

The logo for the Arab Reform Bulletin is a dark purple rectangular box. Inside the box, the words "Arab Reform Bulletin" are written in a gold, serif font at the top. Below this, the Arabic phrase "نشرة الإصلاح العربي" is written in a gold, Arabic script font.

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## **United States: The Bush Administration's Budget and Democracy in the Arab World**

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President George W. Bush submitted to the U.S. Congress in February his budget request for fiscal year 2009 (which runs from October 2008 to September 2009), the final such request of his eight-year tenure. This proposed budget is notable for increased funding for programs to support democracy, governance, and human rights—an apparent effort to cement the legacy of Bush's “freedom agenda” during his final year in office.

Throughout his two terms, President Bush has rhetorically stressed the importance of supporting democracy and human rights abroad, particularly in the Middle East. But policy has not always matched rhetoric, and his administration has come under fire for focusing too heavily on changing the region through military force in Iraq rather than utilizing the nonviolent policy tools available for supporting democracy. In last year's budget, many were disappointed to see small decreases in funding for democracy-related programs in Middle Eastern countries.

But Bush's latest and final budget request—unlike the one that preceded it—goes a long way toward living up to promises of prioritizing support for democracy abroad. Requested funds for programs in the Arab world that fall under the State Department heading of “Governing Justly and Democratically” were tripled to \$390 million from last year's appropriated level of \$132 million. While much of the increase (\$193 million) will go to programs in Iraq, the new request still increases funding to programs for the remaining Arab countries by more than 50 percent. The request includes significant increases for such programs in Mauritania, Morocco, the West Bank and Gaza, Yemen, and Algeria, and for all four programmatic areas: rule of law and human rights, good governance, political competition and consensus building, and civil society.

In addition to expanded funding for country-specific programs, the Bush administration is requesting a 75 percent increase for the Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI), from \$50 million to nearly \$87 million. This includes \$42 million for governance programs, \$16 million for education, and \$28.5 million for economic development. Particular areas of emphasis include

MEPI's small grants program for local civil society organizations and youth-targeted programming across the region. Syria, the only Arab country for which no direct funds are requested, is singled out as a country of particular focus for MEPI, which promises to "work to strengthen the fledgling civil society movement and democracy activists in Syria."

Despite the increases, there are still causes for concern in the budget request. All programs for democracy, governance, and civil society in Tunisia—a state whose autocratic leader recently celebrated twenty years in power and where freedoms have been increasingly curtailed—have been cut. Funding requests for democracy and governance programs in Lebanon were reduced across the board, despite the threat of the ongoing political crisis there. And military funding to authoritarian leaders with no strings attached still constitutes the largest sector of assistance headed to the region. But despite these weaknesses, the budget certainly represents a broad expansion of funding for a variety of programs for supporting democracy.

So, why the widespread increases? After peaking with the so-called "Arab spring" of 2005, President Bush's "freedom agenda" is widely perceived to have faltered and taken a back seat to other policy goals. This budget may be viewed as a final attempt to revive what was formerly seen as a cornerstone of Bush administration policy, to cement the freedom agenda as a key part of Bush's legacy. Additionally, as the administration has encountered increasing resistance from autocratic allies, the budget may represent a deliberate shift toward supporting democracy using less confrontational means. Finally, Bush administration officials have expressed concern that the next administration may reverse course on democracy promotion; funding increases may be an attempt to institutionalize programs before leaving office.

It is also important to remember that the new budget request is still a long way from approval by Congress, which controls the purse strings. Over the next few months, Congress will debate and allocate funding for various programs for fiscal year 2009, deciding where to match the numbers in President Bush's request and where to deviate from them. And there are rumors on Capitol Hill that the Democrat-controlled Congress may attempt to delay the passing of the annual appropriations bills for fiscal year 2009 until January 2009, when they could give the bills to the newly-elected president to be signed into law. Nonetheless, democracy advocates in either party can find much to like in this budget proposal, which seems to have real potential for bipartisan support.

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