This evaluation was conducted between June 20, 2016 and October 28, 2016, and the final report was submitted January 6, 2017.

Programming Background
The United States Department of State’s Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI) is a program managed by the Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs’ Assistance Coordination Office (NEA/AC) that provides assistance, training, and support to citizens, organizations, and governments to achieve shared political, economic, and security objectives. Within MEPI’s portfolio are Democracy, Human Rights, and Governance (DRG) projects which aim to promote a myriad of key areas such as political participation, freedom of the press, citizen engagement, government accountability, etc. across the Middle East North Africa (MENA) region. The overall goal of MEPI’s DRG projects is the promotion of government and citizen cooperation to solve problems together to advance stability and prosperity within their own countries and the region.

Purpose of the Evaluation and Questions Addressed
NEA/AC contracted a third party evaluation team to conduct an evaluation of nine MEPI funded projects focusing on DRG for three main reasons: 1) to provide evidence regarding which of the projects have long-term results, which are most effective, and the programmatic and contextual factors contributing to their performance; 2) to identify the main strengths and weaknesses of the selected projects, compared with the demands and needs of the MENA region; and 3) to provide actionable and specific recommendations that can be used for MEPI future programmatic design and modifications.

The evaluation sought to answer four main questions: 1) Which of the selected MEPI projects met, exceeded, or failed to meet their programmatic objectives? And how, if at all, did they contribute to US Department of State policy objectives (as outlined in the MEPI results framework)? 2) How has the changing political environment since the Arab Spring affected the design and implementation of the projects? 3) What was the effectiveness of local grants in terms of capacity building, sustainability, and engagement level? 4) Where and how can MEPI optimize its program and project results? What DRG sub-sectors are most open for MEPI programming to have long lasting results? In which areas (in terms of sub-sector, types of project, and comparing local versus D.C. –based grants) should MEPI continue to fund projects?

Methodology
The evaluation assessed nine, post-Arab Spring MEPI DRG programs that incorporated various funding mechanisms and project designs. These case studies included eight countries/territories with different levels of democracy, operating environments, and political systems. To conduct this evaluation, evaluators employed a mixed-method, flexible, industry-standard evaluation approach that used various available sources to provide information about program design, performance, implementation, management, and sustainability. The methods used included document review, key information interviews, group discussions, on-site observation of activities, and electronic (web based) mini-surveys. Field visits were conducted in the U.S., Kuwait, and Morocco to collect primary data via individual and group interviews. Secondary data collection consisted of a review of documents and databases of the nine DRG projects and any additional background information.
Conclusions
Below are the significant conclusions the evaluation team has found regarding the effectiveness of the MEPI DRG projects. The conclusions emphasize the level of success the MEPI DRG projects have had since their implementation. NEA/AC has formulated an Action Plan to ensure that the lessons identified in the evaluation are shared to formulate better DRG programming in future projects.

1) Civil society programs were effective despite operating in politically challenged countries. The evaluation showed that MEPI DRG projects which dealt with civil society programs were effective overall. Many of the civic society organizations-focused programs were able to build social capital and bring young people, and others, into the political process even in areas with broader political challenges. For instance, West Bank authorities increasingly restricted political parties and legislative processes, but civil society was one area that the local government could not repress entirely. Civil society programs were implemented with flexibility to adjust to program design and timing due to the political environment. By doing so, they were able to operate in a wide range of environments: including in a new democracy, an electoral democracy facing challenges from non-state and external actors, a non-democracy with some freedom of expression, and a non-democracy in the midst of a civil war.

2) Local government programs performed better in countries with decentralized government – including even those governments with a relatively closed political system. These programs were more effective in areas where the local authorities are freely elected and have autonomy to respond to residents’ concerns. Evaluators found this to hold true in Algeria, where national government gives local authorities latitude to act on local issues, and in Libya, where geography, security, and politics prevent the national government from interfering in local governance. In other countries, the political environment was carefully assessed in order to function within the limits of that environment and the programs were specific in establishing limits on what could or could not be done. For instance, a program in Kuwait steered away from political work to the point the Kuwait government viewed it as an acceptable program. This allowed the grantee to operate a bit more freely without the constant watch from the government.

3) MEPI women’s and youth programs were successful across a range of countries and regime types. Programs that supported women as well as those that focused on providing support to youth were successful in a wide range of countries despite the difficulty with promoting women issues in the MENA region. The successes of women’s program in Israel and Algeria highlighted that a country’s state of democratic development may not hinder or affect such programs. However it is recommended to rely on domestic implementers who have a better understanding of culture and tradition regarding women within the specific country.

4) MEPI programs were successful because of their flexibility. One reason for why many MEPI programs succeeded is that NEA/AC was flexible. Many of the successful programs, for example in the West Bank, Libya and even Yemen, benefitted from flexibility to both changes in the political environment and to the program itself. By recognizing that sometimes changing the program can increase its impact and make it even more relevant.