

U.S. Engagement with Young Middle Eastern and North African Leaders



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“The greatest untapped resource in the Middle East and North Africa is the talent of its people... We must build on our efforts to broaden our engagement... So that we reach the people who will shape the future — particularly young people.”

– President Barack Obama

In the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), the youth cohort between the ages of 15-29 represents the largest in the history of the region. This energetic demographic, increasingly empowered by new technologies and committed to having its voice heard, has proven to be a powerful force and a key driver of the political, economic, and social change pulsing through the region.

U.S. Engagement Efforts

The United States Government continues to pursue a robust program of engagement with young MENA leaders. The initiative began with President Obama’s Cairo speech in June 2009 where he posed a challenge to global youth not simply to accept the “world as it is” but to remake the “world as it could be.” This was followed up by the President’s Summit on Entrepreneurship in Washington, D.C. in April 2010 that engaged and encouraged young entrepreneurs in the MENA region. It has continued with a multitude of programs and engagement efforts throughout the region before and after the “Arab Spring” period.

Engaging Youth in Direct Dialogue

The U.S. Government continues to seek opportunities to engage young MENA leaders in a dialogue to better understand their interests and aspirations; to further inform U.S. policy; and to identify areas of collaboration. New initiatives such as Ambassador Youth Councils will bring young leaders into direct dialogue with U.S. embassies in their respective countries in order to share ideas on strengthening relations and shaping programs.

Empowering Young Leaders with Skills and Networks

The U.S. Government continues to sponsor forums, implement programs, and administer exchanges designed to help young MENA leaders develop skills to be successful future leaders in a range of fields. A sampling of these efforts include:

- The 2010 President’s Summit on Entrepreneurship in Washington, D.C.;
- Workshops on democratic institution building conducted in Tunisia and Egypt;
- Mentorship initiatives for women and girls, such as TechWomen and TechGirls, that engage emerging women in the technology field with their counterparts in Silicon Valley;
- The State Department’s Kennedy-Lugar Youth Exchange and Study (YES) Program for high school students; and
- The Middle East Partnership Initiative’s Student Leaders Program, which conducts leadership training at select U.S. universities.

The U.S. Government has also established a number of alumni networks within the region to build capacity and strategic relationships for past participants in U.S. sponsored programs. Enhanced coordination and collaboration among the complementary networks will strengthen the ability of young leaders to work together on issues of mutual interest.

Encouraging Enabling Environments

The U.S. will continue to put forth programs and policies that enable young leaders to contribute in positive ways to their communities and countries. U.S. embassies are incorporating youth civil society as a priority in bilateral discussions and strategic dialogues. The Department of State and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) aim to help empower young people with enhanced economic opportunity and voice as they demand greater responsiveness from their leaders and increased participation in their societies.

Looking Toward the Future

While youth-inspired protests, political transitions, and calls for greater democratic rights continue throughout the region, the U.S. will work to engage young MENA leaders to better understand their aspirations and to collaborate with them on common challenges and interests.