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“Find Your Voice” A Cross-Cultural Forum on Political Participation and Civic Activism

Rabat, Morocco
April 25-26, 2008

Conference Report

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

On April 25-26, 2008, 23 American and 23 Moroccan students and young professionals came together in Rabat to explore pathways to youth empowerment through political participation, civil society activism, media and blogging. The conference was organized by Americans for Informed Democracy (AID), the Project on Middle East Democracy (POMED), and the Institut National de la Jeunesse et la Démocratie (INJD), an initiative under the Moroccan Ministry of Youth and Sports. Funding was generously provided by the Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI).



The two-day conference featured four panels which covered opportunities for youth in political parties, the role of civil society, media and democracy, and expression through blogging and citizen journalism. Each panel was followed by a series of small discussion groups in English, French and Arabic in which participants shared their ideas on ways to mobilize youth for change in both the U.S. and Morocco. Through these exchanges, participants formed policy recommendations which they ratified at the end of the conference.

Conference speakers represented a wide array of backgrounds; most were accomplished young activists in their respective fields. Among them were Scott Goodstein, the director of New Media for the Barack Obama presidential campaign; Mbarka Bouaida, the youngest female member of the Moroccan Parliament; Houda Filali-Ansary, political correspondent for *La Vie Eco*; David Ranz, Press Attaché at the U.S. Embassy in Rabat;

Mark Parkison, Team Leader for Democracy and Governance programs at USAID Morocco; Gérard Latulippe, Representative of the Maghreb for the National Democratic Institute (NDI); and Sarah Zaimi, a blogger with the Middle East Youth Initiative.

The Moroccans and Americans were treated to a host of social activities, including a reception sponsored by the Political Section of the U.S. Embassy. These interactions formed the basis for participants to work together in a series of follow-up activities planned for the coming months, including op-ed exchanges, blogging workshops, and mobilization campaigns. In addition, one American participant and one Moroccan participant were selected to present the conference's policy recommendations to legislators, policymakers and academics in Washington, D.C.

PARTICIPANTS

The 23 American participants included a number of undergraduate students participating in study abroad programs in Morocco. These students hailed from universities such as Washington University in St. Louis, Reed College, Brown University, Swarthmore College, the University of Arizona, Georgetown University, Ithaca College, and Macalester College. Other American participants included an editor from *Executive Magazine*, a former Fulbright Scholar, a lawyer teaching at a local university, young professionals working at various NGOs, and scholars spending a year on fellowships in Morocco. Of the American participants, 15 were women and 8 were men.



Moroccan participants included young professionals and students from a wide variety of fields. Journalists from Moroccan media bodies such as the Medi-1 Sat channel and the Moroccan bloggers union were present, as were representatives of several NGOs, such as Amideast and Association Action Jeunesse Maroc. A former Fulbright Scholar currently working at the Moroccan Fulbright Commission participated, as did an English teacher active in civil society. Several young political party representatives from the conference's local partner organization, l'Institut National de la Jeunesse et de la Démocratie, also participated. Additionally, several Moroccan universities were represented, included the English-language Al Akhawayn University, Université Mohammed V, l'Ecole Nationale d'Architecture, and l'Ecole Nationale de l'Industrie Minérale. The Moroccan participants consisted of 7 women and 16 men.

OPENING REMARKS

Planning committee member Jane Farrington welcomed participants, speakers and guests to the second annual AID-POMED conference in Rabat, explaining the goals of the conference and introducing each opening speaker. Saad Sahli of the Institut National de la Jeunesse et la Démocratie (INJD) then took the floor, giving an overview of the Institute and its mission to garner youth participation in politics while fostering a tolerance for differences among its members.

Sahli was followed by Vicente Garcia, the Program Director for Peace and Security for Americans for Informed Democracy (AID), who spoke about AID's efforts to empower young people and "be the space for dialogue." Mohammed Loraoui, Associate Director of Dialogue Programs for the Project on Middle East Democracy (POMED), then briefly discussed POMED and the Egypt and Jordan conferences, situating the Morocco event in the larger framework of dialogues taking place between Americans and their peers throughout the MENA region. Finally, Sarah Zaimi of the Middle East Youth Initiative spoke about the role of follow-up after the conference.



PANEL ONE: Opportunities for Youth in Political Parties

- Moderator: Chama EL BOUSSERGHINI, Economist Intelligence Unit
- Gerard LATULIPPE, Resident Director, NDI Morocco
- Scott GOODSTEIN, Obama for America and Catalyst Campaigns
- Mbarka BOUAIDA, Member of Parliament
- Younes FOUJIL, Rights and Democracy Network

Chama El Bousserghini introduced the speakers describing how each would offer their own unique experiences concerning both reasons for and against youth participation in political parties. She highlighted some gloomy statistics regarding youth's lack of interest in political parties and challenged the speakers to make their case for ways to better integrate youth within parties.

Gérard Latulippe started by elaborating on the lack of trust and identification of youth with political parties. He pointed out that youth make up half of the voting population yet "95% of youth have no interest in any political party." Latulippe related this divide to the larger issue of youth not being given any opportunities or agency as party members or citizens. Political parties tend to see youth as a threat to the old guard's lock on decision-making. Furthermore, youth face a tougher time taking initiative in Morocco due to their subordinate role. Rather than challenging their elders, as youth may do in other countries, Moroccan youth are taught to acquiesce, as respect and opportunities are realized through

seniority, not initiative. According to Latulippe, the lack of space for youth to get engaged and the lack of any real role model has left them without an ideology of mobilization.

Scott Goodstein touched on the role of youth in parties in America, noting that the party system has come full circle to embrace youth wanting to get involved. He stressed how the internet has dramatically increased the value of youth in political organizing, as they represent the bearers of the new information age. Youth are also empowered for having lots of time and manpower—two essential components of a campaign. Goodstein stressed that this power of young people to harness new technologies made it an exciting time to be young and involved in politics, and suggested that similar opportunities may arise for youth in Morocco when parties begin to harness the internet more.

Mbarka Bouaida entered politics only one year ago and quickly became the youngest woman serving in Parliament. Her interest in politics was renewed when she attended the National Rally for Independents (RNI) spring conference and saw the internal renewal going on within the party. Despite these positive developments, however, she called on parties to give youth more openings. She also criticized parliamentarians for being too distracted and disinterested to carry out their role of monitoring the government. Bouaida challenged parties to enter into the university setting and develop a concrete strategy for targeting youth, concluding that the 2009 municipal elections would be a great opportunity for parties to show that they take the concerns of youth seriously.



Younes Foudil wrapped up the panel by elaborating on the arguments for the lack of participation of youth within political parties. After giving a brief historical overview of political party formation, Foudil highlighted how high illiteracy rates and inadequate civic education programs ensure that political involvement remains the preoccupation of a small elite. He also lamented the old age of party leaders, as they tend to be self-interested and overly concerned about their party's legacy to tolerate a leadership renewal which would bring fresh faces and ideas into the picture.

PANEL TWO: The Role of Civil Society

- Moderator: Manal ELATTIR, MEPI Alumni Coordinator for Morocco
- Abdelfattah EL BELAMACHI, International Affairs Researcher
- Vicente GARCIA, Americans for Informed Democracy

- Abdelfattah AL IDRISSE, Amal Salé and UNDP
- Laila HAMILI, Former Women’s Outreach Director, *Daba 2007*

Abdelfattah El Belamachi focused his address on the role of civil society within a state, its goals with respect to development, and how it translates as a concept to the local level. By putting stress on the openness of civil society as a benchmark of democratic development, he discussed the challenges to the strength of civil society in countries with undeveloped governments. In conclusion, Belamachi highlighted the importance of cooperation between civil society and other spheres in the age of globalization, giving examples of global forces that affect the development of civil society.

Vicente Garcia gave a more personalized presentation about his own accomplishments as a representative of AID, noting which strategies worked best for him to get youth involved in campaigns for change. He emphasized the role of awareness campaigns using pop culture, media, art and music to attract youth’s attention to more serious issues. By fundraising in a unique way or holding a public conference, one is able to attract the attention necessary to build support for a particular cause. Garcia remarked that in order to affect non-institutional change at the local or national level, you have to change the minds of people first. He concluded on a confident note that the opportunities are endless, “youth just need the motivation to take the next step.”

Abdelfattah Al Idrissi, next, presented his experiences as a grassroots organizer working with underprivileged children. The most rewarding part of his associational work has been working with youth, helping them develop personal skills that allow them to be better citizens. Idrissi harped on the sharp divides that exist in Morocco, with the majority of the population living in poor neighborhoods with an array of social and economic

problems. Given the large percentage of Moroccans who are in need, “civil society and volunteerism are integral to building the country.” He concluded on a poignant note, saying that the vibrancy of Morocco’s development and advocacy associations stems from the value people find in helping others.



Laila Hamili spoke about her work for *Daba 2007*, an

association created before the 2007 legislative elections to “invigorate the electoral system” and encourage Moroccans to get out and vote. Recognizing the strained relationship between youth and politics, the goal of *Daba 2007* was to increase participation rates of youth so that they could integrate into the political system and feel as though they are stakeholders in their country’s future.

Despite being challenged by participants based on the perceived failure of Daba 2007 to bring Moroccans to the polls, Hamili fired back, writing off the low participation as indicative of larger, systemic communication problems between parties and citizens. In the end, the fundamental question was the concept of citizenship, and how Moroccans fail to see themselves as having civic duties due to the nature of the political system. Hamili concluded that in several areas Daba 2007 was successful, such as its accomplishment of signing local partnerships with over 50 associations nationwide. Laying the groundwork for long-term change remains the best remedy to hasty, unsuccessful efforts at instilling civic responsibility overnight.

PANEL THREE: Media: Pick your Medium

- Moderator: David RANZ, Information Officer at American Embassy Rabat
- Ahmed HIDASS, Professor at l'Institut Supérieur de l'Information et de la Communication
- John THORNE, Former North Africa Correspondent for the Associated Press
- Houda FILALI ANSARY, Political Correspondent for La Vie Eco
- Safi NACIRI, Radio "Zaman Assiyasa"

David Ranz opened the third panel on mainstream media and its influence on youth by giving a brief overview of the role of media in Morocco. He touched on the remarkable liberalization of Moroccan press over the past ten years, highlighting the accomplishments of the independent media while underlying the areas where improvements should be made. Before introducing the speakers, Ranz discussed the limits that still exist for the media; namely, the areas or “red lines” that cannot be questioned, such as Islam, the royal family, and Morocco’s territorial sovereignty.

Ahmed Hidass spoke next on broadcast media and shared some of the findings from his published work on satellite television in the Arab world. He spoke of strategies of regulation, territorial objectives and meeting standards of censorship. As emerging satellite channels defy pre-defined censorship roles, repercussions will be seen at the state level. Elaborating on the proliferation of news and entertainment Arabic satellite television, as well as the increased access to satellite TV throughout the region, Hidass concluded that it will surely serve as one of the most predominant voices speaking to youth for the foreseeable future.



John Thorne continued the discussion with a more personal account of his experience in journalism, and how he came to be an international correspondent. Deciding to leave the small West Coast island where he grew up, Thorne traveled the world and tried to launch a freelance career in the process. Although he was eventually successful, he spoke about all the failures along the way and the constant struggle to get published and make it as a credible freelancer. His story served as a great example for participants of the hard work and dedication it takes to reach a goal. Thorne also explained the importance of seeing both sides of any situation and how journalism plays an important role in allowing people to make informed decisions.

Houda Filali Ansary described the current transformation of the press and spoke of the constant limitations and corruption within the world of written press. She touched on the weak readership in Morocco, which counts only 300,000 daily readers. This number is embarrassingly smaller, in relative terms, than Morocco's closest neighbors Algeria and Tunisia. Morocco's low readership is also compounded by the precarious situation that many journalists are in, whereby the lines of acceptable journalism are constantly in flux, resulting in a slew of lawsuits and cases brought against the nation's leading journalists and papers. She noted the lack of quality journalistic training and hands-on experience as an obstacle to journalists' ability to prove their bona fides and professionalism to the authorities. Finally, as one of the most accomplished journalists for her age, Ansary shared how she felt she had greater access as a female journalist in Morocco, as senior figures were more inclined to share information with her because they view women as more trustworthy than men.



Safi Naciri finished up the panel by speaking on the liberalization of media in Morocco. In the past, he described the media as being held hostage by the partisan press, whereby different political parties would use their papers as mouthpieces to attack each other. Over the decades, though, change has been felt, with the government becoming more of a manager over the press, instead of dictating the boundaries of its contents. This move has both encouraged and been strengthened by the rise of private media. Echoing Ansary, he also spoke of the dangers of the field of journalism being subject to misinformation and sensationalism due to the lack of professionalism and training. According to Naciri, there needs to be a more responsible code of conduct for journalists and more reporters who seek to “tell the story like it is.”

PANEL FOUR: Youth and Electronic Journalism

- Moderator: Mark PARKISON, Team Leader for Democracy & Governance, USAID Morocco
- Rachid JANKARI, Blogging expert
- Scott GOODSTEIN, Obama for America and Catalyst Campaigns
- Sarah ZAIMI, Middle East Youth Initiative
- Ayoub EL MOUZAINI, Chebab al Maghreb

Mark Parkison kicked off the fourth and final panel with an overview of citizen journalism in Morocco and the rise of alternative media, such as blogging, podcasting and electronic journalism. Drawing from his 25 years of experience in Morocco, he has



seen the development of the internet, its ability to reach the far corners of the world and the fact that it can encourage and enhance dialogue. In consideration of the emergence of web 2.0 in Morocco, the internet has become more interactive, with an explosion in the numbers of bloggers and webcasters. This has empowered citizen journalists with the potential to create a new arena for expression and engagement. Parkison mentioned, however, that the question of language was still an obstacle, as whether one blogs in French, Arabic or English has ramifications for the resonance of the message.

Rachid Jankari, a leading blogging expert in Morocco, started his presentation by remarking on the relative freedom of the press in Morocco, one of the most liberal in the Arab world. He continued with some statistics about the internet in Morocco, which arrived in 1995. He spoke about the myriad venues for web journalism, such as blogs, wiki, social networks, podcasts, and e-mail. These can all be used as methods to engage and empower youth in expressing their opinions while allowing them to report in real time what they are experiencing. He acknowledges that electronic journalism is a developing medium and that work needs to be done to standardize this outlet and garner respect for electronic journalists. All in all, this is an exciting time to enter into the electronic journalism world and there remains a lot of potential for developing this domain.



Scott Goodstein touched next on the important role blogs play in journalism, politics and even policy, describing how one American blogger found a presidential candidate's cell phone number and called him, after which the government changed the policy regarding

cell phone number access. He also spoke about the lack of uniform expectations for electronic journalists, saying that they are not held to the same ethical standards as written press and the idea of accountability is lacking. Goodstein concluded that “blogging is a powerful medium, but we need to demand quality and accountability, just like any other journalistic source.”

Sarah Zaimi took the floor next, speaking from the point of view of a “normal, young blogger.” She gave a more personal account of her own journey working as a journalist and then a blogger. Zaimi recalled how when she first enrolled in journalism school, she was told that it was a field for men and that she didn’t belong. It also became clear that in Morocco, comment was not free. These experiences taught her that if she was going to make her voice heard it would come from her own drive. At one point Zaimi stopped to asked the participants why people blog, “Is it out of narcissism, frustration or a desire to share experiences?” As for herself, she believes in the power of words and, together with the 20,000 bloggers in Morocco, hopes to educate and engage others.

Ayoub El Mouzaine touched on a plethora of topics, starting with the history of the internet in Morocco, followed by the role of language in electronic media and the sociology of journalism. According to El Mouzaine, blogging is a way to engage youth by giving them an outlet through which to express themselves. He talked about the potential of electronic journalism while also stating that these alternative journalists need to adhere to the same level of professionalism as print journalists.

SMALL GROUP DISCUSSIONS

Following each panel, the participants split into four groups to discuss the remarks made by the speakers as well as formulate policy recommendations. The groups were divided into English and French/Arabic.

Before beginning, each group selected a recorder who served as the group’s official rapporteur and representative. In addition, each group had a facilitator from the conference planning committee to lead each discussion, keeping the dialogue focused on the specific subject and guiding participants as they made recommendations. After each group discussion, the rapporteurs met to consolidate the recommendations, ensuring that all proposals were represented and presented in the clearest way possible. Ultimately, 33 recommendations were formulated, of which 13 were ratified.



The participants benefitted from lively debate as they mapped out pathways for more effective youth engagement and mobilization in the realms of political parties, civil society, media and blogging. Several of the panelists joined the group discussions, curious to engage the youth and listen to their proposals. Discussions on media, for example, were moderated by both Moroccan and American journalists from the region.

CLOSING REMARKS

To wrap up the recommendation process and bring the conference to a close, Vicente Garcia stressed again the role of AID as an open resource for youth looking to be more involved, and Mohammed Loraoui of POMED reiterated the broader importance of cross-cultural dialogue. Julie Lohela then thanked the Institut National de la Jeunesse et la Démocratie (INJD) for their hard work as one of the conference partners, along with AID and POMED, and for their commitment to open dialogue and youth involvement. Finally, she thanked the 46 participants for their active engagement in the panels, group discussions, recommendation process and cultural exchange aspect of the conference.

IMPLEMENTATION AND FOLLOWUP

This conference was the first step in building a network of youth leaders in both countries committed to working for change through blogging, politics, and civic activism. Just two weeks after the conference, participants had their first follow-up meeting to refine the policy recommendations that were ratified at the conference. This meeting was led by the



Moroccan and American representatives who were elected to present the recommendations to legislators and policymakers later this summer in Washington, D.C.

Future capacity building workshops are planned for the months ahead. They will focus on digital activism (podcasting, blogging, e-journalism) as well as investigative journalism and op-ed writing. Through video-conference and written exchanges, Moroccans and Americans will build on the relationships formed at the conference, challenging each other through ideas and addressing effective ways to work for change.

PRESS COVERAGE

The conference received strong press coverage, appearing on the evening news program of state-run SNRT television (Channel 1), SNRT radio, and Al Jazeera. There were several journalists from leading publications as well.

The state-run SNRT television channel carried a two-minute segment on the conference highlighting the efforts of young Moroccans and Americans coming together for dialogue. The segment featured interviews with POMED Policy Associate James Liddell, AID Peace and Security Director Vicente Garcia, and INJD representative Abdullah Chouikh. SNRT radio also carried a piece on the conference throughout the day with other interviews. To view the SNRT clip, please visit: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jTy_F6-jlvs



Al Jazeera television also carried a three-minute program on the conference Sunday, April 27, in the afternoon and during the evening Maghreb News Bulletin. The piece featured clips of several Moroccan and American participants walking throughout the ancient quarters of Rabat talking and sharing their views on the importance of dialogues and bridging misunderstandings.

The program featured an interview with NDI Director Gérard Latulippe as well as a segment with Mustapha El Khalfi, editor of Islamist daily *Attajdid*. The piece ended by stressing the limits of such initiatives as long as “policies that do not take into consideration the opinions of young people.” The entire program can be seen on-line at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m7LONwW-nWs&feature=related>



CONFERENCE PLANNING COMMITTEE

Abdellah Chouikh is the Secretary General and founding member of the youth section of the Alliance of Liberties (ADL) party. He also serves as a member of the party’s executive committee. Chouikh has been very active at the associational level as a member of both the Global Youth Action Network (GYAN) and World Youth Movement for Democracy. As a member of the National Institute for Youth and democracy (INJD) in

Morocco, he has played a leading role in organizing various activities and conferences for emerging political party leaders. Chouikh holds an engineering degree in information systems.

Fairouz El Hamdaoui is a member of Amal Sale Association where she teaches English to Executive Board members and coordinates sessions where American Fulbright Scholars come to share their research with association members. She is also a member of the Moroccan Association for Children in Need (AMESIP) where she teaches English to at-risk children. El Hamdaoui currently works with the Thaqafat Association which is based in Rabat's Center for Cross Cultural Learning. There she is in charge of placing foreign volunteers as well as supervising their work and orienting them to the cultural and developmental issues in Morocco.

Amine El Kabbaj is a resident program officer with National Democratic Institute's Rabat office, focusing on the Institute's parliamentary and political party programs in Morocco. Before joining NDI in 2006, Amine spent eight years in Canada pursuing his Bachelor's degree at the University of Sherbrooke and his Master's at the University of Ottawa, the latter of which included four years of experience as a teaching assistant. Amine has volunteered and/or interned in more than 10 different places in Morocco and abroad including at the UNDP, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *l'Economiste* newspaper, Climate Action Network-Maghreb and National Model United Nations Simulation. He is fluent in Arabic, English, French and Spanish, and has basic knowledge of German.

Jane Farrington graduated from Emory University in 2007 with High Honors in Interdisciplinary Studies and a minor in Arabic. At Emory, she spent semesters abroad in Cairo and Dakar, interned at the Carter Center, served as the Coordinator of the Atlanta Asylum Network, acted in and choreographed numerous plays, and completed an honors thesis on Arabic language education in Senegal. Since graduation, she has lived in Rabat, where she interned at the U.S. Embassy in Rabat and spent the 2007-08 academic year studying journalism as a Rotary Ambassadorial Scholar. Jane is originally from Walla Walla, Washington.

James Liddell currently serves as the Monitoring and Evaluation Coordinator for the National Democratic Institute in Morocco where he oversees evaluation, reporting and youth programming. Previously, he worked with the Public Affairs Sections of U.S. Embassies in Rabat, Morocco and Tunis, Tunisia where he tracked and analyzed press developments, participated in public diplomacy outreach activities, and worked on programs for the Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI). As a Policy Associate for the Project on Middle East Democracy (POMED), he has co-organized a series of Moroccan-American youth dialogue conferences and is currently the editor for the forthcoming Morocco country page. He received a B.A. in Political Science from Bates College where he wrote his senior thesis on "The Inclusion of Islamist Parties in Post-Conflict States." While at Bates, James studied abroad in Russia, France and the Balkans.

Julie Lohela graduated from Northwestern University in 2006 with a double major in Social Psychology and Communication Studies. She spent six months abroad in Paris,

was President of the Northwestern Rotaract Club, interned for Rotary International and was an active member of the Women's Ultimate Frisbee Club team. Upon graduation, she moved to the south of France where she taught English for a year. During the 2007-2008 year she studied journalism as a Rotary Ambassadorial Scholar in Rabat, Morocco and served as the intern for the United Nations Industrial Development Department. Julie hails most recently from Holland, Michigan.

Saad Sahli is a member of the Political Bureau of the Liberal Party (PL) and the founding president of the party's youth section. He has also been very active with the National Institute for Youth and Democracy (INJD) since 2006. A lawyer by training, Sahli has represented a number of media outlets including *Alhayat Alyaoumia*. He holds degrees in public law and administration from Mohammed V University in Rabat where he is currently a researcher.

PARTNERING ORGANIZATIONS

Americans for Informed Democracy (AID)

AID is a non-partisan organization that brings the world home through programming on more than 500 U.S. university campuses and in more than 10 countries. AID fulfills its mission by coordinating town hall meetings on America's role in the world, hosting leadership retreats, publishing opinion pieces and reports on issues of global importance, and providing workshops on civic engagement and advocacy. Through these efforts, AID seeks to build a new generation of globally conscious leaders who can shape an American foreign policy appropriate for our increasingly interdependent world.



National Institute for Youth and Democracy (INJD)



The National Institute for Youth and Democracy is an initiative launched in 2006 by the Moroccan Ministry of Youth and Sports to promote the education and introduction of youth to democracy. It also serves as an open education and training center for youth partisan organizations, with 18 secretaries general of parties' respective youth sections represented on the Administrative Counsel. Through round tables, seminars, workshops and study visits, the Institute seeks to expose youth to the existing opportunities for democratic political participation and encourage greater activism and initiative. A non-partisan institution, the INJD also instills a tolerance for different ideologies.

The Project on Middle East Democracy (POMED)

The Project on Middle East Democracy is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization dedicated to



examining the impact of American policy on political reform and democratization in the Middle East. Through dialogue, policy analysis, and advocacy, we hope to promote understanding of how genuine, authentic democracies can develop in the Middle East and how the U.S. can best support that process.

The Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI)

This project was funded, in part, through the U.S. Department of State, Bureau for Near Eastern Affairs, Office of Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI), under Grant S-NEATU-08-GR-R01. MEPI is a Presidential initiative founded to support economic, political and educational reform efforts in the Middle East and develop opportunity for all people of the region, especially women and youth. More information about MEPI can be found at www.MEPI.state.gov.

