

# American

## NEWS & VIEWS

*A Daily Newsletter from Public Affairs, American Embassy*

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July 7, 2010

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## President Obama Urges Confidence-Building Measures in the Middle East

Washington — President Obama urged Israel, the Palestinians and neighboring Arab states to undertake confidence-building measures to improve the climate in the region for peace, and said he believes that Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is willing to take risks for a peace settlement.

Speaking with Netanyahu at the White House July 6, Obama said there are measures available to all sides that would improve the prospect of successful peace negotiations, and that he had discussed them with both the Israeli leader and with Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas during the Palestinian leader's June 9 visit to Washington.

"There are going to need to be a whole set of confidence-building measures to make sure that people are serious and that we're sending a signal to the region that this isn't just more talk and more process without action," Obama said.

The president welcomed Israel's announcement of new measures to ease its blockade of Gaza, and said continued progress to build confidence among the Palestinians would help them "see in very concrete terms what peace can bring that rhetoric and violence cannot bring."

Commending Netanyahu for allowing more goods into Gaza, Obama said Israel's new policy has "moved more quickly and more effectively than many people anticipated," and that the United States believes "there is a way to make sure that the people of Gaza are able to prosper economically while Israel is able to maintain its legitimate security needs in not allowing missiles and weapons to get to Hamas."

Obama also said President Abbas has been working with Palestinian Prime Minister Salam Fayyad to do "very significant things" to improve security, and said it would be very meaningful to the Palestinian people if the scope of their responsibilities in the West Bank could be expanded.

The president also urged Arab states to support peace efforts, which he said cannot succeed without "a greater investment in the process than we've seen so far" by others in the region.

Obama says he hopes direct talks between Israel and the Palestinians will begin prior to the September expiration of Israel's six-month settlement moratorium. Obama added that he hopes such discussions "will create a climate in which everybody feels a greater investment

and success," and will generate more trust so that "not every action, by one party or the other, is taken as a reason for not engaging in talks."

It is time to seize on the vision of a two-state solution that meets Israeli security needs and Palestinian aspirations for sovereignty, the president said. This, he said, will require "some tough choices."

"I believe that Prime Minister Netanyahu wants peace. I think he's willing to take risks for peace. And during our conversation, he once again reaffirmed his willingness to engage in serious negotiations with the Palestinians" toward the goal of a two-state solution, Obama said.

The United States remains committed to Israel's security and "will never ask Israel to take any steps that would undermine their security interests," Obama said, adding that Israel must be able to "respond to threats or any combination of threats in the region."

At the State Department, press office director Mark Toner described Israel's decision to ease the blockade against Gaza as "a great step forward," and said it is helping to "improve the quality of life for the people of Gaza while addressing Israel's legitimate security concerns."

Israel published a list of goods that are banned from Gaza on July 5. The list includes weapons and materials that can be used to make them. The list expands the range of merchandise that is being allowed into the territory, which has been under the control of Hamas since 2007.

Speaking to reporters July 6, Toner said the list will increase the flow of goods and material into Gaza and significantly improve the access that Gazans have to those items.

"We've worked closely with the Israel government as it developed the list," Toner said, adding the United States will continue to work with Israel, the Palestinians, Egypt and others in the international community to help ensure that the new policies are implemented.

## State Department Using Meetup to Tap Tech Expertise

By Stephen Kaufman  
Staff Writer

Washington — Meetup.com has a simple premise: use the Internet to get off the Internet. Rather than simply "liking" a cause or group on a social networking site, the company wants users to take the next step and do something concrete about it: Find others who share your interest and meet for an organizing event or just a cup of coffee. In other words, use the incredible connective and organizational potential in social media to make things

happen in the real world.

“Twenty-first century movements are about enabling followers, not just collecting them, and to lead your followers to lead [themselves]” to do something, Meetup.com co-founder and Chief Executive Officer Scott Heiferman told a diverse audience of nongovernmental organization (NGO) representatives, communications experts and others at a June 29 event in Washington organized by the State Department.

Founded in 2001, Meetup currently facilitates about 50,000 local gatherings a week all over the world, bringing people together for anything from sports to book discussion, political organizing and casual dining. The company’s motto is “Do something. Learn something. Share something. Change something.” In May, the company announced the launch of Meetup Everywhere, which allows organizations, businesses or movements to suggest a topic for a “meetup” and, with local organization, have it occur simultaneously anywhere in the world.

Rather than have an organization use social networking and other technology simply to communicate with a public that is already suffering from information overload, “What if your supporters or constituents got together with each other?” Heiferman asked. Meetup Everywhere’s Web site provided the answer.

“Because they’re near each other, they can help each other, they can be powerful together, and maybe they can help you. Amazing things happen when people meetup,” the Web site said.

The State Department shares Meetup.com’s objective of encouraging people to connect online to take real-world action, and has begun using Meetup Everywhere to bring NGOs, the private sector and representatives from the U.S. government and multilateral organizations together to find ways of using technology and collective expertise to assemble best practices for problem solving.

In the aftermath of the January 12 earthquake in Haiti, the State Department organized Haiti Tech Meet Up, assembling more than 100 people in Washington on May 10 to discuss lessons learned from the crisis and to promote continued discussion in local groups on how best to use technology in the rebuilding of Haiti.

“We should provide a platform for innovators in the field of relief and communication, education and banking to share their stories and ideas, successes and even their failures – and to look forward to how to apply many of these lessons in the redevelopment of Haiti and elsewhere around the world,” Katie Stanton, a special adviser in the State Department’s Office of Innovation, told the meeting.

Suzanne Hall, who works in the State Department’s Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs, told America.gov that the State Department’s use of Meetup offers experts a central meeting place and public platform from which they can break off and develop their own independent networks.

“We’re trying to convene people. That’s one great role that we can provide,” Hall said. “We’re not a building full of developers, but we can add value by inviting people working in the same space to come together, introduce their projects and find the right partners to scale up.”

Hall said the State Department is organizing the next Tech@State on mobile money and financial inclusion in early August to discuss how to bring banking services and credit to underaccessed populations, including the rural poor and women entrepreneurs. The State Department has also used the Meetup platform to identify existing Meetup groups, including Bogo Tech in Colombia, which focuses on technology and Web development. The State Department is leading a delegation of technology specialists to Colombia in July, and the group will meet with Bogo Tech while in Bogota.

The State Department’s senior adviser for innovation, Alex Ross, said June 29 that being connected online is becoming increasingly mainstream all over the world, and not just among elites. When President Obama took office in January 2009, there were 4.1 billion mobile handsets. That number has increased to 4.7 billion in the past year and a half, and 75 percent of the growth has been in the developing world, he said.

Meetup and other social networking outlets that promote organizing and activism “can have more profound impact in the developing world or in authoritarian societies,” Ross said, since would-be participants no longer are dependent on traditional word-of-mouth information for entry and connection

The Internet has been successfully used to “name and shame” corrupt public servants, create and empower citizen-centered political movements, and, as exemplified by many Iranians after their 2009 election, has even formed the backbone for political dissent.

“Going forward, I think that connection technologies are going to play an increasingly disruptive role in foreign policy, in citizen-centered movements. And I don’t think that there’s a very good way of predicting what’s going to happen other than saying the degree of disruption is going to exceed what anybody expects,” Ross said.

## Syrian-Palestinian Student Creates Empowerment Groups in America

*Hazami Barmada works to improve the lives of Muslims and non-Muslims*

By M. Scott Bortot  
Staff Writer

Washington — In Arabic, *al-mubadarah* is a noun that means “the initiative.”

Hazami Barmada, co-founder of an organization called Al-Mubadarah, takes this noun and lives her life by it, as a verb.

“I have three organizations that I founded from peanuts that are alive and active and kicking with support from people who believed in me and what I was trying to do. All founded and fueled literally with vision, passion, dedication, perseverance and persistence — no funding. And our programming speaks for itself,” Barmada says.

When the 26-year-old graduate student isn’t studying, she is consulting on cultural diplomatic affairs and founds organizations to improve the lives of Muslims and non-Muslims in America and abroad.

Her latest project, Al-Mubadarah: The Arab Empowerment Initiative, was launched at the April 29 Entrepreneurship and Public Diplomacy Luncheon linked to the April 26–27 Presidential Summit on Entrepreneurship. Barmada and Al-Mubadarah co-founder Victor Shibleie organized the luncheon in just more than three weeks. Naysayers had said they lacked the time to find sponsors to fund the event.

Barmada and Shibleie proved them wrong. Not only did they find sponsors, the event drew hundreds more people than expected, including guests from the diplomatic corps, senior staff from the Obama administration and the heads of key Arab and Muslim organizations.

“When you believe and really provide leadership and you show perseverance and dedication, people will buy into your visions, and that’s what really sold our event,” Barmada says. “We actually knocked on those doors and said, ‘We need the community support to make this vision a reality, and this is why it is important for our community.’”

Born in the United Kingdom, Barmada is of Syrian-Palestinian descent. Her education ranges from a United Nations refugee school in Syria to undergraduate studies in anthropology and sociology at Rhodes College in Memphis, Tennessee. Currently working toward a master’s degree in public and social policy at Georgetown University in Washington, Barmada applies her upbringing and education to building and running her

organizations.

Barmada only recently began forming groups that empower people. In 2007, she established the American Muslim Interactive Network (AMIN) to create and foster social, cultural and professional networks of Muslims and non-Muslims interested in Islam and interfaith relations. Then in 2009, Barmada’s concern for neglected children manifested itself when she founded the Iraqi Orphan Initiative. The initiative “aims to convene diverse stakeholders to work in collaboration ensuring that the growing needs of 4.5 million Iraqi orphans are not ignored and marginalized and are properly addressed.”

The two organizations, as well as Al-Mubadarah, operate independently of each other. Barmada’s inspiration for starting Al-Mubadarah stems from dissatisfaction with Arab approaches to improving their homelands.

“Having been brought up very proud of my culture and my ethnicity and heritage, when I would actually come into contact with people who were Arabs around the world I grew increasingly frustrated at this very negative attitude that we have toward development in the Middle East. They all complained about the problems, but did not take the initiative to be a part of the solution,” Barmada says.

While Barmada recognizes how international development can help Arab countries, she disagrees with its implementation.

“I found that Western models of development are not culturally sensitive. They are based on ‘out with everything Arab and in with all these modern, high-tech buildings,’ and I felt a frustration with what I saw was the watering down of my culture,” she says. “But at the same time, internally, it was very important for me to be self-critical and self-critical of my own Arab community to ask what does pride, what does honor mean to us as Arabs and how are we embracing it and then translating it into something tangible? Why are we relying on international development to fix all of our issues?”

Rather than talk about development hurdles in the Middle East, she is doing something about them with Al-Mubadarah. The fledgling organization looks to turn around the brain drain — educated people leaving their homelands for greater opportunities abroad — that plagues many Arab countries and create collaborative networks linking people to opportunities in the Middle East. Similar models include the Teach for America, AmeriCorps and IndicoCorps programs.

After carefully studying the nature of brain drain in the Arab world, Al-Mubadarah will apply the data to the “Reverse Brain Drain” program. The program aims to

recruit Arabs from developed countries – including the United States – and place them in Arab countries. Program participants will have expertise in health care, law, arts and humanities, education, engineering, business and governance, Barmada says.

“We will take people who are already working successfully in their respective fields and plug them into very underdeveloped hospitals, legal firms, social/civil society organizations, schools that really are in need of not only leadership, but structural redevelopment,” Barmada says. “We are taking professionals from around the world and plugging them into these opportunities from one to two year fellowship terms.”

During their fellowship, participants will serve as an inspiration to those around them: “To help be a leader and empower those around them to not only step up and take ownership of our problems, but to also realize that obtaining an education and wanting a brighter future for yourself within your home country is important. Leaving is not necessarily an option ... why don’t we stay here and try to lift everyone up versus everyone trying to leave,” she says.

A “Million Acts of Kindness” is also an Al-Mubadarah project and aims to build communities through service in the Arab world.

“We aim to encourage locals to create community service projects that help develop their direct communities and or contribute positively to their direct communities,” Barmada says.

Planting and maintaining trees, starting after-school programs and coordinating trash pickup are some of the projects Barmada envisions for this aspect of Al-Mubadarah. Barmada says the project will use models already in use where citizens log in to see what projects are under way in their area.

“You can either create a program if you don’t find one that you like or you can join with a pre-existing program,” she says.

As Al-Mubadarah starts empowering overseas communities, AMIN is already active in building communities in America – literally.

Every month, volunteers from AMIN drive from the Washington area to Baltimore to participate in Habitat for Humanity. Started in 1976, Habitat for Humanity is an American-based nonprofit organization that uses volunteers to build and repair homes for people in need.

“What started as us thinking that we would have to beg people to be a part of this program, we actually have a

wait list of Muslims wanting to take part in this program,” Barmada says.

Activities like AMIN’s involvement in Habitat for Humanity go a long way to correct an image that many Americans hold about Muslims. After homes are built, AMIN joins people of other faiths who worked on the project in an interfaith dedication ceremony. Homeowners receive a Christian Bible, a Hebrew Torah and – from AMIN – a Quran.

“That overcomes so many stereotypes of our community merely by having us engage with them,” Barmada says. “We didn’t go and lecture them about how peaceful the nature of our religion is nor are we trying to. What we are trying to do is say that we care. We care about American issues, we care about human issues. We care about poverty and education and we just happen to be Muslims.”

Volunteer activities help Muslims forge their identity away from media stereotypes.

“In essence it empowers us to take ownership of our identity, by creating a positive identity,” she says. “Not by countering the negative one but by putting a positive one out there as an alternative.”

For the future, Barmada plans to earn a doctoral degree and to further strengthen her initiatives.

“[I want to] figure out ways to create sustainable and transparent programs and really build on the vision of creating healthier global communities and to expand the networks that are engaged in that,” she says. “By providing leadership and vision, I notice and I sense how much change I am able to make in my small capacity as an individual.”

(Preceding items distributed by the Bureau of International Information Programs, U.S. Department of State. Web site: <http://america.gov>)