



MEDREGION UPDATE



MedRegion Office, Tunis

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MEPI MedRegion Update Newsletter is produced by the Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI) MedRegion Office at the U.S. Embassy in Tunis, Tunisia.

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We welcome your comments and suggestions

MEPI MedRegion Office Wishes you Ramadan Kareem



Lebanese Women Fight for Their Right to Their Children

Despite notable gains, Lebanese women still have a long way to go in terms of overcoming social barriers and ending gender discrimination. Through its project, "Mother's Rights – End Gender Discrimination," MEPI grantee the Lebanese Institute of Progressive Women (IPW) is advocating for amending a gender discriminatory decree emanating from the Lebanese Personal Status Code that prohibits mothers from taking their minor children outside the country while giving full rights to the father.

IPW launched a broad campaign targeting a wide range of stakeholders. IPW is building a general public consensus in support of the subject through creative interpretation of the spirit of the law. Through the proposed amendment, IPW is



advocating for equating the rights of mothers and fathers based on the presumption that, independent of strict custody laws, mothers have an undeniable right to visitation.

As part of the awareness campaign, IPW developed posters, brochures and a legal study and organized a series of roundtables targeting women directly concerned by the problem to discuss the legal study, sign a petition and gather personal narratives.

The roundtables were a success, as several parliamentarians and political officials who supported the cause attended them. IPW has also networked with grassroots NGOs on the subject, setting up a follow-up committee, involving in particular women active on issues of discriminatory laws.

Parallel to the lobbying campaign, IPW organized a pressure group from those who participated in the roundtables, as well as their network of contacts and NGOs,

to sign a petition that was sent to parliamentarians and concerned members of the administration.

IPW met with many parliamentarians, ministers, opinion leaders, and political party members to present the legal study and executive summary of the project.

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MPs, government ministers and opinion leaders attended the roundtables, expressed interest in the presentation and committed to endorse the project. A total of 2,748 letters and petitions were signed throughout the project cycle.

The extensive media coverage the project received was a major factor in

its success. Several media outlets made special reports through 72 media channels, and the use of social media, especially Facebook, helped reach an even wider audience. ■

MEPI Medregion Office News

Welcome to New MEPI Staff

The MEPI Regional Office in Tunis is very pleased to welcome our new colleagues Stephen Ibelli, Deputy Director of the MEPI MedRegion office, and James Rider, MEPI coordinator in Tel Aviv.

Stephen Ibelli was most recently the Public Diplomacy Officer on a Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) in Najaf, Iraq.

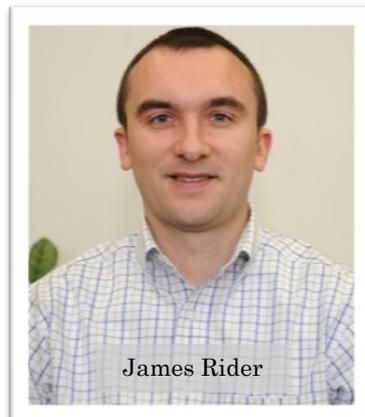


Stephen Ibelli

Stephen has been a diplomat with the United States Department of State since 2005 and has had diplomatic postings at the U.S. Embassies in Moscow, Russia as General Services Officer (2006-2008) and Muscat, Oman as Consular Officer (2008-2010). He is also a former Peace Corps Volunteer, having served in Shymkent, Kazakhstan.

Before joining the diplomatic service Stephen worked several international stints in Saudi Arabia and Equatorial

Guinea for such companies as Raytheon and ExxonMobil. Mr. Ibelli was a double major at Cornell University and holds degrees in Near East Studies and Psychology. Stephen grew up outside New York City but vastly prefers spending time in warmer climates, a result of the cold Kazakhstani winters. Stephen speaks Arabic, Russian, and Italian.



James Rider

James Rider is the MEPI Coordinator and the Assistant Cultural Affairs Officer in Tel Aviv. In addition to MEPI, his portfolio includes English Language programs, youth outreach, and outreach to Israel's Arab and other minority communities. He previously served in Venezuela and also worked for a USAID implementing partner before joining the Foreign Service. Originally from the Detroit area, he has lived in Bolivia and Spain and has degrees in Spanish and Linguistics. ■



Introducing the SFPR

By MEPI Grants Unit

We are rolling out the SF-PPR (Performance Progress Report), which is a standard US Government form. This form will, in most instances, replace the existing MEPI-generated Quarterly Report that you know and love.

We believe this will be easier for our partners to use, although it does limit the amount of information that can be placed on the form. Should you need to provide more information than the form allows simply type in "See attachment (s)" and give us a brief title for each attachment. You can then send as much information as you feel is necessary for us to understand how your project is progressing.

We do have an Arabic copy of the form for your convenience, but the official copy, and the only one we can accept per U.S. government rules, is the English version.

The SF-PPR, coupled with the SF425 (discussed in a previous G\$@W), are the two mandatory reporting documents. Your GA will introduce this new form to you at the appropriate time; until then please continue to complete the existing Quarterly Report format.

As is always true, do not hesitate to contact your GA if you have any questions or concerns. ■

Egyptian Civil Society Groups Upgrade to “Activism 2.0”

MEPI grantee the Development and Institutionalization Support Center (DISC) recognizes the potential benefits of the internet in empowering individuals, grassroots organizations, and civil society. DISC has developed the “Activism 2.0” project to extend the reach of its “Civil Society 2.0” initiative to NGOs.

Activism 2.0 is a capacity-building project to empower Egyptian civil society organizations to utilize cyberspace as a venue for activism, advocacy, and advancing reforms. Activism 2.0 has been working since June 2010 and has been able to help more than 100 different Egyptian civil society organizations to utilize cyberspace as a venue for activism, advocacy, and advancing reforms. This year, during the project’s second phase DISC established an NGO School to serve MEPI partner NGOs.

The project provided training courses and support to help participating organizations establish an online presence and connect with their constituents and stakeholders, launch online advocacy campaigns in collaboration with their peers using new social networking tools, and draw attention to instances of human rights violations and other incidents where officials should be held accountable.

Participants learned about creating websites, using new

media in advocacy and campaigning, and digital security.

DISC has implemented 33 training courses in Cairo to 888 activists and staff from formal and informal civil society groups. The following courses were offered: website building, from basic to advanced; using New Media in advocacy and campaigning, including social networks and forums; using mobile technology; using newly—developed software to manage NGO projects, their activities, accounting and results management; relations with donors, business writing principals and fund raising; and digital security.

The project developed an online interactive platform (social network) for all MEPI NGOs and alumni <http://www.ngo-school.org>. This



Proposal-writing training session in Assiut



Trainees during a training session in Cairo

platform serves to facilitate communication among donors and activists through automatic mailing, text messaging and newsletters. An e-Learning tool was also

developed to spread the trainings and other tools to serve not only Egypt but all Arabic-speaking activists around the world. ■

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Spotlight on MEPI Alumni

MEPI Alumnus among the 20 Most Influential People on Twitter in Lebanon

Congratulations to Asaad Thebian for being nominated among the 20 most influential people on Twitter in Lebanon. Thebian is a MEPI Student Leaders (2007) Alumnus.

MEPI recently spoke to Asaad Thebian about his experiences and achievements.

Tell us more about what you do?

I am currently working as a Social Media Officer for TAKREEM Initiative, an initiative to honor 10 Arab achievers every year in different fields, and the aim is to communicate Arab expertise and to contribute in changing the stereotypes about Arabs worldwide. I also work as a social media consultant for different companies (fashion and magazines) and NGO's.

Why did you choose social media as a field of your work and activism?

It was not a matter of choice; actually, it was a need to sound out my voice in different fields. In the beginning, my blog served as a platform to write down my thoughts about life, Arabic poetry and to archive my newspaper writings. Afterwards, I discovered that I do not

have an editor-in-chief but my readers, and that I can write what people really think and wish to say, and hence I began posting articles that dealt with different political and social issues. I reported about human rights causes, civil society campaigns, the Arab uprisings and top news that happen in Lebanon and the Middle East.

You write about Lebanon & Middle Eastern political affairs. What is the message you are conveying?

The whole area has been controlled for years by a triangle of taboos: religion, social norms and tyrant political regimes. I try to break through these thick walls and reach the beam of light at the end. I have put a headline on my blog which is a quote by George Orwell: "There is no more free space in this world except for a few centimeters underneath the skull," and these few centimeters I try to preserve.

How could you be such an influential person through social media?

I think that this report is not the most credible report ever, and I think

that everyone is influential because we are living now in the days of "citizen journalism," where everyone can become the news source and be able to report what is happening to the rest of the people and effect their views about matters they took for granted for so long. But what is important is to build trust, and this happens with time, people will trust a news source each time he/she proves they were right and when they do not talk to people from a higher or a lower stand. Saying this, I do not think I am influential yet. In case I had, I would wish to contribute in fixing many political and social issues in my country and the region.

How is social media, and specifically Twitter, serving the community? Twitter and other social media platforms are only channels, and a channel is always controlled by two ends: the transmitters of the message and the recipients. When we compare social media and other channels, we could easily say it is faster, cheaper and allows feedback. So social media helps in spreading the message



Asaad Thebian

more and more to make it viral, as well as creating discussions about these matters.

What other activities have you been doing to contribute to your community?

Being a member in different NGOs such as Lebanese Association for Democracy of Elections (LADE) to monitor Lebanese municipality and parliamentary elections as well as lobby for electoral reform. Feil Amr NGO which aims to promote usage of Arabic Language along with activism and participation in demos, strikes and sit ins that have to do with human

rights and against the Lebanese sectarian regime.

Did your MEPI experience (the program you participated in) contributed to your success? Or did it have an impact? If so, how?

Yes of course, because it opened my eyes about the world and the different political systems and the political rights a citizen could have. Also introducing me to inspiring colleagues who I learned a lot from, and then being part of a network that has common beliefs in a better society. ■