The European Union and Islam: Democracy Promotion in Bahrain and the Arab World

E. A. Fakhro

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Abstract

This paper addresses the role of the EU in promoting democracy in the Arab world, with particular reference to Bahrain as an example of a society in transition. This entails an examination of the compatibility of Islam and democracy, as well as a study of the impact of Islamist political parties on democracy in Bahrain. This, in turn, provides insights into how the EU could play a larger role in promoting free and democratic governance in both Bahrain and the region as a whole. It is necessary to grasp not only the varied blend of influences that may give rise to the politicization of Arab societies, but also the way in which civil discontent among particular groups may ultimately translate into increased support for Islamist actors on a national or regional level. Having examined both the influence of Islamist actors and the role of the EU in promoting democracy in Bahrain and the Arab world, it is evident that there is strong potential for the EU to play a central role in influencing both civil society and decision makers in the region by focusing on a variety of long-term media, educational and diplomatic strategies, in addition to supporting the development of non-sectarian democratic institutions and political forces.

Summary of Recommendations

Any entity that seeks to promote democracy in the state, whether as an internal or external actor, should focus on the implementation of structural institutional reform, and move away from dwelling on questions of 'Islam and democracy' since there is almost no correlation between the religious platform of a given party and its perception of democratic reform. It is important for the democratic forces within the Arab world to receive support from an external power, in particular the EU, given the structural and political obstacles facing democratic institutions in the region. By taking immediate steps to establish stronger cooperation, both entities can make progress towards achieving their related aims while building a strong platform for the growth of a long-term and mutually beneficial relationship. In developing its democracy promotion strategy in the Middle East, the EU ought to emphasize its strengths as a 'soft power' and build a strategy based around dialogue, cooperation and education as opposed to

military influence. This is likely to be welcomed by both civil society and policymaking bodies alike.

The EU should act to improve its educational influence in the region and build stronger cultural programmes designed to promote cooperation between Arab youth and European educational institutes. This is necessary in order for the EU to establish a legitimate presence in the region and build institutions that are capable of influencing both citizens and policymakers in the long term. The EU should also support the development of independent media outlets in Bahrain and other Gulf States with the intention of promoting free dialogue in the region.

Relations between the EU and the Gulf could be strengthened by improving economic ties between the two blocs. In this respect, both parties should renew efforts to establish a GCC-EU FTA, which has been in the pipeline for almost 20 years. Bringing the two blocs closer together economically will also strengthen political and diplomatic ties, thereby improving the ability of the EU to directly influence policymaking and decision makers in the GCC.

There are established perceptions among civil society groups of the EU as a credible, albeit silent, political actor. It is ultimately in the interests of both European and Arab states to begin to forge stronger cooperation aimed at helping to tackle educational, political, and security challenges in the region. This will increase the diplomatic leverage of the EU and allow it to take a leading role in promoting democracy and democratic values in the Middle East, and ultimately establish its presence as a long-term ally and partner of the Arab world.

1. Introduction

In recent years, the European Union (EU) has secured its position as a key influential actor on the world stage. This, in turn, has renewed calls for the EU to play a greater role in promoting international democracy and resolving a number of international security issues. Such calls have gained momentum, amid heightened global tensions with regard to two fundamental issues: the US-led 'war on terror', which has resulted in an increasingly unstable Middle East; and the rise of Islamist radical fundamentalism worldwide. It has become increasingly important that the EU not only develop a viable partnership with the Middle Eastern states, but also ensure that this partnership plays a direct role in building more secure, stable and democratic Arab societies. This paper addresses the role of the EU in promoting democracy in the Arab world, with particular reference to Bahrain as an example of a society in transition. This entails an examination of the compatibility of Islam and democracy, as well as a study of the impact of Islamist political parties on democracy in Bahrain. This, in turn, provides insights into how the EU could play a larger role in promoting free and democratic governance in both Bahrain and the region as a whole.

2. Islam and Democracy: Conflicting Ideologies or Compatible Philosophies?

Any consideration of the future of democracy in the Arab world must examine the impact of cultural, religious and sociological factors in shaping perceptions of democracy in Arab societies. Few such factors have been scrutinized and misrepresented

Case Study: Democracy in Bahrain

Background

Bahrain provides an interesting example of causes and effects of top-down democratic reform in the Gulf and the subsequent effect that this has had on the rise of democratically elected Islamist parties. Bahrain's early experiments with democracy began in 1973, almost immediately after it gained independence from colonial rule. Sheikh Isa Bin Salman Al Khalifa promulgated Bahrain's first constitution and established a partially elected Constituent Council. This experiment in power-sharing, however, proved short-lived as elected representatives regularly rebelled against the vision of power promoted by Sheikh Isa, resulting in the dissolution of the constitution in 1975 and a total ban on political activity for the next 25 years (Burke, 2008: 5–61). In 1999, the son of the Amir, Sheikh Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa, assumed power and declared a new era of national reconciliation. Sheikh Hamad endorsed redrafting the constitution to establish a bicameral parliament. During this period, public support for political liberalization was almost universal, particularly among the Shiite population.

This enthusiasm, however, essentially collapsed when it was announced that the democratically elected lower house (Majlis Al Nuwwab) would share power with an appointed upper chamber (Majlis Al Shura), which would hold the deciding vote in the case of a deadlock (Burke, 2008: 5–61). Subsequent gerrymandering also ensured that the status quo remained in force. The Bahrain Human Rights Society, for example, reported one predominantly district Sunni district with barely 400 voters, while another Shiite district had 14,000 voters (Haq Movement of Liberties and Democracy Bahrain, 2007). The ban on political parties also remained in force. In protest at the diluted outcome of the reform process, all the major Shiite parties in addition to the main secular opposition party, the National Democratic Action Society (NDAS), boycotted the 2002 elections, resulting in a national turnout of barely 43 per cent (Haq Movement of Liberties and Democracy Bahrain, 2007). This resulted in a parliament dominated by Sunni Islamist groups and pro-government loyalists, which held 19 and 18 of the 40 seats, respectively (Burke, 2008). Given the scale of the boycott the outcome of the 2002 elections cannot be said to have portrayed a fair or democratic representation of the Bahraini electorate.

The 2006 Elections and the Islamization of Democracy

The second round of parliamentary elections in 2006 saw an end of the boycott imposed by Shiite and secular opposition groups in Bahrain. This resulted in the Shiite party Al Wefaq securing victory with 17 seats in the 40-seat parliament (Burke, 2008: 5–61). Sunni groups Al Menbar and Asalah won seven and eight seats, respectively, while Bahrain's main secular opposition party, NDAS, won only one seat. In response to the outcome of the elections, Professor Fouad Shihab of Bahrain University commented that 'It looks like our parliament will be dominated by people who see themselves only as Sunnis or Shiites ... these are the same Islamists that are gaining control across the Arab world' (Krane, 2006). In determining the impact of the rise of Islamist parties on democracy it is therefore necessary to examine both the causes behind this trend and its impact on democratic reform within the state.

The Islamization of Democracy: Causes

While external actors may have contributed to the growth of sectarianism within Bahrain,[1] it is evident that state policies played a primary role in escalating sectarian divisions between Sunnis and Shiites. This is evident from the impact of the 'Bandargate' scandal, which provided the backdrop to the 2006 parliamentary elections. This scandal followed the publication of a report by the UK-based Gulf Centre for Democratic Development by Dr. Al Bandar, an advisor to the Cabinet Affairs Ministry (Haq Movement of Liberties and Democracy Bahrain, 2007). The report details the existence of a secret task force led by the Minister for Cabinet Affairs aimed at undermining and diluting the power of the Shiite community.

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[1] With regard to the role of religious actors in influencing the outcome of and participation in the 2006 elections, it is worth considering not only internal but also external religious figures. With regard to the Shiite boycott, it is evident that external actors played a direct role in reversing public perceptions. For example, prominent Bahraini Shiite scholar Sheikh Eisa Qasem publicly reneged on his support for the boycott, citing a religious fatwa by the Grand Ayatollah Ali Al Sistani in Iraq that called the refusal to participate in the elections 'a grave mistake'. Interestingly, Sunni parties in 2002 also relied on external religious leaders to justify political participation, as highlighted by the reference by prominent Sunni Sheikh Adel Al Mouawda to religious edicts from Saudi Arabia allowing him and other Sunnis to vote and run in the elections. (KAS Regional Program Near East/Mediterranean 2006). It is therefore clear that both internal and external Islamic figures have affected the Bahraini political process at the highest levels, which is worth considering when assessing the potential for non-Islamic actors such as the EU to play a role in influencing political participation in the state.

In the midst of such scandals and accusations of gerrymandering and electoral fraud it is no surprise that sectarian insecurities remain rife – particularly among Shiites who have found their demographic position and economic and political interests routinely attacked. Government policies have also had the effect of fuelling Sunni sectarianism, as minority Sunni groups are encouraged to cling to tribal loyalties in what is perceived by them to be the only viable way of maintaining a grip on power. It is therefore evident that the 'sectarianization' of democracy, as expressed through the rise of Islamist Shiite and Sunni parties, is linked not only to the demographics of Bahrain, but is also a result of a perceived deliberate and routine campaign against Shiites at the policy and decision-making levels.

The landslide victory by Al Wefaq was due in large part to the ability of its charismatic leader, Sheikh Ali Salman, to present the society as a unified moral force. As a political bloc, Al Wefaq extracts the bulk of its support from lower-middle class Shiites by focusing its campaigns on two main objectives: socio-economic and moral reform, and constitutional reform (Haq Movement of Liberties and Democracy Bahrain, 2007). Al Wefaq's policies on women's rights have been equally conservative as demonstrated by the party's refusal to field any female candidates during the elections, and by its support for a rally against the introduction of a personal status law for women. In terms of socio-economic issues, however, Al Wefaq has displayed a willingness to target real and pressing issues by addressing housing, unemployment and discrimination in the allocation of resources as key issues in its campaigns.

The second aim of Al Wefaq – constitutional reform – has led the bloc to take definitive steps to campaign for democratic accountability within the state. Al Wefaq's support for constitutional reform, however, has perhaps less to do with any prodemocratic stance advocated by the party and more to do with its position as representative of a marginalized Shiite community that could stand to benefit from increased government transparency and accountability.

as often Islam and Islamic values. The Islamic tradition has a profound influence on the ideology of individual actors ranging from the lower classes to ruling elites. This is especially true in states such as Bahrain, Egypt, the Palestinian authorities and Kuwait, where municipal and parliamentary elections have resulted in victories for a wave of Islamist parties. Assessing the relationship between Islam and democracy is also vital in order to determine the extent to which regional and prodemocratic actors could cooperate with such Islamist forces in promoting democracy and transparency in the region.

If democracy is taken to refer to a pluralist system of representation, then some democratic tendencies may be identified in states that engage with civil society through parliamentary representation or a more limited consultation.

In assessing whether there is a conflict between Islam and democracy, it is necessary to define what is meant by democracy and what is meant by Islam. If the conceptual understanding of democracy is restricted to the version of liberal secularism often practiced in the West, then most Arab states cannot, by definition, be said to exhibit democratic tendencies. However, if democracy is taken to refer to a pluralist system of representation, then some democratic tendencies may be identified in states that engage with civil society through parliamentary representation or a more limited consultation through systems of Shura Councils, which are considered an established part of Islamist governance. Islam must be understood as both a dynamic and a heavily contested ideology, the interpretation of which is often largely dependent on the political and social background of its interpreter. The relationship between democracy and Islam cannot therefore be essentialized as a conflicted ideological struggle, by virtue of the fact that no single definition exists for either democracy as a system or Islam as an ideology.

It is also necessary to bear in mind the impact of non-Islamic influences on the development of political ideology in Arab states. For example, increased politicization in

a number of Gulf states can be attributed to demographic and economic changes. This state model is only able to preserve a depoliticized social base as long it is equipped with sufficient resources to provide a high standard of living for its citizens. As demographic changes within the Gulf make this increasingly difficult, Gulf states have faced renewed challenges in controlling demands for increased political participation.

Other more pressing state policies such as institutionalized discrimination and sectarianism have played a more obvious role in the politicization of civil society. Ultimately, renewed calls by civil groups for increased political participation have resulted in the growth of Islamist political parties on a regional scale. This may be attributed to the presence of Islamist groups in society that possess the required organizational tools to rapidly mobilize and voice the concerns of civil groups.[2] In addition, Islamist groups do, to a large extent, represent not only the religious but also the political and social convictions of a given community – especially in states that have banned political parties and thus restricted the ability of non-Islamist actors to establish alternative ideologies on a large scale. It is therefore necessary to grasp not only the varied blend of influences that may give rise to the politicization of Arab societies, but also the way in which civil discontent among particular groups may ultimately translate into increased support for Islamist actors on a national or regional level.

3. The Consequences of the Islamization of Democracy

In examining the social, political and economic views adopted by the dominant Islamist parties in Bahrain, it is possible to identify two major trends. First, all the Islamist parties in the state have sought to promote conservative social values and, in this sense, can be characterized as representatives of a wider Islamic community. However, in terms of political reform and democratization these same Islamist parties have all exhibited a tendency to favour the interests of the sectarian class from which they extract the bulk of their support – as opposed to any overarching 'Islamic' principle either for or against democratic reform. This has been reflected most strongly in the tendency for the Shiite parties Al Wefaq and Al Amal to support the type of democratic reform typically advocated by European and Western secular powers, including increased transparency and equality. By contrast, Sunni Islamist parties whose supporters have largely benefited from the political status quo have exhibited a persistant reluctance to support any political reform that might challenge their traditional base or authority. It is therefore evident that Islamist parties, at least in the political sense, can be said to behave just like any other political actor, since their position on key democratic issues is determined in large part by their position in the ruling elite and not by any Islamic ideology in particular (Niethammer, 2007). In the light of these findings, any

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[2] In Bahrain, for example, the Shiite society Al Wefaq has been able to secure its position as the most influential political bloc by providing social services through mosque outreach programmes in Bahraini villages (Zweiri 2007).

entity that seeks to promote democracy in the state, whether as an internal or external actor, should focus on the implementation of structural institutional reform (Nelson, 2008), and move away from dwelling on questions of 'Islam and democracy' since there is almost no correlation between the religious platform of a given party and its perception of democratic reform.

Having considered the manner through which democratic reform may best be approached in the Middle East, it is necessary to consider the potential for the European Union to establish itself as an active partner in promoting such reform. This is especially important because the EU has declared the promotion of democracy to be 'one of the main objectives of its Common Foreign and Security Policy and of the European Community's Cooperation Policy' (DeLoecker, 2009). It is equally crucial for the democratic forces within the Arab world to receive support from an external power, and in particular the EU, given the structural and political obstacles facing democratic institutions in the region. By taking immediate steps to establish stronger cooperation, both entities can make progress towards achieving their related aims while building a strong platform for the growth of a long-term and mutually beneficial relationship.

4. The European Union: A Role in Promoting Democracy in Bahrain and the Arab World

Two features are particularly striking about the present role of the EU in the Arab region: first, the extent to which the EU has limited its economic and military presence, and therefore stunted its political leverage; and, second, the effect that this has had on securing the role of the United States as the 'only external power today that concretely influences the security, policies, and objectives of the regional players in the Middle East' (Aliboni, 2005). The absence of a coherent and unified European presence in the region may be attributed to several structural and historical factors. Its structure as an economic entity has led to the prioritization of economic cooperation ahead of diplomatic and political cooperation. For example, attempts by the EU to establish a Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)-EU Free Trade Agreement (FTA) have been emphasized as a cornerstone of EU policy towards the GCC since 1990, but its efforts to establish political influence in the region are relatively recent. It was not until 2004 that the EU launched its Strategic Partner Initiative with the Mediterranean and the Middle East in an attempt to promote political reform and conflict-prevention (Aliboni, 2005: 2–15). Apart from this broad initiative, there is an absence of any coherent, unified and direct initiative led by the EU to promote democracy and political stability in this part of the Arab world.

Structural factors have also hindered the EU's political strategy in the region, as is evident from the growth in bilateralism between individual EU and GCC member states at the expense of wider EU-GCC relations. This trend has increased in recent years, as bilateral ties have been renewed between the United Kingdom and Bahrain, France and Kuwait, France and Qatar, and the UK and the United Arab Emirates. If the EU wishes to establish a stronger presence in the region, it must first develop a coherent and

unified foreign policy in the Gulf that prioritizes the interests of the EU ahead of those of individual member states and, second, implement and develop this policy through the creation of a unified strategic forum designed to further the diplomatic and political influence of the EU in the GCC and the Arab world.

In the light of US hegemony in the region, it is necessary to briefly consider the extent to which the EU could benefit from its established ties with the USA in developing a strong presence in the Middle East through, for example, increased initiatives through the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Although this may have been a beneficial strategy some years ago, it is evident that US-Arab relations are growing increasingly complex. Arab states have continued to rely on the USA for assistance with education and development, but its military and political presence in the region continue to be perceived as misguided and ineffective at best, and as hostile and threatening at worst – particularly amid the failed US policies in Iraq and its continued support for Israeli aggression in the occupied Palestinian territories. Experience with the EU as a single entity, however, remains largely undeveloped and, apart from lingering memories of colonialism in certain states, the present generation harbours no serious antagonism towards it. There is therefore a genuine opportunity for the EU to establish a sense of trust and build a solid future relationship with both citizens and leaders in the Arab world but, in so doing, it should move far away from US positions in terms of both policy and diplomacy, as experiences of both remain badly tarnished in the minds of the average Arab citizen.

In developing its democracy promotion strategy in the Middle East, the EU ought to emphasize its strengths as a 'soft power' and build a strategy based around dialogue, cooperation and education as opposed to military influence, since this is likely to be welcomed by both civil society and policymaking bodies alike. In developing such a strategy, the EU could look to support secular pro-democratic societies, such as Bahrain's NDAS which aims to 'put aside religious affiliations and work for the common good of the nation' (Toumi, 2006), by monitoring human rights and promoting transparency and good governance. In working to strengthen such parties, the EU could take the initiative to launch educational and cultural sessions by, for example, offering to send academics and European intellectuals to lecture on key issues related to democracy and human rights. This strategy has been used in the past by Islamist parties including Al Wefaq, which invited representatives of the National Democratic Institute, a US organization that promotes citizen participation around the globe, to lecture in Bahrain (Nelson, 2008).

The United States has established a strong presence in the Gulf by developing a number of significant educational initiatives with local Ministries and educational bodies. For example, the Qatar Foundation for Education, Science and Community Development has launched a joint effort with

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the US government to deliver branches of major US-Universities in Doha, including Weill Cornell Medical College, Carnegie-Mellon University, the Georgetown School of Foreign Service and Northwestern University. The region as a whole has received a strong level of support from the USA in developing such 'university branches', resulting in a predominance of US views, visions, and educational influences in the region. This is furthered by the number of US scholarship initiatives launched in the region, through US embassies and by AMIDEAST, a US-Arab forum that promotes cooperation between the Arab world and the USA through educational and cultural initiatives.

The EU should act to improve its educational influence in the region and build stronger cultural programmes designed to promote cooperation between Arab youth and European educational institutes. This is necessary in order for the EU to establish a legitimate presence in the region and build institutions that are capable of influencing both citizens and policymakers in the long term.

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Furthermore, the EU should support the development of independent media outlets in Bahrain and other Gulf States with the intention of promoting free dialogue in the region. At present, access to independent media forums in many states remains limited and subject to censorship. In this respect, the EU could adopt the strategies used by both the UK and the USA to influence local perceptions of key issues through their support for independent media outlets. For example, BBC World News has played a supporting role in developing the 'Doha Debates' – a standing forum in the Arab world that allows audiences to argue freely without fear of censorship and challenge politicians face to face. The USA has also placed heavy emphasis on ensuring that its own views are heard in the region by establishing outlets such as Radio Sawa, an Arabic radio station that broadcasts news and information from a US perspective to youth in Arabic-speaking countries. The USA has also established Al Hurra, a satellite TV channel aimed at influencing Arab perceptions and views. The EU has neglected to establish a media outlet in the region and therefore hindered its potential to directly reach out to citizens in the region and further its own democracy promotion agenda.

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At the policymaking level, the EU could see its credibility and influence in the Middle East significantly strengthened if it developed a strong diplomatic presence in the region. The EU has the potential to establish long-term credibility by developing a strategy designed to actively negotiate a resolution to historic and strategically important political issues, in particular the Arab-Israeli conflict. In this respect, the EU is already perceived as a potential friend and ally of the Arab cause, as it currently provides over USD 500 million in aid to Palestine on an annual basis, making it the single largest donor to the occupied territories (BBC World News, 2006). Building on this

recognition, the EU today possesses huge potential to launch its own talks between the Israeli Government and Hamas, and act to resolve a crisis that years of Arab-Israeli and Arab-US negotiations have failed to resolve. By deepening its involvement in this area, the EU could gain both the respect of Arab citizens and the support of Arab leaders, leading ultimately to the growth in political and diplomatic leverage that the EU seeks. In achieving this, the EU will also be able to counter US hegemony in the region, which would ultimately be to the mutual benefit of the EU as a rising global power and Arab citizens who have grown weary of decades of failed US policies in the Gulf.

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5. Conclusions

Having examined both the influence of Islamist actors and the role of the EU in promoting democracy in Bahrain and the Arab world, it is evident that there is strong potential for the EU to play a central role in influencing both civil society and decision makers in the region by focusing on a variety of long-term media, educational and diplomatic strategies, in addition to supporting the development of non-sectarian democratic institutions and political forces. This potential has grown in recent years in the light of the increasing antagonism felt by civil society groups towards failed US policies, which has resulted in an absence of legitimate external actors in the region. The EU is clearly capable of filling this void, particularly in the light of the established perceptions among civil society groups of the EU as a credible, albeit silent, political actor. It is ultimately in the interests of both European and Arab states to begin to forge stronger cooperation aimed at helping to tackle educational, political, and security challenges in the region. This will increase the diplomatic leverage of the EU and allow it to take a leading role in promoting democracy and democratic values in the Middle East, and ultimately establish its presence as a long-term ally and partner of the Arab world.

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