

European Democracy Promotion in the Middle East

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In the aftermath of the Sea Island G8 summit that took place on 8–10 June 2004, democracy promotion in the Middle East is firmly on the agenda of international donors. The G8 meeting agreed on a new Broader Middle East and North Africa Initiative (BMEI), elaborated by the United States. The BMEI purports to establish »partnership« with the Middle East, with the aim of supporting democratic reformers. The initiative is built around a »Forum for the Future«, a regular dialogue to include governments, civil society and business representatives. Observers have highlighted the extent to which the BMEI has been watered down from the US's initial proposals for a Greater Middle East Initiative, the Bush administration influenced by hostile reaction in Europe and the Middle East. Beyond the idea of new dialogue on reform, the BMEI is so far bereft of concrete democracy policy instruments. The only new projects agreed under the Initiative relate to literacy and micro-credit, with European governments resisting a new common democracy foundation for the Middle East.

While most attention has focused on US strategy, recent deliberations around the BMEI may also mark a modest increment in European democracy policies in the Middle East. Seeking to build on their existing reform efforts, European governments have recently sought to strengthen EU strategies, not least in order to respond to new US activity. This paper assesses the nature of these European policies, and suggests a number of ways in which they should be changed.¹

1. This paper is a version of a presentation given at the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, in Berlin December 2003. The paper synthesises a more detailed account of European policies found in Youngs R. (2004) *Europe's Uncertain Pursuit of Middle East Reform* (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Working Paper 45), while its recommendations draw on Youngs R. (2004) *European Policies for Middle East Reform: A Ten Point Action Plan* (London, Foreign Policy Centre).

European Democracy Promotion: State of the Art

Democracy promotion has gradually established itself as a central component to European foreign policy, expressed through an array of different instruments: Support for political reform process is an aim formally enshrined in EU objectives; EU third country agreements include a standard sanctions-triggering democracy and human rights clause; a Commission-managed European Initiative for Democracy and Human Rights provides over 100 million euros a year for political aid projects; and member states have significantly increased governance and human rights funding under their bilateral aid programs. Democracy policy in the Middle East was expressed most clearly within the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP), created in 1995 with Maghreb and Mashrek states; has now assumed significant magnitude within Turkey's pre-accession agreement; and has slowly become a topic of more systematic dialogue and some funding in relations with Iran, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and Yemen.

In practice, prior to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 European democracy assistance in the Middle East was relatively limited in scale and extremely cautious. The Middle East received just under ten million euros per year between 1996 and 1999 from the European Commission's new democracy budget, but the region was conspicuously under-represented in the political aid profiles of national governments and European foundations. Politically relevant work that was supported targeted relatively technical governance reforms or basic human rights issues.

Commitments have been made to revitalize democracy promotion policy. Countless ministerial statements have committed European governments to prioritizing support for political reform in the Middle East, in claimed recognition of the extent to which Western backing for autocratic regimes have fostered resentment against the West. Many donors have introduced new initiatives or expanded budget lines aimed at intensifying democracy assistance in the Middle East – this applying to the German, Swedish, Dutch, Danish, British and French governments. Democracy promotion is a more prominent feature of both the Wider Europe initiative and the EU's new guidelines for »Partnership with the Middle East«. ² More formalized dialogue on political reform and initia-

2. Joint Strategy Document of the European Commission and Council Secretariat (2003) *Strengthening the EU's Relations with the Arab World*, December 2003.

tives for new political aid projects have been witnessed within the framework of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership. New EU guidelines for democracy and human rights promotion were agreed in 2003, committing the EU to elaborating national plans for human rights to be agreed with EMP Arab states.

The EU's pre-accession partnership with Turkey has produced significant increases in political aid to support prime-minister Erdogan's apparently genuine commitment to democratization. A new EU-Iran human rights dialogue has commenced and a number of European states have commenced reform-oriented programs on the ground in Iran. The EU also appears finally to have become more serious about trying to democratize the Palestinian Authority. The Occupied Territories have become the favored destination for European political aid in the Middle East, while increasing shares of EU aid has been made conditional on governance, judicial, civil society, security sector and electoral reforms. Yemen has similarly established itself as a prominent political aid destination for European donors, with new projects prioritizing judicial reform and parliamentary training. Even in Saudi Arabia, a modest opening is seen as having appeared for political aid and European donors have offered support for proposed governance reforms and the commitment to hold partly competitive municipal elections.

Democracy assistance in more politicized spheres – elections, parties, parliaments and civil-military relations – continues to be disproportionately limited in the Middle East.

Despite progress, the European focus on democracy promotion in the Middle East is still relatively limited. Democracy assistance amounts are still modest. While contrasting definitions of different types of funding make it impossible to compile reliable figures – some projects supported from »democracy« budgets stretch that definition, while other funding that is relevant to democratic reform flows from mainstream budgets – it can be reckoned that little more than 2–3 percent of European aid in the Middle East is devoted to political reform. Many in development ministries have resisted funds being diverted into middle-income Middle Eastern states for foreign policy rather than poverty-reduction reasons. Much European political aid relates only indirectly to democracy, aiming, for example, at small business development, environmental and service delivery

associations or cooperation in the cultural sphere. European donors have supported national human rights committees, for example, most of which have highly compromised positions in the Middle East. Most European »reform« support is orientated notably towards cultural, education, development and governance projects. In the region's most closed societies – Syria, Libya, Saudi Arabia – European governments have failed to establish a significant foothold for political aid work. In many states – Algeria, several Gulf states – the largest share of European aid still goes to security forces with highly questionable human rights records.

The main significant change on the part of most European donors has been away from self-standing development projects towards programs that aim to encourage reform within particular sectors. So, instead of just building and equipping schools or training teachers, now European donors aim at broader reform of the education system. This is the kind of approach often meant when governments refer to their commitments to »Arab reform«. Women's rights have become a particularly strong focus of European funding: support for women's human rights groups has been one of the largest categories of funding in Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco; parliamentary training programs for women have been provided by a number of European donors in countries like Yemen and Jordan; while the issue of gender rights is one whose »mainstreaming« has been most strongly promoted within EU development assistance.

Democracy assistance in more politicized spheres – elections, parties, parliaments and civil-military relations – continues to be disproportionately limited in the Middle East. While in other regions donors have increasingly sought to link civil society work to parties and parliaments, this new focus has remained largely absent in the Middle East. Nearly all parliamentary work takes the form of training for actual or would-be women parliamentarians. European approaches remain highly economic, based heavily on the assertion that cooperation on new market regulations, economic decision-making capacities and trade-related governance reforms represent the most fruitful routes towards political change.

European policies have laid heavy emphasis on the cultural dimensions of Middle Eastern transformation, in particular through the Dialogue on Cultures and Civilizations established under the rubric of the EMP; Romano Prodi's convening of a »Groupe des Sages« to recommend new avenues for enhancing cultural cooperation and understanding; and the new Euro-Mediterranean Foundation. However valuable, it is not clear how the plethora of new cultural fora link into the democracy agenda.

There have been few obviously political dimensions to such cultural initiatives. Indeed, several member states have advocated a focus on cultural cooperation as a softer and more palatable alternative to muscular democracy promotion. Many aspects of this cultural dimension have had a defensive feel, focusing less on the prospects for spreading democracy in the Middle East than on the need for better respect for Islam *within* Europe.

A particular challenge for European democracy promoters has been the US's new high profile initiatives aimed at »democratizing the Middle East«. The apparent direction of US policy in recent months has encouraged European policy-makers to become if anything even more insistent on a gradual approach to political change. All European donors have stressed the need to work in partnership with actors in the Middle East, and to draw on the recent reform initiatives created by civil society activists in the region, such as those that took place in Sana'a and Alexandria in early 2004. The US has been accused of overplaying the link between 9/11 and democracy promotion in the Middle East, to the detriment of the reform agenda. European governments have sought to avoid this danger.

Yet, while the EU admonishes the US for its hard-headed direct security approaches and claims that its approach is far more oriented towards targeting the roots of terrorism, the EU has itself also prioritized defensive measures most notably since 9/11. The most dramatically expanding area of EU activity since 9/11 has been the strengthening of defensive approaches to security through new »justice and home affairs cooperation«. Funding for border controls and anti-terrorist cooperation with Middle East governments has far outstripped new democracy promotion resources. The focus on securing non-proliferation commitments from Iran, Syria and Libya has been bought at the cost of diminished focus on these states' internal reforms.

Ways Forward: A Reform Agenda

Against this background, a number of improvements to European democracy promotion are called for in the Middle East:

A European Democracy Fund

Funding for democracy assistance projects needs to be increased, and organized at the European level. The current lack of consultation between

donors risks duplication and excludes opportunities for sharing knowledge and experiences between different donors. The Commission's new Country Strategy Papers have failed to deliver the promised detailed overview of member states' national policies or any analysis of evolving political challenges impacting upon European interests. Setting up a common European democracy fund would not only increase available funds and facilitate coordination, but also send a clear message to both governments and reformists in the Middle East. At present, European funding has been so fragmented and low profile that its existence often barely registers in the region. Such a fund would not need to undermine national bilateral initiatives. Different donors have developed different strengths in the field of political aid and such a division of labor would continue, with respective areas of expertise drawn on rather than suppressed. The aim would be to increase the visibility of overall EU efforts and to coordinate these within a more comprehensive and better-planned general strategy.

Balancing Top-down and Bottom-up Approaches

A better balance is needed between top-down and bottom-up approaches. Many analysts have cautioned that change in the Middle East is unlikely to emerge solely from bottom-up civil society dynamics, but must necessarily involve more top-down approaches. European donors have been too imprecise in conceptualizing how their focus on bottom-up process relates to reforms at the political-institutional level. A focus on the institutional products of formal democracy should be developed in a way that sustains and furthers the bottom-up process dynamics that European donors seek to strengthen. There is still concern that civil society's transformative potential has been over-estimated and the essential aggregative role of political institutions unduly overlooked. Tentative efforts to train political society actors have fallen short of expectations, as government authorities have prevented these projects from gaining adequate political backing. This represents a failure to move beyond isolated civil society initiatives to an appropriately political approach to democracy building. The social and political domains should thus be harnessed within single cross-cutting projects and initiatives.

Responding to »Windows of Opportunity«

European approaches are good at focusing on the gradual underlying processes that generate long-term change, but bad at responding politically to reform opportunities. One effect of the EU's preference for highly formalized and institutionalized partnerships is that initiatives tend to work to their own internal momentum, in a complete vacuum from outside events. A striking arbitrariness pervades European funding decisions and these consequently often bear little relation to changing international priorities. For precisely this reason, at the beginning of 2004 the European Parliament launched a legislative process aimed at strengthening political control over the Commission's democracy funds. Policy aimed at the gradual conveyor-belt of underlying change needs to be complemented by more dexterous and nimble political interventions targeting visible change when break-through opportunities present themselves.

Linking Governance Work and Political Reform

European policy has been weak in making the leap from gradual changes in economic process to the tangible results of political reform. The relationship between Europe's extensive range of governance work and broader political reform has been worryingly under-conceptualized. Most judicial reform or public administration reform carried out under a democracy label has in practice focused on enhancing the capacity of particular institutions and has not touched on the fundamental nature of political process. Many EU governance projects appear in this sense simply to have strengthened the policy-making capacity of ruling elites and helped shore-up incumbent regimes. The paucity of decision-making linkages between the EU's relatively large »good governance budgets« and its more modest »democracy and human rights« funds remains debilitating. Thus, better assessment is required of the precise political effects of European strategies aimed at general social and economic development.

Joined-up Policy Making

More joined-up policy-making is urgently required – including between government and European party foundations. Decision-making processes are at present simply too incoherent to produce a well-thought out and sustained commitment to generating new policy-making process.

Separate pockets of policymaking currently tend to work away on their own efforts in acknowledged ignorance of how these relate to any grand design. EU democracy and human rights officers have no link to aid officials in national capitals.

The process-oriented approach requires fundamentally restructured decision-making processes – if gradualism is not to equate to little more than ad hoc muddle.

There is little or no coordination in terms of overall direction, either vertically between different ministries in capitals, or horizontally between member states. No common European-level assessments have been drawn up of democratic conditions in individual states or of the security implications of political reforms. Coordination has developed at the local level between in-county missions, on implementation issues and individual funding decisions rather than over-arching strategic questions. The whole justification of the process-oriented approach is that it embodies a sophistication absent in short-termist top-down policies. But this requires fundamentally restructured decision-making processes – if gradualism is not to equate to little more than ad hoc muddle.

Engaging with Moderate Islam

Despite the commitments made by countless ministerial statements and policy documents, in practice little new engagement with moderate Islam has been forthcoming. European donors have proceeded no further than including general discussion on »Islam and democracy« in some civil society forums. A plethora of initiatives have aimed at »cultural understanding« between Islam and the West, but concrete support has been lacking for moderate Islamists concerned to widen political participation within their own societies. It is widely recognized that this is the single most important area in which European approaches must change, but so far little has been done. There should be a concerted commitment on the part of European donors to support grass roots Islamist welfare organizations, where the latter's work might overlap with EU social development programs. Such concrete support would be more valuable than any number of »Islam and democracy« workshops. It would provide a first tentative step towards establishing mutual trust between European donors and Is-

lamists, so that relations could then move on to more political issues. A key challenge would be to design such cooperation in a way that helped demonstrate the link between effective social policy and the need for open politics.

Assessing the Impact of Democracy Promotion Policies

More sophisticated indicators for assessing the impact of democracy funding should be devised. The effects of democracy assistance have been notoriously difficult to ascertain. Up to now, judgments have revolved around donors' own need to demonstrate tangible, quantitative short-term results. Democracy projects have often been assessed in a very top-down, elite-focused way, with little local input – this invariably more notable than the generation of genuinely local-level legitimacy.³ This has been compounded by the shift towards funding bigger NGOs, invariably based in Europe – this the result of tighter audit rules agreed in the aftermath of the Commission's 1999 financial scandal. More qualitative assessment indicators should be developed, oriented to the longer term and revolving around concepts such as participation, access to policy-making and actors' effective autonomy from the executive.

Mainstreaming Democracy Promotion

Better linkages are needed between democracy assistance and mainstream development assistance. »Democracy assistance« has been understood in restrictive terms, and has failed to draw on the potential of projects run under far larger standard development aid budgets. For example, a number of large judicial reform projects have been introduced in Middle Eastern states in the last two years, but it remains unclear how the strengthening of judicial capacity in these cases relates to broader political reform. The need for complementarity has been recognized, with increased consultations between departments running the EU's MEDA budget (for cooperation with Mediterranean countries) and the unit in Europe Aid responsible for the European Initiative for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR). Links are still weak, however, particularly in a number of member states. The inception of systematic coordination between mainstream

3. Crawford G. (2003) »Promoting Democracy from Without – Learning from Within (Part I)«, *Democratization* 10/1: 77–98.

Overseas Development Assistance (ODA) and democracy assistance objectives could significantly strengthen the impact of overall EU efforts.

Rewards and Conditionality

While European donors are right to stress the need for partnership and for reforms to be driven from within the Middle East, they should consider modest forms of conditionality. There is a case for ensuring a tighter correlation between very specific political reforms and the potential benefits that partnership with the European Union bestows. Political conditionality does not need to be used in a dramatic fashion, completely breaking off relations if immediate and far reaching political change is not implemented. But, conditions should be developed that are linked in a very specific way to particular programs. The specific aim should be to secure a change in institutional processes to allow for greater autonomy and access in the area of work covered by each individual EU aid project. More generally, the EU needs to make available far larger rewards linked to political reforms that are attainable and narrowly defined. It must have the political will to spell out more clearly what kinds of reforms are expected in return for aid increases. These should be modest political liberalization measures that have a reasonable chance of being successfully implemented. Recent European Commission plans do focus on the notion of more effective positive conditionality, providing aid and trade rewards for those Middle Eastern states that do cooperate with the EU on human rights issues. This is the kind of approach that should be made more systematic, and extended to national donors.

Supporting the Private Sector

A share of economic aid should be set aside for »democracy-assisting« funding for private sectors in the Middle East. The Middle East still lacks prominent and organized private sector support for democratic reform. No other region has reached similar levels of economic development with such modest autonomous political activism on the part of private sector actors. While concerned over corruption and economic mismanagement, private sector organizations in the Middle East have invariably accepted autocratic regimes as a necessary bulwark against Islamists. But, there has so far been little European effort directly to encourage the emergence of a more politically independent and pro-democratic private sector. Euro-

pean aid channeled to private sector organizations has rarely been provided for purposes that would assist the development of political activity. This feature of European policy should be revisited.

Strengthening Transatlantic Cooperation

A final issue relates to the need for better transatlantic cooperation. In the run up to the June G8 summit, the EU resisted US overtures to combine democracy funds in the Middle East, and the extent of transatlantic coordination that will be forthcoming under the new Broader Middle East and North Africa initiative remains uncertain. The EU has gained presence and purchase in many parts of the Middle East by virtue of not being the US and by not presenting its policy as part of a »Western« project.

One of the most valuable contributions the EU might make to democracy promotion could be seen in its ability to effectively influence the direction of US strategy.

Where differences with the US are over-stated, however, genuine opportunities for joining forces may be lost, and the danger arises of Middle Eastern states being able to play the US and European states off against each other – to the benefit of neither the EU nor US. Differences can easily be overplayed. Recent years have witnessed some convergence between European and US approaches to democracy assistance. Notwithstanding European criticisms of the current Bush administration, both the EU and US could learn more from each other. The EU needs to spend more time on considering how cooperation with the US might add to the efficacy of its own work, and what division of tasks might be envisaged between the EU and US in the democracy assistance field.

Conclusion: European Added Value?

These changes would help create a more effective and distinctive European approach to the broader Middle East. There has been understandable concern with European policies being adversely effected by over-weaning US agency in the region. Certainly, one of the most valuable contributions the EU might make to democracy promotion could be seen in

its ability effectively to influence the direction of US strategy. At the same time, the positive potential in stronger transatlantic coordination of democracy promotion should not be lost from sight, if EU and US policies can galvanize each other in the development of more assertive reform efforts. Existing, institutionalized dialogue, social development initiatives, women's rights, governance and cultural cooperation can all serve as useful foundations for a European »added value« in debates over Middle East reform. Their resonance could, however, be enhanced by a strengthening of the so-far weaker aspects of EU policies. For this to happen, a »more of the same« philosophy still needs to be supplanted by a deeper reassessment of Europe's role in the broader Middle East.

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