

Reform and reformulating

Some of the details of America's new initiative for a more democratic Middle East emerged last week. **Gamal Essam El-Din** reports on the lukewarm reaction in official circles

The sudden appearance of the "Greater Middle East" initiative -- an American-driven, European-supported plan to reform the Arab and Islamic worlds and integrate them within a Western security umbrella -- has inspired concern and anger, as well as a generally dismissive response from Egyptian government, ruling party and opposition figures.

The idea first came into public view during last month's World Economic Forum in Davos, when US Vice President Dick Cheney called on Europe to join the US in a "forward strategy for freedom" that "commits us to support those who work and sacrifice for reform across the greater Middle East. America's democratic friends and allies in Europe and everywhere," Cheney said, should make joining this effort a top priority.

The genesis of the idea, according to Western commentators, was the US administration's post-11 September recognition that rampant and deep-rooted authoritarian and dictatorial practices in the Middle East are two of the major causes of terrorism. The plan, they said, also seemed to correspond to the neo-conservative view that reforming the Arab world would somehow facilitate a solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict.

In January, American and European officials met in Washington to work out the project's details. EU diplomats said the meeting clarified an ambitious post-Iraq war idea being debated by the US administration. The complete details, they told the press, would be unveiled this summer at a series of NATO, Group of Eight and US-EU summits in June.

On 7 February, German Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer said the US-EU initiative was based on linking the existing NATO Mediterranean dialogue with the European Union's Barcelona process; the former includes Israel, Egypt, Jordan and four North African states, while the latter adds Syria and Lebanon to the mix. Fischer said NATO would offer a security partnership, while the Barcelona process is supposed to lay the foundation for an economic partnership and a free trade area beginning in 2010.

By 12 February, German ambassador to Cairo Martin Cobler had given Osama El-Baz, President Hosni Mubarak's chief political adviser, a copy of the new US-EU transatlantic initiative for the greater Middle East.

Cobler told reporters the initiative aimed at securing a full partnership between the transatlantic coalition and the greater Middle East, in light of US and European consensus that reforming the Middle East must be a top priority "because reform is the basic measure required for uprooting terrorism, which is a danger to both the West and the Arab world".

To achieve this objective, Cobler said the initiative would attempt to adopt recommendations made by two recent United Nations human development reports on the Arab world. These reports, he said, discuss educational reform programmes, democratisation and human rights schemes, as well as the need to strengthen the region's entrepreneurial and economic capabilities.

Although the initiative's objectives appear noble, the initial Egyptian reaction has been less than enthusiastic. Distrust of US intentions is a major factor, as is most senior Egyptian and Arab politicians' conviction that solving the Arab-Israeli conflict must come before reforming the Arab world. "The problem," said Mohamed Abdallah, the former head of parliament's foreign affairs committee, "is that the Bush administration has a stubborn conviction that political reform in the Arab world will naturally lead to eradicating terrorism and solving the Arab-Israeli conflict." Abdallah, a senior member of the ruling National Democratic Party (NDP), said that

was the wrong approach. "The new so-called greater Middle East initiative is a smoke screen," he told *Al-Ahram Weekly*. "The Bush administration's talk of peace, democracy and freedom in the Arab world will be pointless as long as Israelis and Palestinians remain committed to slaughtering each other every day."

Without a serious resolution of the Arab- Israeli conflict, said Ahmed Abu Zeid, chairman of parliament's Arab affairs committee, "progress with wider Middle East initiatives is destined to grind to a halt." The problem is that the US -- and the West in general -- believes that Israel is a democratic society and that it should not be pressured as part of solving its conflict with the Arabs. Meanwhile, the West sees the Arab world as the world's hotbed of authoritarianism, corruption, terrorism and economic failure. They think the Arab world must first be reformed before a solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict can be found.

"We don't deny that the Arab world is still a long way from being a complete democracy," Abu Zeid said, "but we think it is the conflict with Israel that basically breeds terrorism and undemocratic politics."

Abdellah said the US probably asked for Europe's backing for the initiative "because it thinks that Europe's positive ties with the Arab world will help market the idea here".

On 12 February, Foreign Minister Ahmed Maher said, "reform must come from within the Arab world." Describing the initiative as being more about "how Western nations can help the Arab world achieve reforms" than "about establishing a Middle East axis", Maher said, "the democratic achievements embraced by Egypt ... outweigh those adopted by the US initiative." The foreign minister listed democratic reform, women's emancipation and human rights, and educational reform as examples.

Opposition figures interviewed by the *Weekly* agreed that political reform must come from within. They argued, however, that the ruling party was not doing enough to achieve this. "The more the NDP drags its feet on real political reform," said Wafdist journalist Gamal Badawi, "the more it will fall under more embarrassing American pressure to do so."

Leftist Tagammu Party Secretary-General Hussein Abdel-Razeq said Egypt was destined to feel even more Western pressure to move towards democratic reform if George Bush remains in office. NDP officials, Abdel- Razeq said, think the current US drive for democratisation is mere Bush propaganda during a US presidential election year.

"Like many Arab countries," Abdel-Razeq said, "Egypt is doing its best to appease the US in several areas, but not [when it comes to] democratisation. Moving in this critical area is very dangerous to a regime that thinks stability must be maintained at any expense." Abdel-Razeq cited NDP Secretary-General Safwat El-Sherif's recent announcement that "amending the constitution is not on the agenda of any political reform in Egypt" as a sign of the party's chronic indifference to domestic calls for democratisation.

Gamal Mubarak, the 40-year-old son of President Mubarak and chairman of the NDP's influential Policy Secretariat, said on 11 February that, "the issues of reform in Egypt and the entire region are currently the focus of international spotlight." Arguing that the NDP must work towards opening Egypt up to the outside world, Gamal Mubarak wondered why "the opposition is alleging that the NDP is not serious about political reform." He said the party truly believed in reform, and hoped that the opposition "would positively respond" to that.

It didn't look like they would. According to Wafd Party chairman No'man Gomaa, Egypt would be unable to make real democratic progress "as long as the president of the republic is the head of the ruling party and the president's son is the chairman of the ruling party's most influential secretariat." Badawi, meanwhile, called the positive announcements made by NDP officials a "form of self-deceit for which they will surely pay a dear price some day".

Another opposition figure, who requested anonymity, said he supports what America is doing. "Sadly enough, it was only this kind of pressure that forced the NDP to finally relinquish its 22 years of stubborn refusal to embrace any kind of political reform, establish a human rights council and allow a remarkable amount of press freedom."

Many also see the Greater Middle East initiative as a furtive method of imposing American and Israeli control on the region. Badawi said it was "clearly aimed at re- drawing the Middle East map in favor of American and Israeli hegemony".

During a visit to Cairo last week Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Al-Hariri said he told President Hosni Mubarak and Arab League Secretary-General Amr Moussa that the initiative "must be seriously discussed by Arab leaders during the coming Arab summit", which is scheduled for next month in Tunisia.

<http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2004/678/eg3.htm>