

Issues and Legislation

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Keynote Address by Rep. Henry Waxman
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Thank you very much. I'm delighted to welcome all of those of you who are not from this country to Washington, DC, and even those who are from the United States to Capitol Hill where across the street is the symbol of our democracy, the capitol of the United States.

I have a great sense of personal pride in your being here as well as the author of the original amendment that encouraged regional cooperation. I think all of you know that I have been a great believer in regional cooperation and what you're doing from the very beginning. I believe in it in and of itself as an end, and also as a means to a greater end as well: lasting peace in the Middle East.

The very existence of this conference indicates how far regional cooperation has come since its beginning. When the program was first enacted into law, many saw it as sort of an anomaly, a gadfly program that was well intentioned but naive. Many people believed that governments simply wouldn't be interested in having their scientists come together for joint projects, particular governments who always had, for many years, strained political relationships.

We believed that if any field of endeavor could pioneer regional cooperation it was science. We thought the scientists, because they have their own standards and methods that have nothing to do with politics, could cross national and religious boundaries by talking to each other as professionals. Thus their projects would enjoy a measure of independence from whatever might be the state of diplomatic relations or global politics at any particular time.

So regional cooperation started small with many skeptics. Now, five years later, it's still small, certainly relative to the sums of money that the United States government devotes to bilateral aid to Israel and to Egypt. What is different now is that regional cooperation has proven itself. It has proven it works. And we ought to make sure we understand and savor all of these accomplishments.

Anyone, for example, who has read about or seen the new strain of goat that produces more milk and more meat and survives in a drier environment than any before, or the techniques of growing tomatoes and melons in salty water, or then new species of high-protein fish or the infectious diseases that have been controlled or eliminated, anyone who has taken a look at the hard science coming out of this program knows that regional cooperation is working.

But the program has also proven itself in its second key aim: building ties between peoples. The very fact that those of you from Egypt, and Israel have come all this way to talk together about cooperation, in itself illustrates that fact. I trust this conference will not only exhibit those ties but help build them as well.

So regional cooperation has survived and proven itself. One result of that is that you have won yourself tremendous support here in the Congress of the United States. When we in Congress heard that budget cuts were being planned for this program we mounted some serious pressure against them.

You may have seen the letters from members of the key Congressional committees to our Secretary of State and administrator of AID telling why cutting this program would be wrong.

Similarly, if you were to read the record of the Congressional hearings this spring where AID presented budget requests for the next fiscal year, you would note that several members of Congress said that cuts in this program would be counterproductive and if they are repeated, Congress may write into law a certain level at which it must be funded.

The public hearing coming up on Tuesday will again give you an opportunity to see that support, and indeed, to heighten it.

So you have built for yourselves a very strong base of political support here. Several things are needed to strengthen that. One is to create an equally strong political base for it in Israel and Egypt. That is essential if regional cooperation will ever be able to challenge other forms of AID such as bilateral economic military aid as a vehicle to lead us toward peace.

Regional cooperation can never mature properly if it is perceived as an American idea accepted and pushed mainly by Americans.

But that's not for now. This conference has a different purpose: to point the future direction of regional cooperation. Many of my colleagues and I believe regional cooperation can and should be expanded. You are the people in the best position to tell us how to do this.

Having won our initial battles we are now poised to begin a new era. If we are going to broaden and have a real impact in the Middle East, now is the time to make some of the crucial decisions along those lines.

For example, we must decide what needs and problems are going to be addressed by cooperation. As I have said, we've regarded scientific and technical work as the most appropriate. Is it possible that there are other appropriate areas as well, and if so, which ones?

The second is who's going to run this activity? While the U.S. government always takes over-all responsibility? Likewise, will certain private American citizens always bear so much of the burden of keeping it going? Is it realistic to even think of working toward full bilateral partnership between Israel and Egypt?

Another vital question is who will fund this activity? Will it always be the US government? We in the US, as you well know, are facing a budget squeeze more serious than any in our memory. If we decide the program should expand, how will it do so? Would opening it to private support be possible? Is direct financial support from the regional partners on the horizon?

In short, I don't believe the crucial question for you in this conference is will regional cooperation survive and grow. The answer to that seems to be clearly yes. The real question is what will it do, how will it do it, and with whom.

Those of us supporting you will be listening very carefully to the conclusions you reach to some of these very questions. They will inevitably be crucial to policy decisions that will come later.

Finally, let me end by thanking AID, the Center for Social Policy in the Middle East at Brandeis and the many private donors that made this conference possible.

On Tuesday I will be part of the Congressional hearing that will review this very program. I will try to join with you in some of the activities, possibly tonight. If not tonight, tomorrow, to check in to learn more as to how you're doing.

Let me wish you the very best in your deliberations. Be fruitful. Continue to work as you have in making this program a success and all of us who have been involved and associated with it very proud.

Thank you very much.