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A Forum without a Future?

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U.S. secretary of state Condoleezza Rice has decided to skip the Forum for the Future in Abu Dhabi this weekend, a move that will deepen concerns surrounding the Bush administration's Broader Middle East and North Africa (BMENA) Initiative. Although Deputy Secretary John Negroponte will attend the forum -- an annual meeting of G-8 and Middle East foreign ministers -- Rice's absence will signal waning American interest in the region's political and economic reform, and will probably cause other ministers to stay home. Additionally, her absence may fuel ongoing speculation that the initiative will not survive this administration. Rather than letting the initiative fall into disuse, the next president needs to reinvent and reinvigorate this multilateral effort to accelerate badly needed reform. This endeavor will be especially important for countries trying to survive the revisionist challenge from Iran and its proxies.

Background

The United States launched the BMENA Initiative during its 2004 G-8 presidency as a means of turning President Bush's "forward strategy of freedom" into reality. Washington produced a working paper that suggested the G-8 create a "Greater Middle East Initiative," "agree on common reform priorities" toward the region, and commit "to promoting democracy and good governance, building a knowledge society, and expanding economic opportunities." Each priority was drawn directly from the UN Development Program's 2002 Arab Human Development Report and included a number of G-8 member projects.

Although the strategy was never an easy sell, the paper's leak to the Arab press produced a firestorm, and the initiative nearly aborted. Regional governments were furious at the United States for suggesting a cooperative approach that had no Arab input. Regional leaders also feared that they were being targeted for soft regime change, since the nongovernmental sector played a critical role in the plan. Furthermore, it appeared to them the United States was undercutting the Arab League by creating an alternative structure.

The paper also disturbed the Europeans. From their perspective, Washington was taking Europe's ten-year-old modernization process of the Maghreb -- Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia -- for granted. The idea of coordinating with the United States, which had dedicated fewer resources to the problem and whose image in the region was much worse than their own, was also anathema. Ultimately, the furor required high-level U.S. diplomacy to preserve the initiative, eventually producing only grudging acquiescence from the G-8 and many BMENA countries.

In December 2004, the first Forum for the Future was held in Rabat, Morocco, while subsequent forums have been in Bahrain (2005) and Jordan (2006). Although the 2007 forum in Yemen was canceled at the last minute due to security concerns, many BMENA-related activities took place that year under Germany's G-8 presidency.

BMENA since 2004

In many ways, the BMENA Initiative never fully recovered from the stigma of being a Bush

administration-led effort, despite U.S. efforts to assuage the initial concerns of regional and G-8 governments. To secure cooperation, the United States agreed to change the name of the initiative, recognize the need for "regional stability," and acknowledge the importance of resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. It also agreed to emphasize economic over political reform. These changes helped to secure the participation of France, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt for the first forum, but did little to build momentum for the broader initiative. In fact, since the Bahrain gathering in 2005, interest in the BMENA Initiative as a whole has waned on all fronts. Regional governments have constantly complained that G-8 nations and the oil-rich Gulf states have not made sufficient resources available. Over the years, Europeans have guarded against too much "cooperation," choosing instead to emphasize concepts such as "complementarity."

Although Washington has continued to push the initiative, its efforts have been halfhearted. An undersecretary once led the initiative, but now a deputy assistant secretary drives the process. High-level political attention also has drifted to other priorities, particularly the renewed peace process and Iran's nuclear program. In addition, new structures such as the Gulf Cooperative Council (GCC)+3+1 -- the GCC plus Egypt, Jordan, Iraq, and the United States -- have supplanted BMENA as Secretary Rice's preferred framework for political and security discussions.

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Despite the negativity and lack of initiative surrounding the project, the next U.S. administration should continue the BMENA Initiative for two reasons. The first is straightforward: a Middle East forum that includes regional governments and the G-8, and that discusses political and economic reform issues, is critical to long-term regional security and essential to defeating Iran and its proxies. The BMENA framework -- if reimagined and reenergized -- could create an alternative narrative by demonstrating that G-8 and Middle East governments are partnering together to achieve benefits for the region.

The second reason is that the Initiative expands the role of business and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in the reform process. The G-8 has insisted that NGOs actively contribute to the ministerial meetings. As a result, the number of NGOs involved has expanded exponentially since 2004; nearly 140 are expected to participate this year.

For the initiative to achieve full potential, however, its image needs to change. Despite the current economic crisis, both the oil-rich states and the G-8 need to invest in this project over the long term to demonstrate that this "talk shop" produces results. Otherwise, the extremist narrative -- that partnership with the West achieves nothing but autocracy -- will be enforced. In addition, the initiative should become a formalized structure, something similar to the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation model.

Finally, the next administration should consider making the BMENA Initiative resemble the Cold War-era Helsinki Process, so that civil society, as well as the private sector, can leverage for real change. During the Cold War, the so-called Third Basket of the Helsinki Process, which was devoted to cooperation in humanitarian efforts, helped to weaken Soviet tyranny. But what attracted the USSR to the process were the other baskets, particularly the security basket, an issue that the United States has been disinclined to include into the BMENA process.

Conclusion

The BMENA Initiative has failed to meet its potential, and this year's forum might be the last -- an eventuality that few would mourn. Nonetheless, the initiative has demonstrated some utility and provided a unique platform to address many of the region's ills. As such, the next president needs to use it in a way that its creators, including Secretary Rice, never did.

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