The U.S.-Middle East Partnership Initiative: Building Hope for the Years Ahead

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SECRETARY POWELL: Thank you very much, Ed, for that warm introduction. It's a great pleasure to be with you this afternoon, and Frank and Bill, good to be with you both. And to many other distinguished ladies and gentlemen, excellencies, friends, I want to thank you especially, and the Heritage Foundation, for inviting me here to spend a few moments with this audience and with the watching and listening audience and discuss the hopes and aspirations that we share with the peoples of the Middle East. I also especially want to welcome the distinguished guests in the diplomatic corps, Congressional staff, the NGO community, and the private sector.

Thank all of you for finding time in your schedule to join us this afternoon. It is fitting that we meet here at the Heritage Foundation. For the Heritage Foundation's vision -- to build a country "where freedom, opportunity, prosperity, and civil society flourish" -- is the same vision, the very same vision, that we share with the peoples of the Middle East for their countries. The Middle East is a vast region of vast importance to the American people. Millions of us worship in churches, mosques, and synagogues, professing the three great faiths that were born in the lands between the Mediterranean Sea and the Persian Gulf. Our language and traditions are filled with references to Jerusalem, to Bethlehem, to Mecca. Our phone books list names -- such as Mousavi, Levy, and Shaheen -- that speak of deep family roots in the Middle East.

Our farmers grow wheat, and our workers make airplanes, computers, and many other products that we sell to the countries of the region. We, in turn, benefit from traded goods and investment from the Middle East. Tragically, thousands of our countrymen and women died on September 11, 2001, at the hands of terrorists born and radicalized in the Middle East.

Recognizing the region's importance, we have for half a century and more devoted our blood and our treasure to helping the peoples and governments of the Middle East. Indeed, my own career in public service, and especially military service, has been shaped by events in that region. I was privileged to be Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff when the United States led the international coalition, which included many Arab countries, that evicted the Iraqi invaders from Kuwait. Today, as Secretary of State, the Middle East requires and deserves a great deal of my attention.

Our Middle East policy has emphasized winning the war on terrorism, disarming Iraq, and bringing the Arab-Israeli conflict to an end. The war on terrorism is not confined to the Middle East. Our friends there have a very important stake in that conflict and in winning that conflict because many have suffered the scourge of terrorism first hand. I am pleased that our friends have stepped up to the challenge by extending basing rights for Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan, exchanging intelligence and law enforcement information, arresting suspected terrorists, and clamping down on terrorist financing.

With the countries of the Middle East, our friends and allies, and the community of nations, we must also deal with the grave and growing danger posed by the Iraqi regime, led by Saddam Hussein. By unanimously passing Resolution 1441, the United Nations Security Council has offered Iraq a final opportunity to meet its obligations to peace and to the international community. The Iraqi regime can either disarm, or it will be disarmed. The choice is theirs -- but this decision cannot be postponed.

We also have a deep and abiding national interest in bringing the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to an end. With our friends in the region and the international community, we are working to bring about a lasting peace based on President Bush's vision of two states, living side-by-side, in peace and security. This peace will require from the Palestinians a new and different leadership, new institutions, and an end to terror and violence. As the Palestinians make progress in this direction, Israel will also be required to make hard choices, including an end to all settlement construction activity, consistent with the Mitchell Report.

As President Bush has stated, with intensive effort by all, the creation of a democratic, viable Palestine is possible in 2005. Our ultimate goal is a just and comprehensive Arab-Israeli settlement, in which all the peoples of the region are accepted as neighbors, living in peace and security, and building a better future for all the peoples of the region. These challenges have been at the forefront of America's Middle East policy, and with good reason. Each of these challenges profoundly affects our national interest, and the interests of the peoples who call the Middle East home. We remain deeply committed to meeting each of these challenges, meeting them with energy and determination.

At the same time, it has become increasingly clear that we must broaden our approach to the region if we are to achieve success. In particular, we must give sustained and energetic attention to economic, political, and educational reform. We must work with peoples and governments to close the gulf between expectation and reality that Queen Rania of Jordan has so eloquently termed the "hope gap." The spread of democracy and free markets, fueled by the wonders of the technological revolution, has created a dynamo that can generate prosperity and human well-being on an unprecedented scale. But this revolution has left much of the Middle East behind.

Throughout history, the countries of the Middle East have made invaluable contributions to the development of the arts and sciences. Today, however, too many people there lack the very political and economic freedom, empowerment of women, and modern education they need to prosper in the 21st century. The 2002 Arab Human Development Report, written by leading Arab scholars and issued by the United Nations, identified a fundamental choice -- between "inertia … [and] an Arab renaissance that will build a prosperous future for all Arabs." These are not my words. They come from Arab experts who have looked deeply into the issues. They are based on the stark facts.

Some 14 million Arab adults lack the jobs they need to put food on the table, a roof over the heads of their families, and to put hope not only in their hearts but the hearts of their children. Fifty million more Arab young people will enter the already crowded job market over the next eight years. But economies are not creating enough jobs. Growth is weak. The GDP of 260 million Arabs is already less than that of 40 million...
Spainiards, and falling even further behind. Add in the production of 67 million people in Iran, and the total is still only two-thirds of Italy's. Internally, many economies are stifled by regulation and cronyism. They lack transparency, and are closed to entrepreneurship, investment, and trade.

The countries of the Middle East are also largely absent from world markets. They generate barely one percent of the world's non-oil exports. Only ten Middle Eastern countries belong to the World Trade Organization. The region's governments are now recognizing, as Egypt's President Hosni Mubarak has warned, that "giving a boost to exports is a matter of life or death." A shortage of economic opportunities is a ticket to despair. Combined with rigid political systems, it is a dangerous brew indeed. So, along with freer economies, many of the peoples of the Middle East need a stronger political voice. We reject the condescending notion that freedom will not grow in the Middle East, or that there is any region of the world that cannot support democracy.

President Bush gave voice to the yearnings of people everywhere when he declared, in his West Point address, that "when it comes to the common rights and needs of men and women, there is no clash of civilizations. The requirements of freedom apply fully to Africa and Latin America and the entire Islamic world." Given a choice between tyranny and freedom, people choose freedom. We need only look to the streets of Kabul, filled with people celebrating the end of Taliban rule last year. There are rays of hope in the Middle East, as well. Countries such as Bahrain, Qatar, and Morocco have embarked on bold political reforms. Civic organizations are increasingly active in many Arab countries, working on bread-and-butter issues such as securing badly needed identity cards for women.

We are also seeing an explosion of media outlets, from satellite television stations to weekly tabloids. Though some still do not live up to their responsibility to deliver responsible coverage and factual information, altogether they are making information available to more people than ever before. And with information, ultimately comes knowledge, knowledge to raise young people up, knowledge about what is happening in other parts of the world. Still, too many Middle Easterners are ruled by closed political systems. Too many governments curb the institutions of civil society as a threat, rather than welcome them as the basis for a free, dynamic, and hopeful society. And the language of hate, exclusion, and incitement to violence is still all too common throughout the region.

As Morocco's King Mohammed told his country's parliament two years ago, "to achieve development, democracy, and modernization, it is necessary to improve and strengthen political parties, trade unions, associations, and the media, and to enlarge the scope of participation."

Finally, too many of the region's children lack the knowledge to take advantage of a world of economic and political freedom. Ten million school-age children are at home, at work, or on the streets, instead of being in class. Some 65 million of their parents cannot read or write, let alone help them with their lessons, teach them to read or write. Barely one person out of a hundred has access to a computer. Of those, only half can reach the wider world via the Internet. Even when children do go to school, they often fail to learn the skills that they will desperately need to be successful in the 21st century world. "Education" too often means rote learning rather than the creative, critical thinking essential for success in our globalizing world.

The authors of the Arab Development Report have found that "education has begun to lose its significant role as a means of achieving social advancement in Arab countries, turning instead into a means of perpetuating social stratification and poverty." This is a telling indictment, but it is more than that; this is a call to action. There is a constant theme running through these challenges, and that is the marginalization of women. More than half of the Arab world's women are illiterate. They suffer more than men from unemployment and lack of economic opportunity. Women also make up a smaller proportion of members of parliament in Arab countries than in any other region of the world.

Until the countries of the Middle East unleash the abilities and potential of their women, they will not build a future of hope. Any approach to the Middle East that ignores its political, economic, and educational underdevelopment will be built upon sand. It is time to lay a firm foundation of hope. Hope is what my presentation today is about. America wants to align itself with the people of the Middle East, moving forward on the basis of hope, hope for peace, hope for a better life for the children of the Middle East and the children of the world. To that end, I am announcing today an initiative that places the United States firmly on the side of change, on the side of reform, and on the side of a modern future for the Middle East, on the side of hope. During last March's visit by President Mubarak to Washington, President Bush asked me to head a new American government effort to support the peoples and governments of the Middle East in their efforts to meet these challenging and pressing human needs.

I am pleased to announce the initial results of our work -- an innovative set of programs and a framework for future cooperation that we call the U.S.-Middle East Partnership Initiative. The U.S.-Middle East Partnership Initiative is a bridge between the United States and the Middle East, between our governments and our peoples, an initiative that spans the hope gap with energy, ideas, and funding. Our Partnership Initiative is a concrete demonstration of our commitment to human dignity in the Middle East.

We are initially dedicating $29 million to get this Initiative off to a strong start. Working with Congress, we will seek significant additional funding for next year. These funds will be over and above the more than $1 billion we provide in economic assistance to the Arab world every year. Our initiative rests on three pillars. We will engage with public and private sector groups to bridge the jobs gap with economic reform, business investment, and private sector development. We will partner with community leaders to close the freedom gap with projects to strengthen civil society, expand political participation, and lift the voices of women. And, we will work with parents and educators to bridge the knowledge gap with better schools and more opportunities for higher education.

My friends, hope begins with a paycheck. And that requires a vibrant economy. Through the United States-Middle East Partnership Initiative, we will work with governments to establish economic rules and regulations that will attract foreign investment and allow the private sector to flourish. We will help small and medium-sized businesses gain access to the life-blood of capital. As a first step, I am pleased to announce that we will establish Enterprise Funds for the Middle East, modeled after the successful Polish-American Enterprise Fund, and these funds will begin investing in promising new businesses.

We will also help more countries share in the bounty of the global economy. That means offering aspiring World Trading Organization members like Saudi Arabia, Algeria, Lebanon, and Yemen, technical assistance to meet the WTO's membership criteria. It means building upon our successful Free Trade Agreement with Jordan by beginning FTA negotiations with Morocco. And, it means continuing to work with countries like Egypt and Bahrain to explore ways to enhance our bilateral economic trade relationships, including through possible free trade
agreements. Open economies, to be successful, require open political systems. So the second pillar of our Partnership Initiative will support citizens across the region who are claiming their political voices.

We began the first pilot project in this area last month, when we brought a delegation of 55 Arab women, women political leaders, brought them to the United States to observe our mid-term elections. I had an excellent meeting with this remarkable group, and I was inspired by their energy and their commitment. They put tough questions to me, and we debated the issues as people do in a free society. These women were proud of their heritage. They spoke eloquently of their dreams of a world where their children could grow up and live in peace. They told of their hopes to see an end to the conflicts that cripple their region. They also spoke of their expectations of America. They talked about how they want control over their own lives and their own destinies. And, they asked to know more about American democracy, and how to make their own voices more effective.

Increased political participation also requires strengthening the civic institutions that protect individual rights and provide opportunities for participation. Through our Partnership Initiative we will support these efforts. To be effective, free economies and open political systems need educated citizens, so the third pillar of the U.S.-Middle East Partnership Initiative will focus on education reform. Our programs will pay particular emphasis to the education of girls. An Egyptian poet once wrote that, "A mother is a school. Empower her and you empower a great nation." He was right. When girls' literacy rates improve, all the other important indicators of development in a country improve, as well.

With the U.S.-Middle East Partnership Initiative we will provide scholarships to keep girls in school and expand literacy for girls and women. More broadly, we will work with parents and educators to strengthen local and parental oversight of school systems. In each of these three areas, we are committed to genuine, two-way partnership with the citizens and countries of the region, with Congress, and even with other donors as we implement this agenda.

The U.S.-Middle East Partnership Initiative is one of the most challenging undertakings that we and our friends in the region have ever considered. We should be quite realistic as we move forward about the obstacles that are ahead, about the time that it will take to see real change take root, about the limited role that outsiders can play. We can and must understand that genuine Middle Eastern interest must drive this initiative, and only Middle Eastern engagement will sustain it over time. But we should also avoid resigning ourselves to low expectations. As the ferment in the region shows, the peoples of the Middle East themselves are seized with these issues. These are issues they are talking about. These are problems they are ready to deal with.

We are not starting from scratch, either. We are already working successfully with a broad array of partners. For example, just last month we announced the establishment of the LEAD Foundation, in which the United States Agency for International Development is partnering with the World Bank and the Egyptian private sector to support micro-enterprise lending in Egypt. In addition, through our Partnership for Learning, we are already engaged with the countries of the region on teacher training, English-language instruction, and other programs to strengthen their educational systems.

Indeed, an important part of our work will involve reviewing our existing programs to learn from them and to make sure our assistance touches as many lives as possible. Nor are we advocating a "one size fits all" approach. The region is too diverse for that. We will be on the ground listening and working to make sure our programs are tailored to meet the needs of people where they live their lives. In my travels throughout the Middle East, in public and in private life, I have seen first hand the energy, creativity and dedication of parents as they try to build a better future for their children. But I have also seen their frustration when progress is so painfully slow. We must move faster. And we will move faster.

Through the U.S.-Middle East Partnership Initiative, we are adding hope to the U.S.-Middle East agenda. We are pledging our energy, our ability, and our idealism to bring hope to all of God’s children who call the Middle East home.

Thank you very much. (Applause.)

MODERATOR: Thank you very much, Mr. Secretary, for presenting us with that challenge today. The Secretary has agreed to take several questions.

QUESTION: Mr. Secretary, you have spoken eloquently about the need to promote freedom. Some of the governments there, including some that are allies, are not hospitable to either free markets or democracy, and how are you going to resolve the tension between the desire to promote our goals and not offend allied governments?

SECRETARY POWELL: We believe that democracy and free markets will benefit all countries in the Middle East. Obviously, some are further away from this concept than others. We are not setting out in this Initiative, nor are we setting out in any of our other policies, to say to someone, this is the American way, you have to do it our way.

We hope that through programs such as this, through education, through persuasion, but really through the countries in the region taking a look at the situation they find themselves in individually, looking at whether or not they are educating their young people for the kind of future that is in front of them, whether or not they can continue to afford not to educate 50% of their population, women, for the challenges and jobs and requirements of the future, and whether or not they see a future in their economic system that does not get them engaged somehow in a globalizing world.

I think by them examining themselves honestly and working with us and allowing us to work with them, we can make the case. I don't see this as something that is going to be done in 1 year or 5 years. This is a long-term prospect. But to stand back from it and say, well, we can't possibly discuss these issues with a particular country because there is some other geo-strategic agenda that we have in mind or priority we have in mind that makes it too difficult an issue to discuss.

I no longer think that is affordable and sustainable. And there is not a country in the Middle East that I have not begun to have this conversation with and the President has not begun to have this conversation with.

QUESTION: Mr. Secretary, considering the enormous oil wealth in the Middle East and the statements of Arab brotherhood, isn't this a job, really, for countries like Saudi Arabia and Kuwait? Second point, considering the vast population explosion when you spoke of women, women...
-- young women -- surrounded by huge families almost tied down into poverty, is there room in the Bush administration to make family planning one of the pillars of your program?

SECRETARY POWELL: On the first question, there is wealth in the region. But there is also great poverty in the region. The United States has provided assistance to the region for many years and we want to use the assistance we have been providing in a more directed way to deal with these structural and fundamental issues that I spoke to.

And I think it is quite appropriate for us to add additional monies to this kind of effort and I look forward to appearing before the Congress to seek additional money because it is not only in interest of these nations to move, but it is in our interest, as well. And I think there is more -- there is enough of a problem there to demand additional contributions from those who are able to contribute in the region, as well as additional contributions from the United States, and I hope to also be able to engage my colleagues in other parts of the world among European nations and other nations that this is in their interest, as well.

With respect to population and family planning issues, as you know, we do contribute to family planning activities of the kind that we believe are sensible, appropriate and consistent with the values of the United States and consistent with the values of this administration.

QUESTION: You did not in your remarks make any explicit connection, or connection at all, as far as I could hear, with the struggle the United States has been engaged in since September 11. Is there a -- is this a way of, in fact, fighting the war against terrorism? Is this another angle in that struggle for taking the wind out of the sails of the radicals in the region?

SECRETARY POWELL: We have been working on this since before 9/11, and I think it is something that can be seen as totally separate from 9/11. We should do this because it is the right thing to do. The pillars I talked about, the programs I talked, about are relevant before and after 9/11 -- perhaps after 9/11, somewhat more relevant because to the extent that you have populations where people are angry, people are frustrated, people do not feel that their lives are improving, then you have the possibility of additional radicalization of that population.

But I don't think 9/11 should be seen as the determining factor with respect to this program. We hope that it will make it more likely that young people will see this possibility of a better future and hope, and will not be pulled into activities of the kind that led to 9/11. We also have to remind ourselves that the perpetrators of 9/11 were doing quite well in their societies and in terms of the wealth they had accumulated and we should not fall into this trap of they were oppressed, they were poor, they were poverty stricken; quite the contrary, they have stolen these issues from those who are poor and oppressed and used these justifications for their own evil ends, but they're certainly not justifications.

So I think this program stands on its own before 9/11, after 9/11, with a little greater emphasis after 9/11.

QUESTION: Mr. Secretary, this kind of follows on previous questions. Throughout the Middle East one hears the refrain, "We love America, we hate America's policies." This is directed both towards perceived imbalance in terms of Israeli-Arab relations and in terms of U.S., perceived U.S. support for non-democratic regimes. The policy initiative you have announced today and the statements you've made clearly address the latter. I was wondering if you could address the former a little bit more, how the government intends to address the perception of US policy.

SECRETARY POWELL: I think there's no question that there is great admiration throughout the Arab world, throughout the Middle East, throughout the Muslim world for the United States as a nation, as a people. Come with me to our visa offices and I will show you long lines of people who are anxious to get into the United States.

One of my favorite lines is I can walk out of this building right now, go get in a car, and be at a mosque, a temple, a synagogue or 12 different kinds of churches within 5 minutes -- showing the strength and beauty and diversity of our society, and created by people who have come to this nation knowing what kind of a nation and what kind of a people we are. And there is great admiration and support for that.

We do have problems with some of the policies that we are following and those policies are, to some extent, driven by the situation we find ourselves in. The Middle East peace process, of course, is Exhibit A. We would do anything to find a solution, a way to move forward, to end the terror and the violence that comes from the Palestinian community -- some parts of the Palestinian community. Most parts of the Palestinian community want the same thing we want for our communities: peace and security for our children. And with the terror and the violence down, then we're in a position to get movement from the Israeli side.

We have not lost sight of the vision that the President gave us in his June 24 speech that said we have to find transforming leadership within the Palestinian community, and there are expectations we have of the Israeli community. And we have to work on both of these tracks, and the President is committed to finding a solution that will create the state of Palestine living side by side, in peace, with the Jewish state, Israel.

And I think that as we continue to move in this direction, as we continue to work on the initiatives that we have for a political settlement, the roadmap is much discussed -- we're still hard at work on the roadmap -- we'll continue that work next week when the Quartet assembles and also have a chance, I hope, to meet with President Bush and discuss their work with President Bush. And we're committed to move forward and find a solution.

And I think the people of the Middle East are looking to the United States to play a leadership role in finding that solution. And to some extent, we're held to account for the problem until the solution is found. And so you have to kind of separate this, this feeling toward America into those two pieces: respect for us as a people and a nation, but there is concern about the policies we follow. And Exhibit A is the Middle East peace plan and effort and, of course, there's considerable debate with respect to Iraq. And I think that as the Iraq situation resolves itself one way or the other, that will be dealt with and hopefully we will see progress in the Middle East peace plan.

QUESTION: Thank you. Mr. Secretary, even if we grant that democracy can take on a number of forms, it still is primarily a secular institution. How can democracy coexist with the profound levels of depth of theocracy and theology which is prominent in the Muslim world?

SECRETARY POWELL: That is a challenge that will have to be dealt with by Muslim leaders, Arab leaders, Arab and Muslim leaders in different parts of the world, not just in the Middle East.

I think a way has to be found. You can have a strong commitment to religion. We do. Most democratic nations have a faith-based aspect to
them, but there has to be a model found that will allow that faith to coexist with political and economic institutions that serve the people.

And it will be a challenge for each and every one of those nations to find the proper way forward. And I think each and every one of them will find a model that is unique to their culture, unique to their history, unique to their experience and unique to the aspirations of their people.

It's not going to be a Jeffersonian model that is imposed in each one. But clearly, strong leaders will have to come forward and the peoples of the region will have to come forward to raise up strong leaders that are willing to find the balance between faith, theocracy, as you call it, and a political system, an open political system, and an open economic system that will give them what they really need -- faith plus hope for a better future for their children.

Thank you all very much. (Applause.)

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