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Arab States: Five Myths about Western Political Party Aid

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Until recently Western assistance programs aimed at strengthening political parties were less present in the Arab world than in almost all other areas of the developing world. As part of the heightened U.S. and European interest in promoting Arab political reform, however, such programs are multiplying in the region.

Some of the larger European political foundations such as the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung and the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung and Sweden's Olof Palme Center have been present in various Arab countries for years and sponsor some party-related activities. The current increase in party assistance is coming mainly from the two U.S. party institutes, the International Republican Institute (IRI) and the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (NDI). These are private organizations affiliated with the two principal U.S. political parties. Their Middle East work is funded by the U.S. Agency for International Development, Department of State, and National Endowment for Democracy. They are currently working with political parties in Algeria, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Palestine, and Yemen.

Externally-sponsored party assistance often triggers sensitivities given the centrality of parties to a country's political life. Last year the governments Algeria, Bahrain, and Egypt took steps to terminate U.S. party aid and other U.S. democracy-related programs in their countries out of concern about political interventionism. Such controversies are sometimes aggravated by misconceptions about party aid. Five such misconceptions are common in the Middle East:

1. *Western party aid involves cash transfers to political parties.* Party aid does not involve the transfer of money but rather the attempted transfer of knowledge about political party development. Party aid programs consist primarily of seminars, workshops, conferences, study tours, informal consultations, and other similar activities aimed at party activists, candidates, and parliamentarians.
2. *Western governments use party aid to favor certain parties and influence electoral outcomes.* U.S. party aid has in some cases in Latin America and the former Soviet bloc

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favored opposition coalitions challenging entrenched strongman leaders, such as in Chile during the presidency of Augusto Pinochet and in Serbia under Slobodan Milosevic. The current wave of U.S. party programs in the Middle East, however, largely follows a multiparty method in which all legally registered parties in a country are invited to participate. Two exceptions are in Lebanon and Palestine where due to U.S. legal restrictions, U.S. party programs do not include Hizballah and Hamas. Where assistance is offered to an opposition coalition in the region, as with NDI's work in Yemen, assistance is also offered to the ruling party.

3. *Western party aid excludes Islamists.* The two U.S. party institutes include Islamist parties in their activities whenever such parties are present and legally registered, including in Algeria, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, and Yemen. Islamic parties do sometimes choose not to take part in U.S.-sponsored programs for their own reasons. The Moroccan Party of Justice and Development, for example, sometimes chooses not to participate in NDI and IRI programs. The exclusion of Hizballah and Hamas, mentioned above, is based on their connection to terrorism, not their Islamist character.
4. *Party aid focuses on preparing parties for electoral campaigns.* Some party assistance programs do help parties prepare for campaigning by helping them learn about message development, volunteer recruitment, and media outreach. Most Western party aid, however, seeks to strengthen the long-term organizational capacity of parties. This involves helping parties build a presence throughout the country, develop the ability to communicate effectively with and represent the interests of a significant constituency, and learn to formulate and implement a serious policy platform.
5. *Western party aid groups are wealthy, powerful organizations that have decisive political influence in other countries.* Western political foundations and party institutes are indeed well-funded organizations but their ability to shape the political life of other countries is limited. Their main method of operating—attempting to transfer knowledge and ideas—is an indirect method of influence that tends to have only modest effects. The record concerning the impact of political party aid is fairly clear in this regard: such assistance at most has only gradual, incremental positive effects, usually coming from the absorption of new ideas by younger party activists, and sometimes fails to have much effect at all when leaders of recipient parties actively resist party reform ideas, perceiving such ideas as threats to their power.

In short, it is understandable that Arab policy makers, political observers, and concerned citizens will watch Western party assistance carefully with regard to its political role in their societies. The key question in most cases for such aid, however, is not whether it is illegitimate interventionism but how such aid can be made effective in the face of challenging local realities, including the chronic weaknesses of parties in over-centralized political systems and a continuing lack of engagement by large members of citizens in daily political life.

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