

# State Department Document Reveals Shaping of Arab World ‘Civil Society’

by George Canning

June 4—In a May 28 speech at Harvard University, U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Samantha Power repeated the now-famous (apocryphal) story of the “Arab Spring” having begun when a Tunisian street vendor, despairing of any change in the oppression by his government, set himself on fire. This, the story goes, triggered an uprising by the Tunisian people which deposed a dictator and created a new constitution, “which recognizes fundamental freedoms and the separation of powers,” and respects the rights of women and religious minorities. “Yet,” Power continued, “it would be a mistake to look at this achievement as the work of Tunisia’s leaders alone. It was the Tunisian people, backed by human rights defenders, civil society groups, a vibrant press, NGOs, and so many others, who pressed these new leaders to reach such a compromise.” Moments later, she said, “President Obama has instructed all his diplomats to make supporting civil society an integral part of American foreign policy—to support the change-makers who are on the front lines of the struggle for universal rights.”

But that’s not the entire story. A document recently released by the U.S. State Department under the Freedom of Information Act reveals a U.S. Government (USG) program to exercise funding and organizational control over “civil society” organizations and “non-governmental organizations” in the Middle East and



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*UN Ambassador Samantha Power spilled the beans in a recent speech at Harvard University: “President Obama has instructed all his diplomats to make supporting civil society an integral part of American foreign policy—to support the change-makers who are on the front lines of the struggle for universal rights.”*

North Africa (MENA) region. The document, dated Oct. 22, 2010, was written months before the Tunisian events. At the time, a U.S. National Security Council team, including Samantha Power, was reshaping U.S. MENA policy. The inter-agency policy-making coordinated by the NSC team had been mandated by Presidential Study Directive 11 issued by President Obama, reportedly in August 2010.<sup>1</sup> E-mails released by the State Department make reference to working papers bearing computer-file names such as “PSD ME Political Reform”; some of the e-mails refer to an “NSC Arab Political Reform Paper.”

## A ‘Region-Wide Tool’

The State Department document, titled “Middle-East Partnership Initiative Overview,” says in its opening paragraph that “MEPI has evolved from its origins in 2002 into a flexible, region-wide tool for direct support to indigenous civil society that main-

1. Presidential Study Directive-11 (PSD-11) itself, the center of the FOIA request, has been entirely withheld by the State Department. The apparatus of “humanitarian interventionists” and “democracy promoters” runs seamlessly from Bush through Obama. For example, Amb. William B. Taylor is President Obama’s chief of the Office of Special Coordinator for Middle East Transitions, the man in charge of all of the “color revolutions” in the MENA region. From 2006-09, he was President Bush’s ambassador to Ukraine, where he cut his teeth on the first phase of the “Orange Revolution.”

RELEASED IN FULL

**Middle East Partnership Initiative  
Overview  
October 22, 2010**

The Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI) is a regional program that empowers citizens in the Middle East and North Africa to develop more pluralistic, participatory, and prosperous societies. As the figures in this overview illustrate, MEPI has evolved from its origins in 2002 into a flexible, region-wide tool for direct support to indigenous civil society that mainstreams that support into the daily business of USG diplomacy in the region.

MEPI engages all the countries of the NEA region except Iran. In the seven of NEA's eighteen countries and territories with USAID missions, country-level discussions and communication between MEPI and USAID in Washington ensure that programming efforts are integrated and complementary.

**Mission & Goals**

MEPI's mission is to partner with citizens of the region in helping them create more pluralistic, participatory, and prosperous societies throughout the region. We define these goals as:

*This unpublished State Department Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI) report was secured through an FOIA lawsuit by EIR. It boldly states: "MEPI's mission is to partner with citizens of the region in helping them create more pluralistic, participatory, and prosperous societies throughout the region."*

streams that support into the daily business of USG diplomacy in the region." The document goes on to say that "MEPI's mission is to partner with citizens of the region in helping them create more pluralistic, participatory, and prosperous societies throughout the region."

The paper describes MEPI's three principal mechanisms:

- "MEPI's region-wide and multi-country programming builds networks of reformers to learn from and support one another, and to catalyze progressive change in the region. . . .

- "MEPI's Local Grants provide direct support to indigenous civil groups, and now represent more than half of MEPI's projects. Local Grant proposals are solicited by each NEA [Near Eastern Affairs] embassy and reviewed by one of MEPI's Regional Offices. The Regional Office handles grant management, while an embassy officer serves as the direct liaison to the local grantee. . . .

- "MEPI's country-specific projects are designed to respond to local developments and local needs, as identified by our embassies, local reformers, and our own field analysis. Political developments in a country may produce new opportunities or challenges *for USG policy goals* and MEPI will shift funds to respond to these needs" (emphasis added).

A section of the 2010 paper addresses "MEPI's Unique Features." These include:

- "MEPI mainstreams a reform agenda into the daily work of U.S. diplomacy. . . .

- "MEPI is not a government-to-government assistance program." The paper explains that even though some projects may have local government participation, "*MEPI works primarily with civil society, through NGO implementers based in the United States and in the region.* MEPI does not provide funds to foreign governments, and does not negotiate bilateral assistance programs. . . [emphasis added].

- "MEPI's structure lends unique flexibility to respond to on-the-ground realities. MEPI's region-wide scope, its integration into the NEA [Near Eastern Affairs] Bureau, and its in-house grants management enable it to respond swiftly to emerging challenges or opportunities. . . ."

Interestingly, one of MEPI's two regional offices is or was located in Tunis.

So, is there anything wrong with this program, which advertises itself as bringing the blessings of democracy to the benighted MENA region?<sup>2</sup> Well, yes.

What State's program is about, is shaping the internal affairs of other sovereign nations. It is one thing for a nation's citizens and organizations to run political and social welfare institutions to shape the destiny of their society. It is quite something else, for the State Department—acting primarily *for the benefit of the United States* ("new opportunities or challenges for USG policy goals," as the 2010 paper put it) to use MENA nations' citizens to shape those nations' destinies. In es-

2. Aside from the principles involved, it is useful to look at the actual outcomes of State's civic society/NGO operations. The worthy-sounding goals announced in the 2010 paper are of course public relations sales points, which may or may not be entirely true. In Egypt, Libya, and Syria, those operations opened the door to chaos at the hands of the Muslim Brotherhood, al-Qaeda, and Islamist militias—all of whom seek the very antithesis of "pluralistic" and "participatory" societies. As for "prosperous" societies, the State Department's view of "reform" and the road to prosperity is certainly open to question. After State's civil society/NGO networks launched the overthrow of the democratically elected Ukrainian government which had resisted the European Union's economic demands, Assistant Secretary of State Victoria Nuland enthusiastically told a Senate subcommittee that the new Ukrainian legislature had "passed landmark anti-corruption measures, deficit reduction measures, and taken very difficult steps to reform the energy sector. Many of these will be painful to the Ukrainian people, but they're absolutely necessary. . . ." State's view of democracy clearly has its limits.

in nearly every NEA embassy. MEPI's embassy-implemented local grants also broaden our diplomats' engagement with their host societies and improve their understanding of local political dynamics.

**MEPI is not a government-to-government assistance program.** Although some of MEPI's projects engage government participants or government institutions, MEPI works primarily with civil society, through NGO implementers based in the United States and in the region. MEPI does not provide funds to foreign governments, and does not negotiate bilateral assistance agreements. As a regional program, MEPI can shift funds across countries and to new issue-areas as needed.

**MEPI's structure lends unique flexibility to respond to on-the-ground realities.** MEPI's region-wide scope, its integration into the NEA Bureau, and its in-house grants management enable it to respond swiftly to emerging challenges or opportunities, as well as to maximize synergy among programs and participants. Leveraging our embassies' staffs and tightly integrating its own programming and grant operations allows MEPI to set up new projects in a matter of weeks when the need presents. MEPI's capacity for nimble response derives from its ability to work with and

*The highlighted paragraph from page 3 of the report reveals that: "MEPI is not a government-to-government assistance program," that instead, it "works primarily with civil society, through NGO implementers based in the United States and in the region."*

sence, this is the time-honored, great-power practice of shaping the concepts and practices of other nations' citizens and institutions—beginning, no doubt, with grant applicants' creating their programs in conformance with the State Department's view of the world—to the ultimate goal that the people who will be running those other nations in the future, will look to State in making their nation's policy.

### Neo-Wilsonian Hypocrisy

Of course, such activity in America by other countries—particularly those with political goals adverse to the U.S. government—is, quite properly, forbidden. During the Cold War, allegations that Americans with political allegiance to the Soviet Union were employed in the State Department and other U.S. policy agencies were the basis for the Truman Administration's implementing the conservative Republicans' demands for abusive investigation of government employees. Hollywood, a center for shaping Americans' views of the world, found its writers, directors, and actors subject to the same kind of "red hunt." And the movement to claim full civil rights for African-American citizens, and their leaders such as Martin Luther King, were subjected to similar scrutiny by the FBI and Congressional committees based on allegations of Soviet influence.

This is not to say that those U.S. government actions, or the allegations on which they were based, generally had any merit, or were done in good faith. But they all occurred on the undisputed premise that it was impermissible for the Soviet Union to shape America's political and social development for the benefit of Soviet foreign policy goals.

In the present day, U.S. law continues to quite properly forbid contributions to Federal political campaigns by foreign nationals. Further, any person who is acting in a political or quasi-political capacity in America (e.g., lobbying) and promoting the interests of a foreign nation is required to register as a "foreign agent" of that nation.

Yet State Department officials regularly pontificate

about other nations' "regulatory threats" to "civil society," for example, by instituting laws which "restrict the ability of NGOs or activists to operate and to act freely in the manner they would like."<sup>3</sup> And why should these nations not regulate their "civil society" organizations, so long as the U.S. State Department persists in shaping their activity? This is, after all, the same old "neo-Wilsonian" hypocrisy which spouts high-minded declarations and prescriptions for other countries, but in the final analysis, promotes only the interests of colonialism. If the worthy goals purportedly sought by State through the MEPI and similar efforts are in the interest of the foreign states and their societies—as they truly appear to be—why not engage those governments in diplomacy (which after all is the State Department's job) to persuade them and assist them to pursue those worthy goals in their own nations' interest?

In point of fact, in the immediate aftermath of the Sept. 11, 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, the successive U.S. administrations of George W. Bush/Dick Cheney and Barack Obama have adopted a policy of promoting "color revolutions" in a number of targeted nations, using the pretense of "promoting democracy" and "atrocities prevention" to enact regime-change. The unbroken continuity from Bush through Obama has led to American interventions around the globe, generally leading to instability, the spread of terrorism, and economic collapse.

3. This formulation was by the Secretary of State's Senior Advisor for Civil Society and Emerging Democracies Tomica Tillmann, in a 2011 State Department press conference. Tillman was described by Samantha Power in an 2014 speech at the Ford Foundation (bemoaning restrictions on civil society) as "our civil society champion at the State Department."