Extracted from *Democracy in Development. Global consultations on the EU's role in democracy building*
© International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance 2009.

The European Union and challenges to democracy building in the Arab world

Amor Boubakri and Susanne Lindahl

Executive summary

This chapter examines the main challenges for democracy building in the Arab world and how the role of the European Union (EU) is perceived. Policy proposals and recommendations for consideration by the EU are presented with a view to addressing the gap between the EU's policy intentions and Arab perceptions of the EU's ambitions in promoting democracy building. The chapter is based on consultations and research on the EU's role in democracy building in the Arab world conducted by International IDEA during 2008 and 2009.

The Arab world is politically, socially and economically diverse. The region's political diversity is related to levels of democratic development and political stability. Although all Arab countries suffer from substantial democracy deficits, there are different degrees of authoritarianism or liberalism across the region. Distinctions exist between traditional Arab societies, in which archaic social structures and values still dominate, and relatively modernized societies. Finally, some Arab countries, such as Iraq and Somalia, suffer from dangerous instability due to persistent conflicts.

Although the region is diverse, there are also common challenges. There is a lack of real choice in the political system. Opposition and democratic institutions are weak or even non-existent in most Arab countries. There are specific problems with the role and independence of parliaments, the judiciary and governance structures, including the capacity of municipal and state authorities to deliver services to their citizens. The exclusion of Islamist movements, among the most important political actors, is another relevant point. The exclusion of women from political participation and gender discrimination that curbs women's rights are another important issue.

Links between democracy and social and economic development are of central importance to democracy building in the Arab world. Outside the high-income Gulf region, large parts of the Arab world grapple with poverty, social underdevelopment and

insufficient access to basic welfare systems. Insufficient or underdeveloped education systems are especially significant in this regard. The Arab world also faces exceptional demographic change coupled with high unemployment rates. This could be either an opportunity for or a challenge to democracy building, depending on how the new generation of young people is nurtured.

Foreign intervention in the region has increased since the 19th century. The Arab world has been especially troubled by the effects of the US-led 'war on terror', which increased instability in the region and contributed to increases in violations of human rights behind the façade of security policy.

Opinions of the EU's democracy promotion efforts differ throughout the region. Undoubtedly, there are positive perceptions, but there are also objections to them and criticisms. The EU is generally perceived as an interesting partner but with a credibility gap which it needs to take seriously. The EU is not thought to be responding to the need for a partnership to address the socio-economic challenges in the region. Instead, it is seen as focusing on trade and the promotion of human rights.

In order to improve its policy and action and contribute to supporting democracy building in the Arab world, the EU must shift its focus towards a long-term commitment to democracy issues, including finding strategies for an inclusive approach and a broader understanding of democracy and its linkages to socio-economic development in the region.

Introduction

The EU and the Arab world belong to the same neighbourhood: they are neighbours with economic, cultural and political ties that bring their peoples together. Migration flows and shared concerns linked to instability and insecurity in parts of the Arab world create common agendas.

There are, however, challenges to cooperation and partnership, such as a communication gap and a lack of trust and credibility on both sides. The discourse tends to focus on the differences between rather than the similarities in the two regions – focusing on the divide between Christianity and Islam even though both regions represent both religions, and emphasizing a 'clash of civilizations' (Huntington 1996: 22–49) in spite of the shared culture and history. Recent developments connected to Europe's reaction to the rise of political Islam, Europe's perceived relations with Israel and the so-called war on terror have exacerbated the differences between the two regions.

This chapter discusses the main challenges to democracy building in the Arab world, putting in perspective the perceptions of the EU's role in the region. The chapter provides a set of policy options for the EU which can serve as an input for a changed partnership between the two regions.

The main challenges for building democracy in the Arab world today

The Arab world is politically, socially and economically diverse, which is also reflected in the perceptions of the EU's support for democracy building in the region.

First, in terms of geography the 'Arab world' is a difficult concept, including countries from the Gulf region, North Africa and West Asia/the Middle East. Sub-Saharan African states such as the Comoros, Djibouti and Somalia are members of the League of Arab States and could also be included in the definition. The countries bordering the Mediterranean and the Gulf states have different points of departure for their relations with the EU.

The region's political diversity is related to levels of democratic development and political stability. Countries range from modern to traditional. Although all Arab countries suffer from substantial democracy deficits, degrees of authoritarianism or liberalism vary within the region. Distinctions should also be made between traditional Arab societies, in which archaic social structures and values still dominate, and relatively modernized societies. Finally, some Arab countries, such as Iraq and Somalia, suffer from dangerous instability due to persistent conflicts.

> **All Arab countries suffer from substantial democracy deficits, degrees of authoritarianism or liberalism vary within the region. Paradoxically, the low-income economies that suffer from major social problems are, generally, governed by relatively open regimes.**

In economic terms, Arab states can be divided into four categories: the low-income economies (Comoros, Mauritania, Somalia and Yemen), the low to middle-income economies (Algeria, Djibouti, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Morocco, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia and the West Bank and Gaza strip), upper middle-income economies (Lebanon and Libya) and high-income economies (Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates).

Combining these classifications would contribute to a better understanding of the Arab world. In the high-income economies of the Gulf states, which are traditional societies governed by authoritarian regimes, prosperity is linked to oil revenues which represent more than 80 per cent of GDP. The lower middle-income economies are relatively modern societies ruled by either authoritarian or relatively open regimes. Paradoxically, the low-income economies that suffer from major social problems are generally, though not in all cases, governed by relatively open regimes.

Although the region is diverse, there are also common challenges. The absence of democracy in the region is common to all Arab states. There are both factors specific to the region and more general challenges to democracy building, but the distinction is in many ways artificial – in reality the two are closely interlinked.

Region-specific challenges

A number of problems peculiar to the region contribute towards the democracy deficits in the Arab world. These relate mainly to the persistence of authoritarianism and of economic and social underdevelopment.

Arab regimes and other key players seem to lack the will to commit to democratic objectives. Arab regimes resist change. According to one interviewee 'there is a big gap between the rhetoric of agreeing on democracy and the belief in democracy, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, accepting each other and to share power' (Pace 2009). There is also a lack of real choice in the political system. Opposition is weak in most Arab countries, and in others it is simply not allowed to exist (Saudi Arabia, Libya, Oman, Qatar, Syria and the United Arab Emirates, UAE). Even where the right to vote

exists, the electorate does not necessarily have real alternatives to vote for, and elections only serve to confirm the same rulers in their positions. Democratic institutions are weak or non-existent. There are specific problems with the role and independence of parliaments, the judiciary and governance structures, including the capacity of municipal and state authorities to deliver services to their citizens.

The exclusion of Islamist movements, potentially the most important political actors, is another relevant point. Apart from a few cases, such as Algeria, Bahrain and Morocco, in which a distinction is made between moderate and radical movements, the majority of Arab regimes have banned Islamist movements, either de jure or de facto, thereby depriving a stratum of Arab societies of political participation. Exclusion of these movements has its roots in the authoritarian characteristics of the Arab regimes and cannot be explained by any repudiation of Islamism per se. Opposition parties are constrained regardless of their political ideology, and democratic parties of the left and right suffer from the same blinkered treatment.

The exclusion of women from political participation and gender discrimination that curbs women's rights are also important issues. Gihan Abouzeid concludes that women are discriminated against in the political sphere across the Arab world (Abouzeid 2009). Tribal traditions and a strong patriarchal culture are highlighted as the roots of this problem, which is a major challenge for democracy building in the region. The Arab world is unique in that women are not usually allowed to vote or to be a candidate. This is the case in the majority of the Gulf states. Even in the countries where women theoretically have political rights, the gap between the law and reality demonstrates the systematic marginalization of women.

Links between democracy and social and economic development are of central importance to democracy building in the Arab world. Outside the high-income Gulf region, large parts of the Arab world grapple with poverty, social underdevelopment and insufficient access to basic welfare systems. Insufficient or underdeveloped education systems are especially significant in this regard. Weak educational institutions do not provide opportunities to strengthen the democratic culture or citizenship. Democracy needs to be practised and schools can be one platform for doing so. A 2003 United Nations Development Programme Report on knowledge in the Arab world showed that Arab educational systems are not able to provide people with a positive civic education and the opportunity to practise democracy (UNDP and Arab Fund for Economic and Social Development 2004:52).

> **Links between democracy and social and economic development are of central importance to democracy building in the Arab world. Large parts of the Arab world grapple with poverty, social underdevelopment and insufficient access to basic welfare systems. Weak educational institutions do not provide opportunities to strengthen the democratic culture or citizenship.**

The Arab world also faces exceptional demographic change and extremely high population growth coupled with high and rising unemployment rates. This could be either an opportunity for or a challenge to democracy building, depending on how the new generation of young people is nurtured.

> **The Arab world also faces exceptional demographic change and extremely high population growth coupled with high and rising unemployment rates. This could be either an opportunity for or a challenge to democracy building.**

Lack of employment opportunities and a lack of opportunities

for men and women to improve their standard of living create tensions that in turn affect democracy and governance in the region. Social and economic underdevelopment leads to frustration and a sense of hopelessness for many young people. This situation is the origin of large-scale migration, both legal and illegal, mainly from the North African states to Europe. Moreover, it can provide fertile ground for increased radicalism and political extremism. The rise of radical Islamism has received widespread media coverage and affects the Arab world's relations with other regions in different ways.

Wider challenges to democracy building

Foreign intervention in the region has increased since the 19th century. The 20th century was particularly challenging – mainly because of the Arab-Israeli conflict. The Arab world has been especially troubled by the effects of the US-led 'war on terror', which has increased instability in the region and contributed to increases in violations of human rights behind the façade of security policy. According to Ziadeh, all Arab countries in the Arab region are 'actively engaged in counter-terrorism activities that to some extent violate human rights such as the right to a fair trial and the ban on torture' (Ziadeh 2009). The post-11 September 2001 world focused on security issues at the expense of, for example, the democracy building agenda.

The policy pursued in the region by global powers such as the USA has been to provide generous support to allied regimes in spite of their undemocratic nature. The objective of regional stability is used as a pretext for setting up military bases, such as the French military base established in May 2009 in Abu Dhabi, UAE, and offering military aid. Egypt, for example, receives USD 1.3 billion annually in US military financing (Sharp 2009: 28–29; United States Government Accountability Office 2006). This policy of supporting authoritarian rulers and corrupt officials undermines democracy building efforts in the region.

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict has been a permanent cause of tension in the region since 1948. There have been six wars during this period, the most recent in Gaza in December 2008. Although the region has been a theatre for several cruel conflicts, this is the most important conflict that the Arab world has ever seen. It is still a major factor in instability in the Middle East and beyond. The Council of the European Union considers the resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to be a condition sine qua non for dealing with issues such as democratization and reform in the region (Council of the European Union 2003).

> **Many Arab intellectuals consider that the EU's policy of democracy promotion is doomed to failure as long as European countries continue unconditionally to favour Israel.**

The conflict generates a general feeling of unfairness and scepticism towards external actors such as the USA and the EU, which are accused of partiality and unconditional support for Israel. Many Arab intellectuals consider that the EU's policy of democracy promotion is doomed to failure as long as European countries continue unconditionally to favour Israel.

The Arab-Israeli conflict has also encouraged the establishment of military regimes and reinforced the popularity of radical movements. The struggle for liberation is considered to be the top priority, and one that is more important than democracy building. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict has been used as an alibi to maintain authoritarian regimes and provide them with false popular legitimacy (Boubakri 2009).

Democracy in Development

Perceptions of the EU in the Arab world

The EU has different policies and mechanisms to facilitate its cooperation with different subregions and for use on a case-by-case basis with individual countries. The main platform for cooperation with the Mediterranean is the Barcelona or Euro-Med Process, which was initiated in 1995 and evolved in 2008 into the Union for the Mediterranean. The structure for cooperation is set out in the EU Regional Strategy Paper (2007–2013) and its Regional Indicative Programme (Commission of the European Union 2007). Political dialogue and reform issues are, at least on paper, elements of such cooperation.

The Mediterranean countries also cooperate with the EU in the European Neighbourhood Policy. Action plans and Association Agreements are laid down for each country, and these include clauses on democracy issues.

The European Commission is present in the region through its Delegation Offices and channels financial aid to both civil society and national authorities. Although the democracy portfolio represents only a small part of these aid allocations, its support for elections and human rights protection is seen as useful.

Democracy clauses are also included in trade agreements. Free Trade Agreements are being negotiated with the Mediterranean countries and the Gulf states, as well as bilateral agreements between individual EU member states and individual Arab states. This is especially the case in the Gulf, where relations between the EU and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) are weak. Negotiations were launched with the Iraqi Government on a Partnership and Cooperation Agreement in November 2006. Eight rounds of negotiations have been held to date.

The EU's policy of promoting democracy in the Arab world is seen differently across the region. Undoubtedly, there are positive perceptions, but there are also objections to and criticisms of the EU's policy and actions.

Positive perceptions of the EU's policy

In the Arab world, the EU is generally perceived to have implemented a successful model of regional integration based on democracy and economic and technological development. Furthermore, the EU is seen as having made real efforts to support democracy building: 'The incentives offered by the EU have been a real catalyst for attaining reform and democratic transition' (Khaled el-Molla 2009). The EU is often described as a credible partner with a good reputation, (Abouzeid 2009, Boubakri 2009, Fakhro 2009) and this explains the demand for Europe to play a role and be a partner in the region (Yassine 2009).

More often than not, the EU is discussed in comparison to the USA. The comparison is often favourable, but there is also a perception that 'the EU is often a hesitant spectator as events unfold, waiting for the USA to give its green light' and that 'the EU often appears powerless, as a hand-wringing bystander' (Pace 2009). Some argue that 'The EU has preferred to leave the political arena to the USA and take a back seat', leading to the assumption that 'it is a payer not a player' (Saif and Hujer 2009).

> In the Arab world, the EU is generally perceived as a successful model of regional integration based on democracy, and economic and technological development. Furthermore, the EU is seen as having made real efforts to support democracy building.

Objections to EU policy

The EU's policy of promoting democratic governance is the subject of obvious objections from a number of actors. Some Arab governments are suspicious of EU policy and refuse to allow the EU to become involved in issues related to governance in their respective countries. EU policy is regarded as interference in the internal affairs of the country. This is most obviously the case in the Gulf states, where negotiations on a partnership agreement have been interrupted on many occasions linked to contradictory standpoints related to democracy and human rights issues. The Gulf states prefer to limit their cooperation with the EU to the economic sphere and to exclude political issues from agreements between the two parties. The communiqué of the 19th EU-GCC joint council and ministerial meeting, held in Muscat in April 2009, demonstrates the EU's apparent acceptance of this attitude, and that it prefers not to risk the material interests of its member states.

The EU's policy of democracy building in the Arab world is also opposed by several political movements, mainly Islamic fundamentalists. This attitude is essentially ideological and political. In reality, the refusal to interact is mutual. Analysts such as Amel Boubekeur argue that the EU's attitude to working with Islamist parties is out of date and should be reconsidered on the basis of recent evolutions in such organizations (Boubekeur 2009).

> **Criticism of EU policy is mainly a reaction to the EU's perceived tolerance of authoritarian regimes in the region. The criticisms are mainly connected to issues of credibility and the lack of a real partnership.**

Criticisms of EU policy

Criticisms of EU policy on the Arab world come mainly from civil society and opposition movements. It is mainly a reaction to the EU's perceived tolerance of authoritarian regimes in the region. The criticisms are mainly connected to issues of credibility and the lack of a real partnership.

In contrast to those who object to the existence of such a policy, these actors believe that the EU can play a positive role in democracy building in the Arab world. Human rights activists consider that the EU has a moral obligation to assume such a role alongside its economic role in the region. However, the EU's real commitment to democracy is questioned because of the gap between policy and action. The EU is perceived as supporting, or at least refraining from criticizing, authoritarian regimes and as not prepared to jeopardize its relations with governments for the sake of democratic principles (Abouzeid 2009). In the eyes of these actors, the EU protects the status quo and incumbent governments for short-term economic and security gains, and to maintain stability (Ziadeh 2009). Saif and Hujer argue that 'democracy does not seem to be a top priority for the EU' (Saif and Hujer 2009), while Khatib believes that European long-term interests in democracy 'come second to short-term preferences for security and regime stability' (Khatib 2009).

The situation is complicated by the lack of a coherent EU voice. The discrepancies in the messages from different EU institutions, as well as in those coming from the EU level and those from individual EU member states are especially discussed (see e.g. Khatib 2009, Fakhro 2009). The perceived competition between EU institutions in the EU's cooperation with the Arab world reduces the effectiveness of EU policies and actions (Khaled el-Molla 2009).

The EU is also believed to 'fear the costs of democratic transformation' (Khaled el-Molla 2009), that is, to be unwilling to push for elections where Islamists could win power. This is a serious accusation that the EU needs to face up to and respond to in order to remain a partner in democracy building in the region. The EU is perceived as having too narrow an understanding of Islamism, and is believed to marginalize Islamist actors (Boubekeur 2009). Contacts and dialogue between Europe and Islam are too limited, in spite of the fact that there is now a significant number of Muslims in the EU who would be able to play a positive role and to act as bridge builders. The unwillingness of the EU to recognize the results of the 2006 election in the Palestinian territories was a big mistake and must be reconsidered if the EU wants to be seen as a credible actor in other democracy building discussions.

The European Commission is the largest financial assistance donor to Palestine. Despite the support provided to Palestinians in humanitarian and development aid, the EU's policy on the conflict and its attitude to the parties has been severely criticized. As a member of the 'Quartet on the Middle East', the EU has never been considered an impartial mediator. Its inertia over the serious crimes committed by the Israeli army contrasts with its vigorous reaction to Palestinians, in spite of the balance of power between these two parties. This policy continues to create tensions between the EU and the Arab world, to impede regional cooperation and create serious problems for the EU's credibility in the region.

The EU's credibility as a partner is also tarnished by the violations perpetrated by European countries in their struggle against illegal migration and in the so-called war on terror. Migration issues are particularly sensitive because of the large migration flows from the Arab world to Europe.

> The situation is complicated by the lack of a coherent EU voice. Many contributors to this volume highlighted the discrepancies in the messages from different EU institutions, as well as in those coming from the EU level and those from individual EU member states. The perceived competition between EU institutions in the EU's cooperation with the Arab world reduces the effectiveness of EU policies and actions.

> The EU is also believed to 'fear the costs of democratic transformation', that is, to be unwilling to push for elections where Islamists could win power. This is a serious accusation that the EU needs to face up to and respond to in order to remain a partner in democracy building in the region.

Policy recommendations for a changed EU approach

The Arab world is a diverse region, consisting of countries with different economic situations, different political conditions and different relationships with the EU. Challenges to democracy building in the region relate to the lack of stable and democratic institutions, insufficient socio-economic development coupled with an unbalanced demographic 'pyramid', and the intervention of external actors in a manner that does not support democracy building. The EU is generally perceived as an interesting partner but with a credibility gap which it needs to take seriously. The EU is believed to apply double standards, particularly to its relations with Israel, on the one hand, and the Arab countries, on the other. The EU is not thought to be responding to the need for a partnership to address the socio-economic challenges in the region. Instead, it is seen as focusing on trade and human rights. Communication and interaction with Islamist actors need further development. Based on this analysis, this section presents a set of recommendations for the future development of EU policies and actions. The key themes of these improvements are credibility, inclusive partnerships, and linking democracy building to socio-economic development.

Credibility and the EU's commitment to democracy building in the Arab world

Where objectives or priorities seem to collide, the more sustainable option of democracy building should take precedence. Policies on anti-terrorism or short-term stability which violate human rights and human dignity are counterproductive and short-sighted. A longer term vision will be more effective at meeting both security and democracy objectives. The democracy agenda should not be allowed to be compromised.

This requires, first and foremost, the adoption of a better calibrated attitude to the Arab-Israeli conflict, and the assumption of a more positive role in the peace process, which has reached an impasse. In this respect, it is essential that the EU continues to bring financial and economic aid to Palestinians, but also that this aid should not be politically oriented and conditioned. In addition, the EU should pay more attention to the observance of international humanitarian law by both parties in the conflict.

This also means that the EU must respect the choices made by voters in democratic elections – regardless of the ideological colour of the elected parties. The EU must establish a policy on how to respond to Islamist parties in governing positions after such elections.

Some of the EU's perceived credibility problems boil down to a lack of clear communication from the EU on its priorities, policies and objectives. It is not clear to all its partners what the EU actually stands for or does. The EU should make an effort to improve its 'public relations' and to increase transparency. The EU's Delegations in the region should play a major role in this.

Ambiguous and confusing messages result from the lack of coherence between different EU institutions, which must also be addressed. There is scope to improve efficiency by reducing inter-institutional competition and increasing the mainstreaming of democracy into the various policy areas involved. This includes closer communication between the EU's Neighbourhood Policy, trade policy, security policy and development policy, as well as efforts to synchronize the messages from different EU member states. It should be clear to the partners that the EU prioritizes agreed EU interests ahead of the agendas of individual states.

The EU should aim to improve mutual understanding between Europe and the Arab world to settle historical misunderstandings complicated by recent events, such as the 'war' against terror and migration issues. One means of achieving this would be to elevate cultural exchange by establishing more cultural centres, more cultural programmes and more fora for cultural exchange. For example, there could be efforts to build European cultural centres and support could be given to more exchange programmes between educational institutes.

> Policies on anti-terrorism or short-term stability which violate human rights and human dignity are counterproductive and short-sighted. A longer term vision will be more effective at meeting both security and democracy objectives. The democracy agenda should not be allowed to be compromised.

> There is scope to improve efficiency by reducing inter-institutional competition and increasing the mainstreaming of democracy into the various policy areas involved. This includes closer communication between the EU's neighbourhood policy, trade policy, security policy and development policy.

Inclusion of several partners in dialogue and cooperation

It has become clear that there is a need to include a broader set of actors – state and non-state stakeholders – in dialogue related to the EU's democracy building policies and actions. The EU should not favour some actors to the detriment of others on ideological grounds. Impartiality is key to efficient partnerships that are respectful of the political, social and religious diversity in the Arab world. Communication channels should therefore be established by the EU beyond incumbent governments to enable dialogue and exchanges of ideas with wider civil society and Islamist parties, including the elected Hamas government in Palestine, as well as with parts of the government other than the executive branch. Active efforts should be made to ensure equal access for men and women to dialogue and consultations. In particular, cooperation with civil society should be reviewed. It is crucial that an assessment be made of which civil society actors are involved and which are not involved in dialogue efforts, and to ensure that interaction with civil society is transparent.

This inclusive approach should include increased EU support for strengthening the capacity of institutions to be open to all – providing equal access for men and women, and for minority groups as well as the majority population, citizens with physical or mental disabilities, and men and women with different backgrounds and levels of education. Actions to remove obstacles to inclusion can include anything from improving the physical environment of state institutions to assistance with translation of materials into minority languages and providing training in gender sensitivity for key officials.

EU policies must take gender concerns more into account, and should avoid viewing women as a single homogeneous category with the same needs and priorities. Women make up about half the population and should not be treated as a minority group – but the traditional marginalization of women should be recognized and special efforts should be made to ensure that men and women have equal opportunities to participate in and influence the democracy building project. Institutions that can sponsor and accept women's participation as equals should be developed and strengthened.

> **EU policies must take gender concerns more into account, and should avoid viewing women as a single homogeneous category with the same needs and priorities.**

The EU needs to acknowledge and understand that the term 'Islamism' encompasses many different players; and that their different ideologies and approaches are dynamic – developing over time in response to changed contexts. The EU needs to find ways to open communication channels with Islamists to improve mutual understanding. Since there are many different kinds of Islamist, the EU needs to develop a multi-pronged approach to deal and interact with Islamist parties in more diverse ways. For radical groups, de-radicalization efforts might be considered, building on the EU's own experience with political extremists from the left and right. Political reintegration methods and the inclusion of radicals can be more effective than unconditional exclusion. It is radicalism, not the radicals that needs to be dealt with. Importantly, democratization efforts in the Arab world should not be reduced to an 'intercultural dialogue'. Islamist parties are political actors in the same way as other ideologies and are accepted as such by regional electorates. By accepting a discourse of Islamic cultural specificity, the EU will feed the arguments of both internal islamophobes and authoritarian regimes in the Arab world that are looking for excuses to reject democratization.

Any partnership must have mutual benefits for both sides. As US President Barack Obama recently observed in Cairo: 'The interests we share as human beings are far more powerful than the forces that drive us apart'.[1] This statement is partly true for the European-Arab relationship. The Arab world has much to contribute, in the form of its experience and history, which could be shared with and made use of by the EU. Similarly, the EU can do more to offer expertise to local and regional actors looking for inspiration, for example, on constitution building, judicial reform and the linkages between social cohesion and democracy building. Objectives and actions within the partnership must also be formulated in a way that captures the benefits for both sides in order to create a platform for buy-in. It is not enough to communicate that the partners should democratize because this is in the interests of the EU – there must be dialogue and communication showing that the partnership focuses on shared objectives.

> **Any partnership must have mutual benefits for both sides. The Arab world has much to contribute, in the form of its experience and history, which could be shared with and made use of by the EU.**

One concrete proposal is the establishment of independent partnership commissions, comprising actors from different levels and backgrounds – such as civil society, political parties, including Islamists where relevant, parliamentarians and other stakeholders – with the task of monitoring and assessing partnership policies and their effects on regional democracy building, and making proposals for change where needed. This would create ownership and strengthen both cooperation and the credibility of policies.

Link economic and social development to democracy building efforts when designing and implementing programmes

The link between social cohesion, economic development and democracy building is not clearly present in the EU's regional strategies for the Arab world. This linkage has been emphasized throughout International IDEA's consultations in the region. A sustainable approach means taking this nexus into account, and building on it to provide more attractive options for cooperation with regional partners.

This means that the EU should better synchronize its development programmes on employment opportunities, education and social security systems with its technical and political democracy building activities. Literacy programmes and educational reform can form indirect parts of a broader democracy building agenda. The need for governments to deliver on promises and to be held accountable for this delivery should be emphasized.

The EU should reconsider its approach to democracy building, and not promote a specific model of liberal democracy that only secular and liberal actors in the Middle East can subscribe to. It would be more useful to focus on the broad and basic principles of democracy, leaving the details to be determined through internal dialogue and debates in which the EU can inspire by example rather than prescribe a solution. Democracy must also be seen as more than elections; and democracy building as more than electoral assistance. At the same time, the EU should not confuse democracy building with human rights work.

---

[1] The White House, Press Office, Remarks by the President at Cairo University, 4 June 2009, http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/Remarks-by-the-President-at-Cairo-University-6-04-09/

The EU's extensive trade relations with the Arab world provide scope for exercising more influence over its partners (Saif and Hujer 2009). Positive conditionality and a soft power approach will be more efficient than military power and should be used more often and more consciously. This power could be used by the EU to pressure Arab governments to recognize and protect democracy, gender equality and basic individual rights and freedoms. The EU could make more effort to provide constructive advice on how to strengthen responsible opposition, build useful institutions, discourage corruption and support the development of an independent media. This should be done in a low-key way with little media attention to enable open dialogue without necessarily causing the partner governments to lose face.

Finally, the EU needs to free itself from the ubiquitous comparisons with the USA. It should be clear to the partners that the EU does not always adopt the same policy or actions as the USA; and when US actions are incompatible with objectives of the EU-Arab partnership, the EU should stand up for its own values (Boubakri 2009, Fakhro 2009).

> **The EU should reconsider its approach to democracy building, and not promote a specific model of liberal democracy that only secular and liberal actors in the Middle East can subscribe to. Democracy must be seen as more than elections; and democracy building as more than electoral assistance**.

Conclusions

The EU can sell itself to the region as a credible and engaging partner with a great deal to offer. This is not only based on the EU's own experiences of democracy building in recent history, bur also because it possesses the advantage of selling an approach which involves the use of *soft power* rather than military influence.

Good neighbourhood relations are essential between the Arab world and Europe. These can only be built on the solid ground of trust and genuine partnership. This must be addressed on both sides of the Mediterranean. We strongly urge the European Union to reconsider its approach to the Arab world, by focusing on issues of common concern instead of on the differences. We also urge the Arab world and the cooperation platforms such as the League of Arab States and the Organization of the Islamic Conference to consider what they can do to take this partnership to the next level, including communicating their needs and demands in a clear way. Such exchanges and peer-level dialogue are the most efficient way to meet the current challenges to democracy building.

> **Good neighbourhood relations are essential between the Arab world and Europe. These can only be built on the solid ground of trust and genuine partnership.**

References

Abouzeid, Gihan, EU's Role in Democracy Building: *Impact on Women's Political Participation in the Arab World*, Stockholm: International IDEA, 2009, www.idea.int/eu

Boubakri, Amor, *Efforts by the European Union to promote Democratic Governance in the Arab World*, Stockholm: International IDEA, 2009, www.idea.int/eu

Boubekeur, Amel, *Updating EU's policies toward Islamist parties and radical actors*, Stockholm: International IDEA, 2009, www.idea.int/eu

Commission of the European Union, *European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument (ENPI) Regional Strategy Paper (2007–2013) and Regional Indicative Programme (2007–2010) for the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership*, Euromed, 2007

Council of the European Union, *Strengthening the EU's partnership with the Arab World*, (15945/03) Brussels, 9 December 2003

El-Fakhro, E.A., *The EU, Islam and Democracy in Bahrain and the Arab World*, Stockholm: International IDEA, 2009, www.idea.int/eu

Huntington, Samuel, 'The Clash of Civilizations?' in *Foreign Affairs*, 72/3 (Summer 1993)

Huntington, Samuel, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of the World Order*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996

Khaled el-Molla, Nesreen, *The EU's Role in Political Reform and Democracy Building in the Southern Mediterranean Region: An Egyptian Perspective*, Stockholm: International IDEA, 2009, www.idea.int/eu

Khatib, Kamleh, *How Promotion of Political Reform by the European Union is Perceived in the Arab World: The Cases of Lebanon and the Palestinian Territories*, Stockholm: International IDEA, 2009, www.idea.int/eu

Pace, Michelle, *Perceptions from Egypt and Palestine on the EU's Role and Impact on Democracy-building in the Middle East*, Stockholm: International IDEA, 2009, www.idea.int/eu

Saif, Ibrahim and Hujer, Michael, *Have Trade Relations Between the European Union and Mediterranean Countries Promoted Democratic Values in the South?*, Stockholm: International IDEA, 2009, www.idea.int/eu

Sharp, Jeremy M., *Egypt: background and US Relations*, Washington: Congressional Research Service, 26 March 2009

United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and Arab Fund for Economic and Social Development, *Arab Human Development Report 2003: Building a Knowledge Society*, Amman: UNDP, 2004

United States Government Accountability Office, *Security assistance: State and DOD Need to Assess How the Foreign Military Financing Program fro Egypt Achieves US Foreign Policy and Security Goals*, Report to the Committee on International Relations, House of Representatives, Washington, April 2006

Yassine, Nadia, *L'U.E et la promotion de la démocratie et des partis islamistes en Afrique du Nord*, Stockholm: International IDEA, 2009, www.idea.int/eu

Ziadeh, Radwan, *EU Policy to promote Democracy in the Arab World*, Stockholm: International IDEA, 2009, www.idea.int/eu