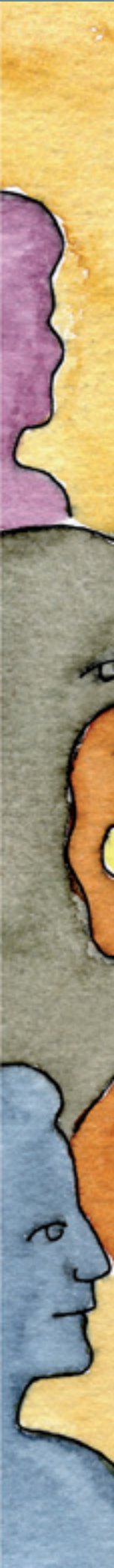




# Perceptions from Egypt and Palestine on the EU's Role and Impact on Democracy Building in the Middle East

Dr Michelle Pace, Senior Research Fellow, Political Science and International Studies Department, European Research Institute, University of Birmingham, United Kingdom



Perceptions from Egypt and Palestine on the EU's Role and Impact on Democracy Building in the Middle East

© International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance 2010

International IDEA publications are independent of specific national or political interests. Views expressed in this publication do not necessarily represent the views of International IDEA, its Board or its Council members.

Applications for permission to reproduce or translate all or any part of this publication should be made to:

International IDEA  
SE -103 34 Stockholm  
Sweden

Layout by: Bulls Graphics

# Perceptions from Egypt and Palestine on the EU's Role and Impact on Democracy Building in the Middle East

## Abstract

Some argue that the EU's focus is more on elections and human rights than democracy promotion, while others question the real intentions of the EU in its democracy promotion efforts in the Middle East. Although such debates are important, they do not pay sufficient attention to the perceptions of the EU's role in and impact on democracy building held by the targets of these policies. This report fills this gap by highlighting some perceptions from Palestine and Egypt. For a long time, the EU has been perceived as a normative actor and a 'force for good', attempting to export its own norms to other regions in the world. This perception has radically changed in the light of recent events in Palestine and Egypt as well as the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. EU actors need to question whether the EU is really interested in democracy building in the Middle East, or whether its priority is diplomatic mediation and alliance-building. This question relates to the interests of EU member states and requires high-level political bargaining between national governments.

The report builds on approximately 20 interviews carried out in Palestine in September 2007 and an equal number conducted in Cairo in March 2008. Those interviewed include academics, representatives of non-governmental organisations (NGOs), bloggers, political party activists and parliamentarians, including Islamists, representatives of the judiciary and journalists. The summarized conclusions provide reflexive reading, particularly for EU officials. The report concludes with a set of policy options for the future.

## Summary of Recommendations

The EU must move away from imposing models of liberal democracy. Interviewees called for the EU to focus on the basic needs of the people of the Middle East and North Africa as well as their claims for real change and reform through economic, social, civil and political rights. The EU could choose to stay out of the democracy building business and allow the forces within the Middle East to develop their own programmes and agendas. The EU could then support internally driven initiatives.

If the EU is more interested in protecting its own set of liberal values than ensuring that these same values are emulated elsewhere, then it needs to do some reflexive thinking. If the EU genuinely desires to encourage democracy building in Egypt and Palestine, it needs to make more consistent and robust use of the democracy clause in its bilateral agreements with third parties, especially in cases of democratic infringements, and to focus on real obstacles to democratization – including authoritarian rule.

In the case of Egypt, the EU should use its leverage to apply more consistent pressure on the Egyptian Government to cease censoring the Egyptian domestic media, including the banning and blocking of Internet sites and journalists' access to information. EU aid to Egyptian society should support the establishment of local NGOs working on educational and health programmes as well as election transparency, freedom of expression, political participation and establishing truly independent human rights NGOs.

As a collective, the EU has the potential to bypass the colonial historical baggage that member states such as France and the United Kingdom carry in their relations with the Middle East. In order to do this, the EU must carry through institutional and political reforms of its own, giving the EU a single, coherent voice as a global actor. Last but not least, the EU must be consistent in its rhetorical pressure on Middle East governments when violations of democratic principles and human rights occur. The EU has to acknowledge its leverage and the power of its rhetoric – but such pronouncements must be regular and show a true commitment to respect for human rights throughout the Middle East region.

## 1. Introduction

The European Commission set out the strategic and funding priorities of the European Union (EU) in the area of democracy and human rights assistance in *The EU Role in Promoting Human Rights and Democratisation in Third Countries* (European Commission 2001). The EU's approach to democracy promotion is marked not by a military posture, but by a predisposition to promoting its values through its interaction with and the socialization of other actors – or, in other words, through a partnership-based approach. The document indirectly sent a message to the targets of the EU's democracy promotion efforts that the EU was somewhat different from the United States in the manner in which it was proposing to encourage political reform in other regions.

However, it has long been acknowledged by diplomats, academics and journalists that when it comes to the EU's external relations with the Middle East, the lack of a coherent and unitary voice is a key constraint on its effectiveness

(MacShane 2008). This institutional constraint is not limited to differences between the positions of the Council of the European Union, the European Commission and European Parliament. It extends to differences within and between EU member states. A second factor which adds to the EU's malaise is its failure to deal with the real political causes of the Middle East conflict. Moreover, a major limitation on the EU's identity as a global actor, particularly in the Middle East, is that the EU is often a

**The EU's approach to democracy promotion is marked not by a military posture, but by a predisposition to promoting its values through its interaction with and the socialization of other actors – or, in other words, through a partnership-based approach.**

spectator as events unfold, waiting for the USA to give its green light.<sup>1</sup> Despite its strong economic and diplomatic influence, the EU often appears powerless, as a hand-wringing bystander. No other area highlights these constraints more than democracy building in the two cases in this report: Egypt and Palestine.

In Palestine, although the EU sent its own mission to observe the January 2006 parliamentary elections – which were declared fair, free and transparent – it reacted by freezing direct aid to the Palestinian Authority after, following pressure from the USA, Hamas was put on the EU’s list of outlawed terrorist organizations. The EU’s refusal to take a different track and officially engage with Hamas on the core challenges of governance, and its refusal to use its diplomatic leverage in an attempt to understand the Islamist, nationalist movement and to encourage national unity between Hamas and the more moderate Fatah, led to the EU being labelled as complicit in the current events in Gaza as they unfold at the time of writing. As Khalid Mish’al, the head of the Hamas political bureau, stated: ‘If this is the “free world”. . . we want nothing to do with it’.<sup>2</sup> As a member of the Quartet, the EU has not only isolated Hamas but also allocated funds for the improvement of the security apparatus which Fatah uses to crack down on Hamas in the West Bank. Such actions encourage an embedded perception in the region that the EU’s principles and values on democracy building are false and empty rhetoric and actually harm Palestinians’ desire for and efforts towards a free society. Javier Solana (2009) has admitted the EU’s failure and collective impotence in this regard.<sup>3</sup>

**The EU’s lack of pressure on the Mubarak regime and its negation of the Palestinian people’s democratic choice has led to unprecedentedly negative perceptions of the EU’s involvement in the Middle East, particularly vis-à-vis its role and impact on democracy building.**

In the case of Egypt, the unprecedented success of the Muslim Brotherhood, a major outlawed opposition force, in the 2005 parliamentary elections has since led to more restrictions by the Mubarak regime on opposition representation, in particular on that stemming from the Muslim Brotherhood. In choosing not to confront the Mubarak regime, the EU endorses authoritarianism rather than democracy building (Pace with Seeberg 2009).

The EU’s lack of pressure on the Mubarak regime and its negation of the Palestinian people’s democratic choice has led to unprecedentedly negative perceptions of the EU’s involvement in the Middle East, particularly vis-à-vis its role and impact on democracy building.

In academic and policymaking circles, some argue that the debate on democracy promotion in the Middle East has been exhausted.<sup>4</sup> Others argue that the EU’s focus is more on elections and human rights rather than democracy promotion per se. Still others question the real intentions of the EU in its democracy promotion efforts in the Middle East.

---

<sup>1</sup> Author’s interview with Dr Diaa Rashwan, Al Ahram Centre, Cairo, 26 March 2008.

<sup>2</sup> Khalid Mish’al 2009.

<sup>3</sup> It may be the case that Solana regretted his announcement prior to the January 2006 elections in Palestine that if the Palestinians voted for Hamas there would be repercussions. From a legal basis viewpoint, this statement was a clear infringement of the internal affairs of the Palestinian territories.

<sup>4</sup> Report from the Second Meeting of the ESRC project research group on the EU and Democracy Promotion in the Middle East, London School of Economics and Political Science, 9 January 2009.

**Perceptions of what the EU does in the Middle East are very much driven by how actors in the Middle East perceive the EU as an international actor.**

Although such debates are important, they do not pay sufficient attention to the perceptions of the EU's role and impact in democracy building held by the targets of these policies. This report aims to fill this gap and highlight some of these perceptions from Palestine and Egypt. Perceptions of what the EU does in the Middle East are very much

driven by how actors in the Middle East perceive the EU as an international actor. For a long time, the EU has been perceived as a normative actor and as a 'force for good', attempting to export its own norms to other regions in the world (Pace 2007). This perception has radically changed since the abovementioned events in Palestine and Egypt as well as the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. This report builds on approximately 20 interviews carried out in Palestine by the author during September 2007 and an equal number of interviews conducted in Cairo during March 2008. Those interviewed include academics, representatives of non-governmental organisations (NGOs), bloggers, political party activists and parliamentarians including Islamists, representatives of the judiciary and the state (in the case of Egypt) and journalists. The aim of the summarized conclusions from these interviews is to provide reflexive reading, particularly for EU officials.

The report first provides a brief background to the EU's relations with Egypt and Palestine in the context of democracy building. This is followed by an overview of the perceptions of the EU as an actor in this policy domain. The report concludes with a set of policy options for the future.

## **2. EU Relations with Egypt and Palestine in the Context of Democracy Building: A Brief Overview**

The European Commission has primary responsibility for developing and implementing democracy related programmes in the framework of the EU's external relations. Since the decentralization reform of 2000, its Delegation offices in the Middle East have had an increased role on the ground, including the management of the former MEDA programme,<sup>5</sup> the European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument (ENPI), human rights and civil society projects as well as European Initiative for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR) micro-projects. The Delegation offices also reports on political developments and human rights in the region. However, the Commission is a far from autonomous actor. EU member state governments are represented through the Council of the European Union, which sets the general political orientation of EU policies, and more specifically through the High Representative of the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) – the Second Pillar of the EU System covering the political and security dimension. Democracy and human rights are core objectives of the EU's CFSP (Treaty on European Union, article 11.1). Making the assumption

---

<sup>5</sup> MEDA was a major financial instrument of the EU to support economic and social reforms in the Mediterranean region, providing finance for bilateral and multilateral cooperation. For example MEDA involved projects relating to the education, health and environment sectors as well as to the improvement of infrastructure and restructuring of administrations. Until 31 December 2006, EU assistance to the countries of the Middle East was provided under geographical programmes including MEDA, as well as thematic programmes such as the European Initiative for Democracy and Human Rights. For the budgetary period 2000–2006, available funding amounted to approximately EUR 5.3 billion for MEDA, as well as approximately EUR 2 billion in European Investment Bank lending for MEDA beneficiary countries. See <[http://ec.europa.eu/world/enp/funding\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/world/enp/funding_en.htm)> for more information.

that economic development leads to political reform, the EU commits itself 'to contribute to the general objective of developing and consolidating democracy and the rule of law, and to that of respecting human rights and fundamental freedoms' (Treaty establishing the European Community, articles 181a and 177.2).

**EU democracy promotion efforts have, so far, mainly focused on human rights and elections. Two key pillars of the EU's efforts are human rights education and an emphasis on institution-building.**

The European Parliament emphasizes the importance of supporting democratization processes, particularly 'EU measures to support the electoral process and to allow comprehensive and effective election monitoring' (European Parliament 1998). In 1999, the Commission granted the Swedish International Development Agency EUR 990,000 to implement common European standards for electoral observation. Members of the European Parliament exercise their limited power through regular resolutions, parliamentary exchanges in the Euro-Med Parliamentary Assembly, reports, hearings, oral and written questions and missions during elections in the area. There is a European Parliament delegation to the Euro-Med Parliamentary Assembly. According to Chris Patten, in the implementation of measures intended to promote observance of human rights and democratic principles in the EU's external relations 'the pivotal role of the European Parliament is in both the development of policy and the expansion of available resources' (Commission of the European Communities 2000).

### **Themes and Actors on the Ground**

As is noted above, EU democracy promotion efforts have, so far, mainly focused on human rights and elections. Two key pillars of the EU's efforts are human rights education and an emphasis on institution-building. In Palestine, community assistance extends to legal aid to the victims of human rights violations as well as support for monitoring by international NGOs specializing in children's rights.

EU democracy building efforts have also prioritized relations with civil society and NGOs, as the main implementing partners for projects such as those under the EIDHR. It is a key stated aim of the EU to strengthen the development of a pluralistic civil society in its neighbouring countries. Linked to this aim are the declared aims of the EU's democracy promotion activities: to develop and consolidate the principles of liberty, democracy, respect for human rights and the rule of law in its neighbouring countries through the development of cooperative activities under association agreements in the case of Mediterranean partners, including Egypt, or, in the case of Palestine, an interim agreement. Article 2 of each association agreement stipulates that respect for democratic principles and human rights is an essential element. This clause is legally binding on both parties to the agreement, with the possibility of suspension in cases of violation.<sup>6</sup>

The EU seeks to achieve these aims primarily through funding projects or democracy assistance packages for particular target groups, including women and victims of torture. Rather than directly challenging the strategies used by authoritarian regimes to suppress and silence opposition voices in the Middle East and North Africa, the

---

<sup>6</sup> The EU has not thus far suspended any agreement with any Mediterranean partner. This may be difficult as such a suspension would require a consensual agreement between all 27 EU member states.

**Rather than directly challenging the strategies used by authoritarian regimes to suppress and silence opposition voices in the Middle East and North Africa, the EU prefers to offer assistance for 'countering the abuse of prisoners and detainees, empowering survivors of torture and developing capacity in the area of forensic medicine'.**

EU prefers to offer assistance for 'countering the abuse of prisoners and detainees, empowering survivors of torture and developing capacity in the area of forensic medicine' (Commission of the European Communities 2000: 53).

Relations between the EU and Egypt and Palestine go beyond bilateral relations to include multilateral as well as regional relations. The EU has had diplomatic relations with Egypt since 1966. The two partners signed a Cooperation Agreement in 1977 and an Association Agreement in 2001.

The latter came into force in 2004 and is a legally binding treaty. In theory, the EU seeks not only to develop financial cooperation and trade relations with Egypt, but also to support Egypt's domestic and political reforms. At the top of the EU's agenda are democratic reform, economic modernization, social reform and migration issues.

EU-Egypt and EU-Palestine relations have been institutionalized further through the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership, launched in 1995, and the European Neighbourhood Policy, launched in 2003. Under the ENP framework, an Action Plan spells out the current agenda in EU-Egypt relations. EU bilateral relations with Palestine also have a legal basis in the Euro-Mediterranean Interim Association Agreement 1997. Since 2004, Egypt has undertaken a comprehensive economic reform agenda (Gehad Madi 2008) driven by a newly emergent elite, but political reforms remain limited.

In the context of the Middle East Peace Process and on paper, the EU plays a role as part of the Quartet and seeks to support the Palestinians with their continuing and comprehensive political, economic and social reforms. In particular, the EU seeks to support Palestinians in their institution-building efforts towards an independent and democratic Palestinian state. The European Commission is the biggest donor of financial assistance to the Palestinians. Following the elections of January 2006, and the victory of Hamas, the EU – at the request of the Quartet and the Council of the European Union – established the Temporary International Mechanism (TIM) to facilitate need-based assistance to the Palestinians and support from international donors. Emphasis was placed on sectors that enabled the continued functioning of essential public social services. TIM was phased out in March 2008 and replaced by the PEGASE (Mecanisme 'Palestino-Européen de Gestion et d'Aide Socio-Economique'), which aims to support a three-year Palestinian Reform and Development Plan (PRDP), which was presented by the Palestinian Authority's Prime Minister, Salam Fayyad, at the Paris Donor Conference of 17 December 2007. Under the ENP, EU-Palestinian relations are guided by an Action Plan concluded with the Palestinian Authority.

The agenda for reform in Palestine has been overshadowed by internal Palestinian fighting since the takeover of Gaza by Hamas in the summer of 2007. The ensuing Israeli and Western economic embargo of Gaza, Israel's almost total closure of Gaza's border crossings, ongoing lawlessness in Palestine, and heightened Israeli restrictions on freedom of movement in the West Bank contributed to the calling of a serious halt to the development of any political, economic or social reforms. A six-month ceasefire was agreed in June 2008 between Hamas and Israel, but was not renewed in December. Israel started bombarding Gaza on 27 December 2008 and a war waged until 18 January 2009, when first Israel and then Hamas declared unilateral ceasefires.



In the case of its relations with Egypt, the EU emphasizes, at least on paper, close cooperation on democratic reform, economic modernization, social reform and migration issues. The Action Plan between Egypt and the EU, in the context of the ENP, sets the current agenda for this relationship. However, when in January 2008 the European Parliament issued a critical resolution on the human rights situation in Egypt, the Egyptian Government was quick to respond, claiming that the European Parliament was interfering in Egypt's domestic affairs. In spite of vowing not to yield to Egyptian pressure, just a few weeks later EU lawmakers signed a memorandum of understanding on the National Indicative Programme (Egypt National Indicative Programme 2007–2010) – an 'assistance package' of EUR 558 million (Pace 2008).

### **3. Perceptions of the Role of the EU in Democracy Building: Interviews with Key Actors in Egypt and Palestine**

In Palestine, there is a view with regard to TIM and PEGASE that by sanctioning an elected party, on the one hand, while increasing assistance to the Palestinians, on the other hand, the EU shows itself to be encumbered by 'clumsy' decision-making and sending 'confused' messages to people in the Middle East. Strong voices in the territories claim that the EU funds the Israeli occupation of Palestine. These perceptions reiterate the view that the EU's policy is subservient to that of the USA. Interviewees expressed strong feelings of anger at the EU, which will make EU attempts at democracy building either impossible or extremely difficult. According to these voices, no democracy building efforts in the Middle East will be possible unless the EU takes the Middle East conflict seriously, including a thorough understanding of its historical roots and an understanding of the real agenda of the occupying power. In other words, the EU must use its economic leverage on Israel, especially when international norms are violated, rather than continuing to upgrade its relations.

The EU is the biggest donor to the Palestinians and also Israel's biggest export market. If lessons are to be learned from the events in Gaza, then the EU should apply tougher conditions on any long-term assistance to the Palestinian community, and suspend its existing and proposed association and new cooperation agreement with Israel until real change takes effect on the ground. The EU cannot attempt democracy building in Palestine while arming Israel with weapons that are used in contravention of their EU licensing criteria (Clegg 2009).

Islamist groups, including the Muslim Brotherhood and Hamas, are becoming increasingly popular in Egypt and Palestine. The Islamists interviewed by this author interpret democracy as a political process and programme which caters for the collective needs of the people, including employment, education, housing and health facilities – a welfare or social democracy. Such a perception of democracy is shared by other interviewees, and all argue that the EU should focus on these basic needs if it is serious about democracy building in the Middle East. In the case of Palestine such a democratic process and programme would require the end of occupation, while in Egypt it would require the end of authoritarianism. Because of the particular context of occupation in Palestine, interviewees distinguished between perceptions of democracy on an intellectual level and perceptions of democracy in praxis. According to Nasr El-Din Sha'r: 'The EU has to understand that people in Palestine – whether they are Islamists or from Fatah or

**No democracy building efforts in the Middle East will be possible unless the EU takes the Middle East conflict seriously, including a thorough understanding of its historical roots.**

from other groups – they accept democracy in principle. What they do not accept is to share power. So 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.<sup>7</sup>

**The EU should apply tougher conditions on any long-term assistance to the Palestinian community, and suspend its existing and proposed association and new cooperation agreement with Israel until real change takes effect on the ground.**

In both Egypt and Palestine, interviewees see democracy as a means rather than an end in itself. In Palestine, it is a means to end corrupt practices and occupation and in Egypt it is seen as a means to end authoritarianism. As Dr Ahmed Youssef stated: ‘When the people voted, they voted because they expected reform and change and we had a political

programme to achieve this: to address the corruption, the chaos, the lack of law and order’.<sup>8</sup>

It therefore follows that while, in the Western mode of democratic political thinking, political Islam lacks an emphasis on the liberal aspect of governance, no external actor has the courage to engage with Hamas’s progressive political faction to increase understanding of what governing really entails. Hamas officials, for their part, had misread the EU’s intentions, thinking that agreeing to a National Unity Government would lead the EU to lift its sanctions on Hamas – but this did not happen. By promoting a specific model of liberal democracy, which only secular and liberal actors in the Middle East can subscribe to, the EU accentuates the divisions between governing and opposition groups in the Middle East and North Africa.<sup>9</sup> This helps to explain why interviewees argued that the EU is only interested in protecting its own set of liberal values rather than helping other regions to emulate its success in the process of democratic transition.

According to Refaat Al Said:

It is very difficult to find a real understanding of democracy. It is not the same in each country. It is a matter of culture. Sometimes things are accepted in one society but not in another. In the European Continent for example, if someone denies the existence of the Holocaust, he goes to prison. Here, it is the denial of the existence of God which takes you to prison. It is a culture, it may be wrong in the eyes of others, but it is a culture. And this is distorting our main activities to create a liberal attitude, a tolerant attitude, and so on.<sup>10</sup>

Ahmed Youssef also emphasized the importance of context to democracy building efforts by any external actor: ‘The situation here is totally different from Europe. The people here feel this is an Islamic culture. We are not intending to have an Islamic state here: We are not like Iran or Sudan. It is better to have a democratic state and culturally we are guided by Islam’.<sup>11</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup> Author’s interview with Dr Nasr El-Din Sha’r, Deputy Prime Minister and Education Minister in National Unity Government, Nablus, September 2007.

<sup>8</sup> Author’s interview with Dr Ahmed Youssef, Political Adviser to Ismail Haniyeh, Office of the Prime Minister, Gaza, September 2007.

<sup>9</sup> On North Africa see Cavatorta (2009).

<sup>10</sup> Author’s interview with Refaat Al Said, Tagamu’ Party headquarters, Cairo, March 2008.

<sup>11</sup> Author’s interview with Dr Ahmed Youssef (see note 8).

A further insight into perceptions in Egypt and Palestine is provided by the view that the EU cannot have an impact or lead by example when the development agencies of its member states donate money to corrupt individuals who pose as representatives of civil society or NGOs. According to Ahmed Youssef:

Some of the Swedish people representing their government I spoke to and who are responsible for funding some projects in Gaza told me that unfortunately after 20 years they figured out that most of the project funded work was just a piece of paper – a project proposal on paper. In reality, there has been no outcome, no impact. All the money they poured in has gone into the pockets of those people who submitted the project proposals in the first instance.<sup>12</sup>

This sentiment was echoed by Refaat Al Said of the Tagamu' party in Cairo (2008).<sup>13</sup>

Moreover while Europe and the Mubarak regime in Egypt hail progress with economic reform (Pace 2008), the reality shows that the regime is consciously distorting what used to be the backbone of Egyptian society – the middle class – and there is growing poverty in Egypt, leading to strikes and protests. The Egyptian Government responds to the demands of factory workers by increasing their salaries but when protesters request more freedom, such as freedom of expression, the government bypasses these demands, which it deems not specific enough to deserve its attention.

A key theme running through the interviews conducted in Palestine and Egypt is that the EU's intervention in democracy building has not addressed the core problem – basic needs and the lack of basic rights in the Middle East. Most interviewees acknowledged that the EU's emphasis has been, in the main, on human rights, and its funding directed at human rights organizations. These efforts have encouraged and created a sensibility for human rights issues in the societies at large, which indirectly affects governments' behaviour. Dr Saad Eddin Ibrahim emphasizes that the fact that the Egyptian Government felt the need to respond to the European Parliament's January 2008 report on the human rights situation in Egypt signals that the Mubarak regime feels some pressure to be seen as adhering to international norms. Such statements from EU institutions need to be made more regularly and on a more consistent basis. Eddin Ibrahim added that there is a serious lack of knowledge in Brussels about the lack of freedoms in the Middle East. When addressing a group of European parliamentarians in March 2008, he was shocked when MEPs informed him that they had not been aware of the Saudi-Egyptian initiative, approved by the Arab ministers of Information at their Arab League meeting of 12 February, 2008, to restrict the freedom of satellite transmission in the Arab region.<sup>14</sup>

**The Islamists interviewed interpret democracy as a political process and programme which caters for the collective needs of the people, including employment, education, housing and health facilities – a welfare or social democracy. Such a perception of democracy is shared by other interviewees, and all argue that the EU should focus on these basic needs if it is serious about democracy building in the Middle East.**

**While, in the Western mode of democratic political thinking, political Islam lacks an emphasis on the liberal aspect of governance, no external actor has the courage to engage with Hamas's progressive political faction to increase understanding of what governing really entails.**

<sup>12</sup> Author's interview with Dr Ahmed Youssef (see note 8).

<sup>13</sup> Author's interview with Refaat Al Said (see note 10).

<sup>14</sup> Author's interview with Dr Saad Eddin Ibrahim, London, 6 March 2008.

**Most interviewees agreed that the EU confuses democracy building with human rights. For this reason, a key related implication of the EU's strategy is that there is no trust in the intentions of external actors in the Middle East.**

Most interviewees agreed that the EU confuses democracy building with human rights. For this reason, a key related implication of the EU's strategy is that there is no trust in the intentions of external actors in the Middle East. The US led 'war on a terror' became a brand which other external actors adopted without question, and Arab regimes were only too keen to adapt it to their own version of dealing with extremism. As Diaa Rashwan emphasizes:

I am not against external efforts at democracy building in the Middle East but we have to be realistic. We have to have a real estimation for our efforts, not to exaggerate what will be or what we will achieve. Democratization is a real, internal problem. What we have here in Egypt, for example, is a lack of basic social and economic rights. This is just one of the obstacles to democracy building. So perhaps external efforts have to change their direction, to ameliorate such conditions – education, social conditions, economic conditions. And it is a long-term process that will take time.<sup>15</sup>

In the case of Palestine, there is general agreement between the interviewees that unless the EU applies strong pressure on Israel to lift the severe restrictions on freedom of movement for Palestinians, dismantle the so-called security wall and freeze all settlement activities, then all EU activities under the banner of democracy building will be pointless.

Perceptions from across the interviewees emphasize that the EU's focus on human rights concerns does not translate into a proactive programme for the EU to understand the situation on the ground. The EU simply cannot have any role or impact in the Middle East unless it puts pressure on Israel to abide by international norms in the case of Palestine and on the Mubarak regime when violations of international norms occur.

**Perceptions from across the interviewees emphasize that the EU's focus on human rights concerns does not translate into a proactive programme for the EU to understand the situation on the ground.**

Actors agree that the EU's hope that economic development will lead to political reform is misplaced. According to Bahgat Korany, political reform, at least in Egypt, should go

hand in hand with economic reform: 'I feel that democracy is a political measure ... that doesn't touch basic needs. Part of the failure of the elites is to not link the campaign for democracy to the daily life of the average man and woman in the street.'<sup>16</sup>

Esam El Erian from the Muslim Brotherhood agrees: 'We are now facing a transition to a failed state [in Egypt]. The regime has failed to provide people with their daily bread'.<sup>17</sup> It therefore follows, according to Chief Judge Muhammad Sa'id Al-'Ashmawy, that what the EU needs is a short to medium as well as a long-term plan for the region: political change requires time and patience as well as the enlightenment of the people of the region through education programmes.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Author's interview with Dr Diaa Rashwan (see note 1).

<sup>16</sup> Author's interview with Dr Bahgat Korany, American University in Cairo, March 2008.

<sup>17</sup> Author's interview with Esam El Erian, Muslim Brotherhood headquarters, March 2008.

<sup>18</sup> Author's confidential interview with Chief Judge Muhammad Sa'id al-'Ashmawy, Cairo, March 2008.

## 4. Conclusions and Policy Prescriptions

The above analysis highlights how, on paper, the EU promotes democracy building in the Middle East using a number of approaches. First, through a conditionality approach whereby the EU attempts to induce change in the region via its economic leverage and, second, through a socialization approach through which the EU supports the development of civil society in the Middle East. This report has concluded that there are a number of problems with the EU's current policies in this area. Apart from internal, institutional constraints, the EU fails, in the eyes of its target audience in the Middle East, to deal with the real, political causes of the failure of reform in the region. Moreover, the EU has a narrow focus on electoral processes and human rights – rather than social, economic and civil rights. It does not focus on people's basic needs and claims to real freedom. An additional problem is the selection of actors that the EU chooses to work with in the Middle East. Local actors were also critical of the lack of consistency in EU statements about the violation of rights in the Middle East, and of the lack of knowledge of the region as a whole. Interviewees questioned the real intentions of the EU when it claims to be supporting democracy building in third countries.

This section outlines some policy recommendations in the area of EU democracy building in the Middle East. These proposals are clearly linked and are not mutually exclusive. First, the EU must move away from imposing models of liberal democracy:

Most Palestinian people are well educated people and they will accept any suggestion coming from Europe on how to politically reform and develop the occupied territories here. ... Most people here they do not have the experience of being democrats. When we had Europeans come here, I observed our people responding positively to the interactions, I could see some change in these people, an incremental change.<sup>19</sup>

This report has emphasized throughout the calls made by interviewees for the EU to focus on the basic needs of the people of the Middle East and North Africa as well as their claims for real change and reform through economic, social, civil and political rights. Conceptually, this finding is in line with Aletta Norval's work on Aversive Democracy (Norval 2007). Norval makes a convincing case for a move away from conforming to models of liberal democracy to an emphasis on the articulation of political demands and the formation of democratic subjectivity. She stresses in particular the creation of democratic claims between citizens and democratic imagination. Her 'aversion to conformism', that is, to traditional democratic grammar and practices, invites external actors such as the EU to aspect learn innovative ways of thinking about democratic practices, procedures and grammars in regions like the Middle East. Rather than adhering to universal norms, Norval emphasizes the 'interplay between tradition and novelty in democratic politics'. In line with the interviewees' encouraging remarks to external actors to take the time to really understand what is going on in the Middle East, for the EU in particular to become fully aware of restrictions on real freedoms, this may involve the EU in taking some brave steps and establishing channels of communication with state and non-state actors in Palestine and Egypt, including Islamists, who are becoming increasingly popular.

---

<sup>19</sup> Author's interview with Dr Ahmed Youssef (see note 8).

Second, and linked to the above, there is a need to identify the real reasons behind the EU's interest in democracy building in the Middle East. If it is partly due to the historical guilt that Europe continues to feel, linked to its colonial past and its involvement in the creation of Israel, then the EU would do better to face and address its past and then move on. This point is linked to calls by critical voices on the ground arguing that the EU should deal with the causes and not the symptoms of the lack of democracy in the region. This is particularly important in the light of the EU's loss of legitimacy in the eyes of people in the Middle East and of how it needs to rebuild trust there. The EU could choose to stay out of the democracy building business and allow the forces within the Middle East to develop their own programmes and agendas. The EU could then support internally driven initiatives. As the interviewees in this report reveal, no actors in Egypt or Palestine would refuse outright to engage with the EU, but the terms for engagement would be on a collaborative basis. Most Islamists as well as academics and representatives of NGOs prefer to engage in dialogue and to debate with the EU rather than receive direct financial assistance: 'European money should not go to people but to specific projects – building schools in rural areas, an independent school for the teaching and study of human rights. ... If Europeans are looking for real activities in this region, they need to change their priorities, their policies ... they should have a real democratic basis'.<sup>20</sup>

Third, the EU should change track by rethinking its policies, priorities and strategies. If we take the view, voiced by actors interviewed in Egypt and Palestine, that the EU is more interested in protecting its own set of liberal values than ensuring that these same values are emulated elsewhere, then the EU needs to do some reflexive thinking. If the EU genuinely desires to encourage democracy building in Egypt and Palestine, it needs to make more consistent and robust use of the democracy clause in its bilateral agreements with third parties, especially in cases of democratic infringements, and to focus on real obstacles to democratization – including, authoritarian rule.<sup>21</sup> The EU should formally open diplomatic talks with Islamic groups like Hamas and the Muslim Brotherhood to allow for credible negotiations, rather than just engagement, with all sides, and re-establish its credentials in the region as a force for good. As Osama El-Ghazali Harb (2008) points out:

If you are asking about the problems of building democracy in this region, I would argue that there are some, including the Americans and the Europeans, who are preoccupied with only one factor: the Islamic threat. I think this is nonsense. Our core problem is not Islamic forces but authoritarian rule, undemocratic rule, dictatorship and corruption – and Islamic forces are the products of undemocratic rule.<sup>22</sup>

In the case of Egypt, the EU should use its leverage to apply more consistent pressure on the Egyptian Government to cease censoring the Egyptian domestic media, including the banning and blocking of Internet sites and journalists' access to information.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, in particular in the case of Egypt, the EU should invest much more in literacy

---

<sup>20</sup> Author's interview with Refaat Al Said (see note 10).

<sup>21</sup> Author's interview with Dr Osama El-Ghazali Harb, the Democratic Front Party, Cairo, March 2008.

<sup>22</sup> Author's interview with Dr Osama El-Ghazali Harb (see note 21).

<sup>23</sup> See the Euro Mediterranean Human Rights Network webpage, <[www.euomedrights.net](http://www.euomedrights.net)>.

programmes. The logic driving such a strategy should be that education is the basis for the development of a democratic ethos and increases the ability of citizens to make claims on the state. The EU should also encourage the Egyptian Ministry of Education to reform the Egyptian education system so that it encourages critical thinking and problem-solving skills, productive student-professor dialogue, and the use of modern technology in the classroom. The EU can put such policies into practice through the specific allocation of EU funds to projects directed at public education, local governance, health care and poverty reduction in Egypt. Funds should be directed at NGOs instead of official agencies and/or government institutions. The EU should encourage the implementation of labour reforms, including raising the salaries of Egyptian public sector employees to a level sufficient to meet basic needs. EU aid to Egyptian society should support the establishment of local NGOs working on educational and health programmes as well as election transparency, freedom of expression, political participation and establishing truly independent human rights NGOs. As the analysis in this report suggests, such a focus would encourage a redirection of EU funds to projects based on needs identified by communities as determined by research carried out by these same local NGOs, rather than EU determined projects.

Fourth, EU actors need to question whether the EU is really interested in democracy building in the Middle East, or whether its priority is diplomatic mediation and alliance building. This question relates to the interests of EU member states and requires high-level political bargaining between national governments. The EU's focus on incremental democratization in the two cases covered in this report requires a process of aspect learning (Norval 2007) from political developments on the ground. In the case of Palestine, the European Commission must act as an influential advocate of national unity between Fatah and Hamas as a primary means of democratic support. As a collective, moreover, the EU has the potential to bypass the colonial historical baggage that member states such as France and the UK carry in their relations with the Middle East. In order to do this, the EU must get its act together through institutional and political reforms of its own. This means that the EU should have a single, coherent voice as a global actor. President Sarkozy's shuttle diplomacy in the current crisis in Gaza – even though the French Presidency of the EU ended on 31 December 2008 – shows that the EU needs a strong President to represent it in a consistent fashion (Garton Ash 2009).

Last but not least, the EU must be consistent in its rhetorical pressure on Middle East governments when violations of democratic principles and human rights occur. The EU has to acknowledge its leverage and the power of its rhetoric – but such pronouncements must be regular and show a true commitment to respect for human rights throughout the Middle East region. As Amr El Shobky emphasizes, 'The Europeans must engage and try to support the people indirectly'.<sup>24</sup> The EU must act by example because actions speak louder than words. This applies equally to the case of Palestine. Given the current humanitarian crisis in Gaza, large numbers of Europeans went on to the streets to protest against the lack of diplomatic leverage that the EU in particular could apply to Israel. It will be no surprise if in the forthcoming European Parliamentary elections, the turnout is very low indeed. It would therefore serve the EU well to take a reflexive step back to learn some lessons from the tragic events that unfolded in front of the

---

<sup>24</sup> Author's interview with Amr El Shobky, Al Ahram Centre, Cairo, 25 March 2008.

international community. The lack of democracy building in the Middle East may well have negative repercussions on democracy in Europe.

## References

- Commission of the European Communities, Brussels, 14.11.2000, COM(2000) 726 Final. Report from the Commission on the Implementation of Measures intended to promote observance of Human Rights and Democratic Practice in External Relations for 1996–1999
- Blom-Hansen, Jens, ‘The EU Comitology System: Intergovernmental Bargaining and Deliberative Supranationalism?’, Paper presented at the 65th MPSA National Conference, Chicago, USA, 12–15 April 2007
- Cavatorta, Francesco ‘Divided They Stand, Divided They Fail: Opposition Politics in Morocco’, in Pace with Seeberg (eds) *Democratization*
- Clegg, Nick, ‘We must stop arming Israel’, *The Guardian*, 7 January 2009, p. 30
- Commission of the European Communities, ‘On The Implementation of Measures Intended to Promote Observance of Human Rights and Democratic Principles in External Relations for 1996-1999’, Document COM(2000) 726 final, Brussels, 14 November 2000
- Council Regulation (EC) No 1488/96 of 23 July 1996 on financial and technical measures to accompany the reform of economic and social structures in the framework of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership, OJ L 189
- Euro-Mediterranean Interim Association Agreement on trade and cooperation between the European Community and the Palestine Liberation Organization, PLO, on behalf of the Palestinian Authority, PA, Official Journal L 187, 16/07/1997 P. 0003 – 0135
- European Commission, ‘From MEDA I to MEDA II: Commitments and Payments’, <<http://europa.eu.int/comm/europeaid/projects/med/financial/1995-2004.pdf>>
- European Commission, ‘MEDA Democracy Programme, Budget Line B7-705N: Criteria and Conditions of Eligibility’, 17 July 1996, DG1B.A1.1
- European Parliament Resolution A4-0410/98, para. 93
- European Union, *Treaty on European Union*, Official Journal of the European Union, C321 E/1, 2006, <<http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:C:2006:321E:0001:0331:EN:PDF>>
- European Union, *Treaty establishing the European Community*, Official Journal of the European Union, C321 E/1, 2006, <<http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:C:2006:321E:0001:0331:EN:PDF>>
- Garton Ash, Timothy, ‘Europe is Failing Two Life and Death Tests: We Must Act Together, Now,’ *The Guardian*, 8 January 2009, p. 27
- Goldenberg, Suzanne, ‘Obama Camp Ready to Open up Dialogue with Hamas’, *The Guardian*, 9 January 2009, p. 1
- Huber, Daniela, ‘Democracy Assistance in the Middle East and North Africa: A Comparison of US and EU Policies’, *Mediterranean Politics*, 13/1 (2008), pp. 43–62



- MacShane, Denis, 'Europe needs to speak with one voice', *The Independent*, 29 June 2008, available at <<http://www.independent.co.uk/opinion/commentators/denis-macshane-europe-needs-to-speak-with-one-voice-850964.html>>, accessed 1 June 2009
- Mish'al, Khalid, 'This Brutality will Never Break our Will to be Free', *The Guardian*, 6 January, 2009 p. 26
- Norval, Aletta, *Aversive Democracy: Inheritance and Originality in The Democratic Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007)
- Pace, Michelle, 'The Construction of EU Normative Power', *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 45/5 (2007), pp. 1039-1062
- Pace, Michelle, 'A Tale of Two Egypts', *Mediterranean Politics*, 13/3 (2008), pp. 439-444
- Pace, Michelle with Peter Seeberg (eds). 'The EU's Democratization Agenda in the Mediterranean: A Critical Inside-Out Approach', *Democratization*, Special Issue (February 2009)
- Hussein, Abdel-Rahman, 'Business as Usual as Europe and Egypt put Human Rights Behind Them', *Daily News Egypt*, 21 January 2008, available at <<http://www.dailystaregypt.com/article.aspx?ArticleID=11445>>, accessed 10 January 2009
- Sida (Swedish International Development Agency), 'Election Observation: A Common European Approach', B7-709, Project No. 99-079 1999
- Solana, Javier, 'Failure of Diplomacy' quoted by Ian Black, *The Guardian*, 5 January 2009

## About the Author

Dr Michelle Pace is Senior Research Fellow at the Political Science and International Studies Department (POLSIS), European Research Institute, University of Birmingham. She is the author of such published works as *The Politics of Regional Identity. Meddling with the Mediterranean* (London: Routledge, 2005). She regularly publishes articles on issues related to Euro-Mediterranean Relations and democracy.

# Annex 1: Extended Quotes from the Interviewees

## ***1. On the distinction between perceptions of democracy on an intellectual level and perceptions of democracy in praxis, Nasr El-Din Sha'r (2007) argued that:***

The EU has to understand that people in Palestine – whether they are Islamists or from Fatah or from other groups – they accept democracy in principle. What they do not accept is to share power. So there is a big gap between the rhetoric of agreeing on democracy and the believe in democracy on the one hand and on the other hand accepting each other and to share power. Democracy is a way of life, accepting the word of the majority against the word of the dictatorship. We can work together on these things, we can accept each other. The PLO represents all Palestinians but it needs to be reformed. The PLO actually misrepresents the Palestinian population in its current structure. What we and the EU – if it wants to engage – need to do is to focus on our people's needs and on reconciliation between the various Palestinian factions.<sup>25</sup>

## ***2. On democracy as a means rather than an end in itself, Ahmed Youssef argued that:***

When the people voted, they voted because they expected reform and change and we had a political programme to achieve this: to address the corruption, the chaos, the lack of law and order. Even people from *Fatah* voted for us because they knew *Hamas* would handle such malpractices. So first, we aimed to enhance the state of law and order. That is one thing we managed to achieve in Gaza. We also had plans to make our people less dependent on the Israelis by ensuring that we produce the basic needs of our people. We also planned to make Gaza cleaner and greener by planting more trees etc. This is important for Gazans' psychological and mental health too. Because we are not an independent state, we agreed to share power with *Fatah* in order to achieve our goals. It is better to have consensus among Palestinians than to have a strong party voting for one

---

<sup>25</sup> Author's interview with Dr Nasr El-Din Sha'r, Deputy Prime Minister and Education Minister in National Unity Government, Nablus, September 2007.

initiative or the other. But *Fatah* was not prepared to surrender power easily. We also wished to have good institutions because unfortunately most of the institutions here – including Human Rights organisations, charity organisations, NGOs – are politicised. They all take sides actually. So we planned to clean up these organisations and, where needed, make replacements with good agendas and people. As in the West, we wanted to have a check and balance system to ensure that every citizen abides by the law. But democracy here also means fear from injustice, from poverty and free media: here the media is biased. So this is another institution that we needed to reform: the media. Since we are not an independent state, one of the things we had hoped for was to emphasize that international actors monitor funds they give to NGOs and we wanted to also propose that we need projects to develop people's understanding of democracy through regular training programmes. We have a very complicated perception about democracy – people here live under a constant siege mentality. We had arranged for MPs to travel to Europe to see the British, Swiss and French parliaments in action. I wish I had told some Europeans that we would like to have some trainers come and inform our people what democracy means ... we are talking about democracy but people here have never seen it in practice. They have not been to the West where it has been implemented. But now the people think that democracy is nonsense. If they vote *Hamas*, *Hamas* will be besieged. If they vote *Fatah* they vote for corruption which is what the West really wants. So you will see, in future elections here, less people will go out to vote.<sup>26</sup>

**3. Of the actors on the ground in the Middle East that the EU has worked with so far, many are involved in malpractices including abuse of funding from external actors. This sentiment was voiced by Mr Refaat Al Said of the Tagamu' party in Cairo:**

First, European donors assist in corrupting civil society and the elite in the Middle East. I have had personal friends and sometimes members in our party whom I have dismissed. Why? One day they are simple people, another day they are suddenly living in a villa, driving a Mercedes, having their own driver... They tell me: Europeans are very tolerant, they know when they give money for the setting up of NGOs here that one will take half of the money for himself... Europeans depend on some (selective) NGOs and they address the development of a vibrant civil society environment here in a very wrong way. It turns out that they bribe some elites and use them as tools to enforce a particular agenda ... So who are they supporting? Clearly their 'friends'. People like Saad Eddin Ibrahim who has US citizenship and Ayman Nour. Europeans are choosing the wrong persons: these two I mentioned, both have falsified voting cards in an attempt to get more money from the Europeans: these same people are considered as 'heroes' in Europe – Europeans choose scapegoats to cover up their real interests. Europeans are corrupting the very ideal of a free civil society environment here. Secondly, Europe is participating in distorting public opinion in Egypt.<sup>27</sup>

---

<sup>26</sup> Author's interview with Dr Ahmed Youssef, Political Adviser to Ismail Haniyeh, Office of the Prime Minister, Gaza, September 2007.

<sup>27</sup> Author's interview with Refaat Al Said, Tagamu' Party headquarters, Cairo, March 2008.

**4. On the need for political and economic reform to go hand-in-hand, Esam El Erian from the Muslim Brotherhood, for example, argues that:**

We are now facing a transition to a failed state (in Egypt). The regime has failed to provide people with their daily bread. For the people here to have food on the table is more important than democracy ... And this same regime is supported by the Americans, the European Union, etc. Europeans and Americans and all foreign powers must learn one lesson: the only way forward for this region is to speak to the people not to the regimes. And the only way to achieve stability and prevent emigration is to develop this country, not only through economic reform programmes but political reform too: economic reform without political reform enhances corruption. The main problem now in this region is the alliance between corruption and dictatorship.<sup>28</sup>

**5. On the need for the EU to move away from a pigeonholed version of liberal democracy exportation to understanding how people in the Middle East need experience of being democrats and training in what real democracy entails, Ahmed Youssef suggests:**

Most Palestinian people are well educated people and they will accept any suggestion coming from Europe on how to politically reform and develop the occupied territories here. If Europe really wants to make a real change here then they have to educate our Members of Parliament, they have to invite them to come to Europe, to see how parliaments actually work. This is a big mission. It is like somebody who is used to drive a camel and suddenly you give him a car. He cannot handle it because although he knows that it should move forward he does not know how, at which speed, which road to take. Most people here they do not have the experience of being democrats. When we had Europeans come here, I observed our people responding positively to the interactions, I could see some change in these people, an incremental change.<sup>29</sup>

**6. On the point that critical voices in the region call for the EU to engage in a real dialogue with all actors on the ground and treat these actors as equal partners rather than merely sending financial assistance for projects which are not monitored for their impact on democracy-building, Al-Said emphasises:**

Frankly, we used to announce that we are against any interference especially in the democratic model of Egypt. Why? Because the external actors themselves are not democratic! They use the democratic discourse as a cover up for their discourse about Islam as a threat. They support Israeli violation of human rights (in Palestine), so the people here have not got a taste of democracy in the actual actions of Europeans. Europeans are not qualified to play an important role in this field. European money should not go to people but to specific projects: building of schools in rural areas, an independent school for the teaching and study of human rights ... the people who receive European money are isolated

---

<sup>28</sup> Author's interview with Esam El Erian, Muslim Brotherhood headquarters, March 2008.

<sup>29</sup> Author's interview with Dr Ahmed Youssef (see note 2).

from the people in this region's societies: nobody trusts them. If Europeans are looking for real activities in this region, they need to change their priorities, their policies... they should have a real democratic basis. They should divert from double-standard policies in Palestine, Iraq.<sup>30</sup>

***7. The EU must be consistent in its critical statements against violations of real freedoms in the Middle East. As Amr El Shobky argues:***

The Europeans must engage and try to support the people indirectly. What do I mean? For example the communiqué which was issued by the EP in January this year. The EU must criticise all violations of human rights, torture ... in other words to define values, democratic values ... and such communiqués must be repeated again and again ... this regime must know that there are problems and that they must respect values. In fact they reacted very strongly, even overreacted, to the EP's communiqué ... It is better for the EU to make such critical statements against the regime than to pick one or two individuals like Saad Eddin Ibrahim or Ayman Nour and support such individuals directly. The EU must stick to principles. Otherwise it comes across as an accomplice in the regime's strategy'. One day a strong rhetorical statement is made by the EP against violations of HR in Egypt, the next day the Council goes ahead and signs a trade agreement with Egypt – it is a contradiction.<sup>31</sup>

---

<sup>30</sup> Author's interview with Refaat Al Said (see note 3).

<sup>31</sup> Author's interview with Amr El Shobky, Al Ahram Centre, Cairo, 25 March 2008.