteworthy, even if they are not always long-lived. For example, in October 2004, the government licensed the opposition Al-Ghad (Tomorrow) party after having earlier rejected its application three times. This secular party boasts a pro-reform platform that seeks to balance presidential power by bolstering the legislative branch. In addition, two new daily newspapers with liberal leanings were given permission to publish. However, these gains dissipated in early 2005 when authorities arrested Ayman Nour, the Al-Ghad party's founder, and temporarily banned the party's newspaper.

Indeed, despite a lot of talk about the need for reform in various conferences and meetings, significant obstacles to deep-rooted political opening remain. The September 2003 NDP conference gave lip service to the need for democratic reform, publicizing its "new thinking" and offering vague proposals for reform. Meanwhile, the 2004 NDP conference introduced several minor reform measures, but the party endorsed an unprecedented fifth term for President Mubarak. NDP leaders also refused to consider opposition calls for lifting the twenty-three-year-old emergency laws and for implementing presidential term limits. In addition, this past May witnessed a major crackdown on Islamist opposition activists, resulting in fifty arrests and the shutdown of the Muslim Brotherhood's website. As a result of mounting government harassment, opposition forces representing a wide spectrum of political views have uniformly greeted the government's reform proposals with deep skepticism.

Ultimately, the Egyptian government's flirtation with political reform will be balanced by concerns over leadership succession and how to shape post-Mubarak Egypt. The government's dialogue on reform has thus been characterized by its reluctance to implement several key elements of any meaningful reform package, such as annulling the emergency laws and lifting restrictions on political parties. In addition, any multicandidate presidential election will likely be highly managed by the Egyptian government to ensure its total control over the process. In light of deep uncertainty about the post-Mubarak era and continuing instability in Iraq, more deeply-rooted reform is not likely in the near term.

### ***Saudi Arabia***

Soon after 9/11, many in the West turned a sharply critical eye toward Saudi Arabia, which produced fifteen of the nineteen hijackers. The Saudi government's initial reaction was defensive; key Saudi leaders refused to acknowledge the role played by their deeply conservative society—anchored in puritanical Wahhabi Islam—and closed political system. However, since 2003 the Saudis have embarked on a reform program that has included the first nationwide municipal elections in decades and a series of "National Dialogues." At the same time, a spate of terrorist attacks beginning in May 2003 has shattered the kingdom's sense of security, once again putting Saudi officials on the defensive and threatening to derail the kingdom's embryonic reforms.

The government held municipal elections on February 10, 2005, drawing an estimated 82 percent voter turnout. While tightly controlled—women could not run or even vote, and the government approved all candidates—the vote represents a significant milestone on the path toward greater political opening. The kingdom has also relaxed press restrictions, established a human rights organization, set up a committee to review school curricula, and enhanced the powers of the appointed consultative council by allowing it to propose legislation.

In addition, three National Dialogues on various areas of reform were held over a yearlong period. The first discussion took place in June 2003 in Riyadh and focused on religion, bringing together representatives of the religious establishment, opposition preachers, Shiite elements, and Sufis. The second dialogue, in December 2003, occurred in Mecca and explored the rise of Islamic militancy and related social issues; the third session, which was held in June 2004 in Medina, examined the role of women.

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At the same time, the Saudi government's reform gestures have been marred by the arrest and harassment of reformers and other measures that ensure that the regime retains full control over the reform process. Therefore, the government's longer-term intentions remain unclear. While the greater openness in Saudi society is notable, questions about the government's seriousness as well as Saudi society's capacity to absorb change remain at the forefront of concerns. However, should the reform initiative in the kingdom—a bastion of extremist Islam—meet with success, its impact would reverberate across the Muslim world.

## **Multilateral Initiatives: The Tunis Declaration**

(<http://www.arabsummit.tn/en/tunis-declaration.htm>)

(Arabic: <http://www.daralhayat.net/actions/print.php>)

Judged by its content, the Tunis Declaration, issued by Arab governments following the May 2004 Arab League summit, holds the least promise of all reform initiatives. Compelled to develop a unified response to the G-8's Broader Middle East Initiative, the Arab League signed the thirteen-point Tunis Declaration, calling in vague terms for a wide range of reforms. However, the document represents the first multilateral Arab call for reform and offers an important entry point for Western governments as they confer with their Arab counterparts on the need for reform.

While the Tunis Declaration is symbolically important, the document suffers from several key flaws. First, the declaration reflects the least common denominator with respect to reform proposals, offering nothing new or innovative. Second, the declaration lacks specificity, instead relying on a series of vague endorsements of reform in principle without committing to anything more substantive. For example, it calls for "consolidating the democratic practice by enlarging participation in political and public life," but it does not propose any real steps, such as lifting restrictions on NGOs. Third, the Arab League made no attempt to reach out to civil society activists and take their views into consideration. Indeed, the document was roundly criticized by Arab NGOs, claiming the declaration made rhetorical promises but offered no concrete programs or policies.

Therefore, the Tunis Declaration's significance lies not in its substance but in the cover it provides for those who seek to engage Arab governments on the question of reform. While the prospects of constructive multilateral Arab engagement on the question of reform remain slim, the Tunis Declaration offers a key point of reference. At a minimum, Western governments can refer to the document, calling Arab governments on their promise to move toward greater reform. Ultimately, disagreements among Arab countries regarding the pace and direction of reform, as well as the differing internal dynamics of each country, suggest that successful Arab reform initiatives are unlikely to emerge from multilateral Arab venues.

***Successful Arab reform initiatives are unlikely to emerge from multilateral Arab venues.***

## **Conclusions and U.S. Policy Recommendations**

Several conclusions can be made about Arab reform initiatives from which important U.S. policy recommendations can be drawn.

### ***The Nature of Arab Reform Efforts***

- As Arab governments stand to become net losers in any real reform effort, most government-sponsored initiatives are motivated by self-preservation and a desire to maintain the status quo rather than a wish to implement genuine change. Therefore,

the boldest and most detailed Arab reform initiatives will generally originate from independent nongovernmental entities.

- All Arab reform initiatives share key common demands. These include calls for free and fair elections; constitutional reforms that feature a diminishing of executive power and a commensurate increase in legislative and judicial powers; the repeal of emergency laws and the abolishment of exceptional courts; an end to the practice of torture; and the lifting of restrictions on civil society, NGOs, and the media.
- Successful reform in the region must be inclusive; all nonviolent elements of the political spectrum, from Marxists to Islamists, need to be consulted and their viewpoints weighed and negotiated in any process designed to arrive at a comprehensive reform plan. To date, Islamists—perhaps the most influential grassroots opposition element—have been largely excluded from both government and nongovernmental initiatives. Greater effort to engage moderate Islamists in a reform dialogue is necessary. Bridging the divide between Islamists and secularists will be a critical component of successful reform efforts.
- The creation of national pacts to generate a set of common values and goals for reform stands as one of the most promising recommendations to date. By bringing together secular and Islamist reformers, these pacts could unify key reform advocates, accelerating the momentum for change. Unlike previous pacts (e.g., Jordan’s 1991 National Charter) devised by governments to co-opt opposition elements, these agreements would allow government and opposition elements to work together to construct a mutually agreed-on set of values, such as those relating to the role of Islam in politics and the “road map” for reform. If constructed in good faith, such pacts could go a long way toward clarifying a number of worrisome ambiguities for both government and civil society.
- Nearly all of the reform initiatives, from nongovernmental to multilateral, suffer—to varying degrees—from a lack of specificity. Even the best-conceived nongovernmental efforts reflect broader regionwide concerns rather than country-specific priorities. Further, the initiatives offer little in the way of specifying how their proposals should be implemented. All of the proposals would benefit from more specific detail on the means of accomplishing the reform objectives.
- Nongovernmental reform initiatives that hold the greatest promise, such as the Beirut Letter and the Doha Declaration, need further thought and development. Specifically, these initiatives should be translated into country-specific action plans that identify and prioritize key reforms and then elaborate on specific steps for achieving these goals.

### ***U.S. Policy Recommendations***

- Bolstering U.S. credibility in the region stands as a key priority for policymakers. However, given the United States’ faltering credibility in the Arab world, U.S. policymakers should steer clear of *publicly* endorsing any particular initiative. While the Beirut Letter and the Doha Declaration hold the greatest promise, any direct U.S. endorsement of these efforts could doom them. With a few exceptions, Arab reformers repeatedly suggest that any public association with the United States would dramatically diminish their credibility at home.
- Instead, U.S. policymakers should raise the urgent need for reform, as emphasized by Arab reformers, at the bilateral level. Consistent yet quiet diplomatic pressure, coupled with financial enticements for positive movement on reform (see below), offers the greatest chance of success. Both Washington and diplomats in the field need to signal that reform is a key objective by repeatedly pressing for the release of imprisoned reformers, an end to press censorship, and the cessation of repressive emergency laws.

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An online edition of this report can be found at our website ([www.usip.org](http://www.usip.org)), together with additional information on the subject.

- Engagement with moderate Islamist reformers is essential. Given the Islamists' strong popular appeal, the United States can no longer afford to call for democratic change in the region while ignoring one of its most powerful political forces. The United States should underscore the commonalities among the demands of secular and Islamist reformers, leveraging the overlap between them to inject greater momentum toward broad reform in the region.
- Positive conditionality, which involves offering financial and other incentives for forward movement on reform, deserves further exploration. Specifically, U.S. policymakers should work to identify key "benchmarks" that adequately measure the progress of political reform. In particular, the creation of bulleted "action plans"—that is, laying out specific reform-oriented goals, a model favored by the European Union—might offer a useful format for the United States and its Arab counterparts. Incentives such as increased aid or enhanced market access could then be tied to the completion of specific action items, offering a stepped, benefit-based approach to reform.
- Greater cooperation and coordination with the United States' European allies could also improve the prospects for successful Arab reform efforts. The United States and its European allies can undertake several key measures to help move Arab reform forward. These include enhancing the transatlantic policy dialogue on Middle East reform; identifying shared transatlantic interests and objectives; coordinating more closely public statements on key reform-related events, such as elections; and synchronizing reform incentives. (For further elaboration on these and other recommendations, see "Transatlantic Cooperation on Democracy Promotion in the Middle East: Ten Recommendations for Enhanced Cooperation," <http://www.usip.org/research/reports/usipfride.pdf>.)
- In addition, the United States should consider establishing a quasi-public, privately run Middle East foundation as the key mechanism for administering political-reform promotion projects. A Middle East foundation would provide the necessary "arm's length" from the U.S. government, creating an important buffer for sensitive political-reform projects. Indeed, U.S. policymakers should resist the urge to publicly promote U.S. aid in the region, as U.S. credibility there will be enhanced through solid progress on reform than through flashy public rollouts and prominent U.S. branding of projects. A Middle East foundation would also provide an instrument for addressing policy interests that, by nature, are extremely long term and go beyond the purview of the traditional policymaking apparatus.
- U.S. policymakers should think ahead and anticipate potential reform-promoting opportunities. Specifically, they should look for milestone events, such as elections or succession scenarios, and devise policy options that exploit these potential openings for reform when they occur. For example, the Egyptian government will be holding presidential elections in the fall of 2005. The United States should strongly urge the Egyptian government to ensure that elections are free and fair and to allow international observers. Furthermore, both Egypt and Saudi Arabia, pivotal states in the region, will undergo leadership successions in the near to medium term. U.S. policymakers should explore options for ensuring that these transitions—to the extent possible—result in more open political systems.
- Finally, at a strategic level, U.S. policymakers need to reconcile U.S. counterterrorism policies with the goals of democracy promotion in the region. To date, regimes in the region are sent mixed messages. They are both asked to reform and to cooperate in the war on terror. A successful U.S. policy for promoting reform in the region must answer the vexing question of how to nurture civil society while guarding against extremism. In this regard, a comprehensive Helsinki-type process (the early inspiration for the Broader Middle East Initiative) in which political, economic, and security issues are linked and addressed in a coordinated fashion may offer a promising approach.



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