



How Promotion of Political Reform by the European Union is Perceived in the Arab World: The Cases Of Lebanon and the Palestinian Territories

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How Promotion of Political Reform by the European Union is Perceived in the Arab World: The Cases Of Lebanon and the Palestinian Territories¹

Abstract

After the events of 11 September 2001, the Arab world moved up the political agenda of the European Union (EU). This increased calls for reform in the region. In order to surround itself with prosperous and stable neighbours, the EU has sought to achieve political reforms in the Mediterranean and the wider Middle East as part of a more comprehensive policy of democracy promotion. This paper fills a gap in the EU democracy promotion literature by investigating the points of view of target countries. It depicts general perceptions of EU electoral assistance activities in Lebanon and the Palestinian Territories. Local actors closely involved in such activities were interviewed in order to reach concrete conclusions about and make policy recommendations on EU policies in this area. Although respondents in both countries describe EU activities as important and instrumental, they highlight several country-specific shortcomings to which the EU needs to pay special attention. In both countries respondents advocate the need to strengthen partnerships with local actors that are already active in the areas of election monitoring and electoral reform.

Summary of Recommendations

In order to build a constructive ‘cooperative security’ approach, the EU must present existing threats as ‘challenges’ that are shared by both the EU and its Arab partners. These challenges then need to be countered by concerted actions over which both Arabs and Europeans have an interest in cooperating, with an understanding that their security is indivisible. If truly mutual partnership is considered a cornerstone of effective democracy promotion, the EU must improve its knowledge of how its actions are perceived by the intended recipients. Given the conditions of direct and indirect censorship prevalent in the Arab world, this paper might not reflect the genuine or more sophisticated discussion taking place in the Arab world. A more rigorous study of Arab perceptions, tackling the elites – both political and intellectual – as well as the Arab street, the media and civil society must be undertaken.

If truly mutual partnership is considered a cornerstone of effective democracy promotion, the EU must improve its knowledge of how its actions are perceived by the intended recipients.

¹ The author would like to thank all those who took part in telephone interviews, but whose names will remain confidential.

The decline in the credibility of the EU is evident in both the Lebanese and the Palestinian case studies, albeit for different reasons. There is a common perception of EU double standards, whereby the EU's long-term interest in a more democratic neighbourhood comes second to short-term preferences for security and regime stability.

Although the EU makes a strong case for the need for political reform in the Arab world, there is no equally detailed and systematic indication of the role the EU will play in order to help the countries concerned achieve the desired changes. There is an obvious gap in the EU democracy discourse between the way it is perceived by its intended recipients and the way the EU thinks it is perceived. Arabs must feel that the EU has a genuine desire to promote political reforms.

The EU democratization agenda should be framed as part of EURO-MED security policy and not as a Western Security policy. Consequently, the EU must invest in its public diplomacy efforts and send the message that the Arab world is an equal partner that shares its security perceptions and is not just the cause of security concerns.

1. Introduction

After the events of 11 September 2001, the Arab world moved up the political agenda of the European Union (EU). This accelerated calls for reform in the region. In order to surround itself with prosperous and stable neighbours, the EU has sought to achieve political reforms in the Mediterranean and the wider Middle East as part of a more comprehensive policy of democracy promotion. However, a review of EU democracy promotion in the region reveals serious shortcomings and inconsistencies.

In Lebanon, for example, the EU pushed for electoral reform to create a system that better represents religious and ethnic minorities. The most recent electoral reforms were loudly applauded by the EU even though the changes were only cosmetic and, as before, make it easy to anticipate the results before elections take place. In Egypt, the EU continually pushes for greater respect for human rights and for political and electoral reform. At the same time it shakes hands and signs important agreements, most recently on energy, with the same elites that it claims to be undemocratic. In Palestine, the EU advocates and applauds free and democratic elections, but after the 2006 legislative elections the EU disapproved of the 'unfavourable' results which brought the militant Islamic party Hamas to power. These are just a few examples. Arabs and non-Arabs alike can grasp the ambiguities that emerge from them.

Unquestionably, 'good governance' is among the most desirable intended consequences of political reforms. This term, however, is broad and encompasses several intertwined issues – such as participation, civil society, elections, gender equality, legislation and local government; the rule of law, the constitution and constitutional affairs, the judiciary and human rights; as well as transparency and accountability, financial transparency and fighting corruption. Consequently, a comprehensive examination of all these issues should ideally be undertaken when investigating political reforms and democratic governance. Elections do not necessarily reflect full democracy, but they are a central element of the concept.

The 'multi-speed' approach and the 'variable geometry' principle (Stubb 2002) that underpinned the EU enlargement and integration processes have been extended to EU

external relations, including Euro-Med relations. This entails that, on the one hand, countries decide their own pace and level of cooperation and, on the other hand, the EU tailors specific policies based on the particularities of each country rather than taking a 'one size fits all' approach. Consequently, in order to assess EU activities in the field of electoral assistance, or in any chosen policy area, it is imperative to look at single case studies. This adds value to the existing literature that tackles the shortcomings of EU democracy promotion. Case studies allow us to identify strengths and weaknesses of the EU approach which are specific to each country. This paper contributes to the democracy promotion literature by analysing two countries that have been the target of EU electoral assistance. The paper depicts general perceptions of EU electoral assistance activities in Lebanon and the Palestinian Territories. Local actors closely involved in these activities were interviewed in order to draw concrete conclusions from and make policy recommendations on future EU policies in this area.

Section 2 is an overview of the EU discourse (normative approach) and activities (positive approach) in terms of political reform in general and electoral assistance in particular. Section 3 discusses how EU activities in the area of political reform are perceived by the Arab world. Section 4 analyses the EU's electoral assistance activities in Lebanon and the Palestinian Territories. Finally, section 5 draws some conclusions and makes a number of important observations that stem from this exercise. It also makes a number of policy recommendations on how to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of EU actions in this area.

2. The Record of Political Reform in the Arab world: EU initiatives

The EU, like any other international actor or state, seeks a prosperous, stable and secure 'neighbourhood'. To achieve such a goal, the EU has chosen to engage in several cooperative activities, including bilateral and multilateral agreements, with its immediate and extended neighbourhood. These agreements cover many areas, ranging from political and security issues to economic and trade matters, migration and the environment, and from the integration of transport and energy networks to scientific and cultural cooperation.

The EU has developed and nurtured its relations with the Arab world for geographic and historical reasons, as well as for reasons related to more recent events which are beyond the scope of this paper. These relations are governed through many instruments, mainly under the framework of the Barcelona Process, also known as the Euro-Med Partnership (EMP), as well as through the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP).² The EMP, which specifically targets Mediterranean countries and consequently a segment of the Arab world, dates back to 1995 and evolved into what is now called the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM). The partnership comprises three baskets: economic, political and cultural. Although several advances have been achieved in the first and third baskets, for several reasons the political one is the weakest in terms of tangible results.³

² The Barcelona Process does not cover the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries. The EU has established bilateral relationships with these countries through Cooperation Agreements, see <http://ec.europa.eu/external_relations/gulf_cooperation/index_en.htm>

³ For more about the Barcelona Process and the Union of the Mediterranean see <http://ec.europa.eu/external_relations/euromed/index_en.htm>

The aims of the EU's political strategy towards the Arab world are spelled out in several texts either under the general framework of the ENP,⁴ or in area-specific documents.⁵ These documents, however, have clear limitations. For example, the Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council of October 2006 sets out general provisions establishing a European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument, but only in vague terms. It spells out cooperation in several areas, among which the following are political: '(a) promoting political dialogue and reform; [and] (b) promoting legislative and regulatory approximation towards higher standards in all relevant areas and in particular to encourage the progressive participation of partner countries in the internal market and the intensification of trade'. The intention to provide support is evident, but the procedure, which translates intent into practice, remains very vague.

The Regional Strategy Paper and Regional Indicative Programme for the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership provides further insights, and indicate that: 'The ENP Action Plans, negotiated from 2004 onwards, contain chapters with specific and agreed reform objectives on basic human rights and fundamental freedoms, the rule of law and political democracy' but '... there are no specific EC bilateral or regional programmes that are aimed directly at domestic political reforms' (Euro-Mediterranean Partnership n.d.).

The common feature of these regulations and papers is a thorough explanation of and advocacy for necessary political reforms, which, however, is not accompanied by an equally detailed and systematic indication of the role the EU will play in order to help the countries concerned achieve the desired changes.

In terms of the concrete practical activities that the EU carries out in the field of electoral support, the EU's central role in the wider context of democracy promotion is in its Electoral Observation Missions. These activities depend on a formal invitation from the country concerned, which limits the role that the EU can play in this field. Consequently, it has conducted very few observation missions in the Arab world – the 2005 parliamentary elections in Lebanon, the 2006 legislative elections and 2005 presidential elections in the Palestinian Territories, the 2006 presidential and local council elections in Yemen and the 2007 presidential elections in Mauritania. The other, and perhaps most effective, tool the EU uses in electoral assistance is the financial aid that it grants to several Arab countries, through either civil society organizations or

⁴ Such as the Commission's communication to the Council and the European Parliament 'Wider Europe – Neighbourhood: A New Framework for Relations with our Eastern and Southern Neighbours', the Commission proposal for a regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council laying down general provisions establishing a European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument; the EC communication to the Council on the Commission proposals for action plans under the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP); the EC communication on strengthening the European Neighbourhood Policy, the European security strategy, EC communication 'reinvigorating EU actions on Human rights and democratization with Mediterranean partners' and the action plans for the countries concerned.

⁵ Such as the European strategy for the Arab world presented in 2003 by the EU High Representative, the interim report on the European Union's Strategic Partnership with the Mediterranean and the Middle East adopted by the European Council in December 2006, the European Parliament resolution of 10 May 2007 on reforms in the Arab world, the European security strategy EC 2003 communication 'reinvigorating EU actions on Human rights and democratization with Mediterranean partners', the 'European security strategy', the 'interim report on the EU strategic partnership with the Mediterranean and the middle East', in addition to the specific policies and strategies adopted by the Commission and the Council in relation to the various countries of the Arab world.

national authorities, in order to help them carry out various initiatives.⁶ The EU provides financial aid either directly or in partnership with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)⁷ and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE)⁸ to several countries, including Lebanon and the Palestinian Authority.

Before investigating how EU actions, financial assistance and observations missions are perceived by the target countries it is useful to elaborate a little on the general way that foreign intervention by the EU is viewed by the general Arabic public.

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3. Arab Perceptions

Several papers and reports have been produced which analyse the democratic deficit in the Arab world, what reforms the EU should push for and why many past attempts have fallen significantly short of fulfilling their full potential.⁹

These documents mainly focus and rely on the supply side – the policies that outsiders, such as the EU, the US Government or the World Bank, believe have to be reformed or introduced and what the outsider envisages are the reasons behind the failure of or the deadlock reached in the initiatives. Less attention is devoted to the points of view of the intended recipients of such democracy promotion initiatives. Given the importance of working closely with the target countries to the success of these initiatives, this paper takes a different approach.

EU actions on political reform have been perceived in different ways across the Arab world. Gauging perceptions is a complex endeavour. Ideally, analysis should be undertaken at several levels: the ruling elite, the intellectual elite, ordinary people, trade unions, the media and civil society, such as non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and so on. Capturing the opinion of the ruling elite is easier as it is often the basis for public statements. However, the opinions of the significant segment of society represented by the other levels are less well known.

It is important to note that the Arab intellectual debate over national or local perceptions of EU actions is far from being clearly set out in Arabic periodicals (Grawi and Sass 2005). Media resources such as electronic newspapers are therefore the main source of perceptions used for this paper. It is also important to mention that better data are required about Arab perceptions towards the EU in general, and its policies in particular. This data should ideally come from targeted regional surveys of elites, citizens and activists in civil society as well as from content analyses of major Arab media organizations. Very

⁶ Among its activities, the EU also provides financial assistance to help run elections (e.g. the forthcoming elections in Lebanon), and helps to train women candidates (e.g. in Jordan's most recent elections).

⁷ For more information see <<http://www.ec-undp-electoralassistance.org>>

⁸ See, e.g., details, of their combined electoral assistance to Albania, available at <http://www.delalb.ec.europa.eu/en/ec_and_osce_presence_launch_electoral_assistance_project_in_albania>

⁹ See, e.g., Yacoubian 2004; Youngs 2002; and Gillespe and Young 2000.

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little work, most notably, Bayoumi (2007), Lucarelli (2007) and Fioramonti and Lucarelli (2008), has been carried out in European academic circles to understand the EU's image in the world, and such work as there is still at its preliminary stages. Furthermore, Egypt is the only Arabic country under investigation, and the analysis is concerned with the general image of the EU in the eyes of the rest of the world – without

a specific focus on perceptions of democracy promotion policies.

This section examines Arabic language academic papers and newspaper articles. General attitudes to EU reform initiatives in the Arab world fall into two groups: those who totally oppose and repudiate them, and those who welcome them but with reservations. While it is not surprising to find both supporters and opponents of EU actions to promote political reform in the Arab world, it is the decline in trust of the EU in both groups that is troubling. There is a common trait among these views: they all agree on the loss of credibility that the EU displays in its democracy promotion initiatives and question its commitment to and, most worryingly, its motivations for promoting Arab democracy.

Those opposed to Western interference in national political reforms mainly reject EU activities by arguing that reform should be instigated from within and that external calls are destructive. This sentiment stems from a perception that the only goal driving EU attempts at reform is to safeguard its strategic interests. Zuhair Salem (2004) criticizes the portrayal of Arabs as opponents of reform and provides a rather bleak portrayal of the EU's motivations. He lists a number of motives behind EU interest in Arab political reform: a fear of waves of migration, the threat of terrorism, an interest in natural resources such as oil, protection of Israel and weakening the Arabic Muslim identity. In his view European intervention is a form of foreign mandate, which is totally unacceptable. Harb (2004) argues, in a somewhat more constructive way, against external pressures, because they might be used as an excuse for internal anti-reform forces and to portray genuine reformers as 'allies' of unwelcome external intervention.

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Pressure for reform from abroad does have some supporters. Faisal Al Qasem (2004) suggests that the foreign role in Arab reform can be explained by Arab stagnation over reforms and the evolution of globalization. Systems have become increasingly interconnected and interlinked and intervention is therefore a natural evolution. Badran (2005) regards external pressures as a positive thing, while the particularities of Arab countries are used by some as an argument to avoid proper reform and constitutes one of the main reasons for the backwardness of the Arab world, preventing it from benefiting from the experiences of other nations. These views are not expressed without reservation. Al Qasem (2004) adds that the EU, as an external actor, has lost credibility, because it is not perceived as serious about genuine reform. This 'lack of genuine interest in Arab reform' is picked up by many others. Ghassan Salameh, a former Lebanese Minister and special adviser to the United Nations on Iraq, sets it out in simple and self-explanatory words: the problem with EU reform initiatives is that 'they contain a lot of interference but with very little reform' (Ignatius 2004). While the EU is perceived as more balanced than the United States, EU support for Israel damages its credibility, especially as EU aid to Israel outweighs that to Arab countries. (Bishara 2004, Munaimna 2004, Nizam

Al Din 2005). These views reflect the perceptions of many Arabs. The EU has lost credibility because it is perceived that European stability is the motive for the EU's promotion of democracy in the Arab world.

Given the limited availability of information on this topic, the above is not necessarily a representative sample of academic and intellectual debate on EU democracy promotion in the Arab world. It sheds some light on existing, but not necessarily prevailing, sentiments towards foreign interventions. Nonetheless, there is an indication that a 'liberal reform discourse' as opposed to a 'cooperative security discourse' (Malmvig 2004) pervades Arab perceptions. In other words, many Arabs believe that EU activities in democracy promotion are put in place to counter the threats that the EU sees as drivers of the political and social problems of the Arab world itself. This leads many Arabs to feel that they are articulated as different – as the 'other'. There is a common perception that the EU is the main object of security, while the Arab world is seen as different, unstable, conflict-ridden and inferior, and thus in need of reform. Many Arabs feel that they are not treated as an equal partner that shares security perceptions with the EU.

In order to build a constructive 'cooperative security' approach, the EU must present existing threats as 'challenges' that are shared by both the EU and its Arab partners. These challenges then need to be countered by concerted actions over which both Arabs and Europeans have an interest in cooperating, with an understanding that their security is indivisible. From such a perspective, the 'democratization-stabilization dilemma' (Jünemann, 2003), according to which the long-term European interest in a more democratic neighbourhood comes second to short-term preferences for security and regime stability, is weakened. If security is articulated and viewed by all players as indivisible, it will not matter whether 'for Europeans, democratization is less a goal in itself than a means of attaining prioritized security goals'. This is because 'security goals' will be understood to be not just those of the EU, or the West, but the security goals of everyone.

4. Case Studies: Lebanese Electoral Reform and the Palestinian Elections

Only in Algeria, Iraq, Lebanon and the Palestinian Territories have serious electoral contests determined the highest level of executive and legislative authority. An analysis of the role the EU plays in electoral assistance in the Arab world allows us to mathematically narrow down the case studies eligible for study. The EU has a general interest in the whole region, but carried out both election observation missions and electoral assistance only in Lebanon and the Palestinian Territories.

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Lebanon

The weak party system in Lebanon is undermined by an electoral system that maintains and reinforces the traditional basis of representation and allows election results to be predicted in advance. The fragile electoral process is widely acknowledged internally and externally, and both national and international players recognize the need to carry out electoral monitoring and to reform the electoral law.

This section is based on a number of interviews with key functionaries, officers and activists in several civil society organizations, such as the Civil Campaign for Electoral Reform (CCER) and the Lebanese Association for Democratic Elections (LADE) – an organization that brings together more than 50 organizations. These bodies are active in monitoring Lebanese elections as well as in electoral reform initiatives and are the actors that have worked both directly and indirectly with the EU.

Two key insights emerge from these interviews regarding the 2005 EU election observation mission. On the one hand, local monitors working actively for free and fair elections were not keen to host an external observation mission. Local entities were defensive of their territories and saw no need for ‘European supervision’ in Lebanon. These organizations consider themselves to be highly competent and experienced in this area, having been actively working on elections since 1996. Notwithstanding their aversion to outside interference, they expressed appreciation of EU expertise. Nonetheless, while the EU mission was perceived as useful in capturing the general trend and the general environment of the elections, it had several limitations. Unlike local observation units, the EU mission was not present at every voting station. This failure to capture the different realities in different areas limited the recommendations that the report produced.¹⁰ Local bodies produced more detailed reports addressing all the technical aspects of how elections took place.

On the other hand, national bodies praised the EU mission as a catalyst for change in terms of national monitoring. In fact, before the 2005 legislative elections and before the EU was allowed to conduct such activities, national bodies were not permitted to conduct any overview and monitoring operations. The EU set a positive precedent that marked the beginning of national observation activities. The combination of national and EU reports prepared after the elections, which highlighted the deficiencies of the electoral law, prompted the Lebanese Government to establish a special entity to help draft new laws in this area.

The EU is also playing an important role in promoting reform and fair elections through its provision of financial assistance. For example, the EU is providing EUR 4 million in electoral support for the June 2009 elections (Delegation of the European Union to Lebanon, 21 January 2009). The UNDP Programme on Governance in the Arab Region (POGAR) directly addresses electoral reform in Lebanon and the rest of the Arab world, and the EU contributes financially to the programme. Those interviewed said that the EU makes an indirect contribution by financially supporting a project on mainstreaming human rights in several aspects of Lebanese society, including electoral

¹⁰ The report of the EU election observation mission for the 2005 Parliamentary elections is available at <http://ec.europa.eu/external_relations/human_rights/eu_election_ass_observ/lebanon/final_report.pdf>

reform. This project seeks to provide guidelines for electoral reform from a human rights perspective.

From the interviews it emerges that, while welcoming the EU's interest in Lebanese reforms, there are nonetheless several perceived weaknesses of its approach. First, although the EU provides funds and writes reports, advocacy remains weak. Interviewees argue that their governments and parliaments are under too little pressure to carry out the suggested electoral reforms. Second, in their view, conditionality should be pursued more strongly. They see the use of conditionality in some fields where the EU has strong interests, such as trade liberalization, but not in areas such as electoral reform. This raises doubts about the genuine desire of the EU to accomplish the required reforms. Interviewees perceive a mismatch between EU rhetoric and EU actions in advocating reform. This mismatch is driven by EU fears that unwanted actors (namely Hezbollah) will come to power. These double standards, however, come at the expense of real change.

Interviewees argue that their governments and parliaments are under too little pressure to carry out suggested electoral reforms. They see the use of conditionality in fields where the EU has strong interests, such as trade liberalization, but not in areas such as electoral reform. Interviewees perceive a mismatch between EU rhetoric and EU actions, driven by EU fears that unwanted actors will come to power. These double standards come at the expense of real change.

When asked about what the EU could do to be more effective in terms of electoral reform, various individuals suggested that, after the legislative elections in June 2009, the EU should use its expertise to assist local actors to draft a proper election law. The lack of sufficient time for proper reforms is usually used as a justification for partial reforms. After the upcoming local elections, which will take place after the national ones, there will be enough time to work together on a fairer electoral system. Others stressed that the EU must start working closely with civil society by providing both financial and political assistance. The interviews highlighted that reforms must come from within, but the local actors involved in the promotion of these reforms must be supported. In addition to financial assistance, the EU should constitute a third actor, encouraging the Lebanese Government and Parliament to listen to civil society. The CCER in particular echoed the above and stressed the current distance between EU and Lebanese local actors. While EU activities are welcome and to be encouraged, there is too little direct contact with those actors actively involved in electoral reform.

Reforms must come from within, but the local actors involved in the promotion of these reforms must be supported. In addition to financial assistance, the EU should constitute a third actor, encouraging the Lebanese Government and Parliament to listen to civil society.

The Palestinian Territories

The EU has been involved with electoral support in the Palestinian Territories both through financial assistance and the electoral observation missions for the 2005 presidential elections and the 2006 legislative elections. The Central Elections Commission (CEC) reports that since 2004 the EU has contributed EUR 13.3 million to its set-up, approximately 65 per cent of its total costs. The EU also contributed to the 2004 voter registration, the summer registration of 2005, the Palestinian Legislative Council Elections of 2006, and the update of the registry of voters in 2007. The EU is a member of the Elections Reform Support Group (ERSG), which is a forum of interested donors to the CEC. This group meets to discuss the assistance needs of the CEC and to oversee CEC development and its operational plans.

This section is based on interviews with officers from the CEC and from Al Multaqa (the Arab Thought Forum). These are some of the main actors involved in monitoring elections and are active in democracy promotion and voters' awareness campaigns.

When asked about their general view of the EU's role in supporting the electoral process in the Palestinian Territories, there was a unanimous chorus: the EU role was instrumental. The EU monitoring mission was by far the largest mission at recent electoral events. In 2006, some 248 EU mission members participated in monitoring the legislative elections. Members were accredited by the CEC and were perceived as well informed about the electoral system. The mission carried out monitoring tasks covering several aspects of the elections, such as electoral challenges, candidate and party nominations and electoral campaigns, as well as of the CEC decision-making process with regard to the different stages of the event. Monitoring was distributed across the West Bank and Gaza and in district offices.

Respondents were more critical of the EU's role in the promotion of electoral reform. While not denying the role the EU has played in the overall running of the elections, many reservations and criticisms were expressed about the inconsistency of EU actions. In particular, the Code of Conduct issued by the Arab Thought Forum was much debated. The Forum issued a document, 'Developing a Palestinian Election Code of Conduct', which was signed by 15 Palestinian political parties.¹¹ Its purpose was to ensure that 'political parties, candidates and their representatives conduct an election campaign based on ideals and standards consistent with democratic principles'. The Council of the European Union officially welcomed the Code and urged 'all parties to adhere to its terms' (Council of the European Union 2005). The EU reiterated its support for the Code in an official statement of the Quartet on 31 December 2005: 'The Quartet is encouraged by the negotiation of a Code of Conduct governing participation in the legislative council election. It calls on all parties and candidates in the Palestinian Legislative Council elections to agree and fully adhere to this Code to ensure an environment conducive to free and fair elections and international observer support'.

Given this official position and these statements, the EU's refusal to recognize the Hamas-led government is seen by Palestinians as a serious credibility issue. Article 24 of the Code clearly expresses a pledge to 'Abide by the official and final results of elections issued by the Central Elections Commission and/or the competent court'. Consequently, Palestinians, irrespective of whether they voted for Hamas, see the EU's position as a main factor contributing to a crisis in Palestinian society. Those interviewed expressed frustration, particularly because – in their eyes – the EU stand has undone the 10 years that civil society and public authorities have invested in teaching Palestinians about democracy. According to interviewees, the elections 'are not about Hamas, they are about people's choice' [and] 'Palestinians now feel as if they are not entitled to exercise their right to choose their representatives, when their choice is ultimately not recognized'. The double standards of the EU are evident, according to those interviewed, in the different treatment that the most recent Israeli elections results received. The leader of the extreme right Yisrael Beiteinu party – known for his extreme views – is a member of the new government. Nonetheless, the EU expressed

¹¹ For both the Arabic and English versions of the Code of Conduct see <<http://www.multaqa.org/etemplate.php?id=325>>

no opposition to such a decision, nor did it refuse to deal with any Israeli government he might be a part of.

When asked about the role the EU is expected to play in the future, those interviewed clearly said that the EU should ‘respect people’s choices, otherwise people will lose faith in the democratic process and be reticent about voting’. Palestinian respondents echoed their Lebanese counterparts in advocating greater EU engagement with civil society. Currently, several organizations are engaged in electoral exercises in the light of the upcoming elections. Many are working closely with US organizations, such as the Carter Center. The EU should increase its presence and become more closely involved with local civil society in such a delicate phase for Palestinian society.

5. Conclusions and Policy Recommendations

In order to surround itself with prosperous and stable neighbours, the EU has sought to achieve political reforms in the Mediterranean and the wider Middle East as part of a more comprehensive policy of democracy promotion. This article addresses the political dimension of EU policies in the Arab world, in particular electoral assistance in Lebanon and the Palestinian Territories, and attempts to better understand the context in which EU policies are implemented and the perception of them in order to make policy recommendations to help improve future actions by the EU.

If truly mutual partnership is considered a cornerstone of effective democracy promotion, the EU must improve its knowledge of how its actions are perceived by the intended recipients. The discussion of Arab perceptions is an important window on some of the debates taking place there, but we must be cautious about the conclusions drawn from it. Given the conditions of direct and indirect censorship prevalent in the Arab world, the above excerpts might not reflect the genuine or more sophisticated discussion taking place in the Arab world. A more rigorous study of Arab perceptions, tackling the elites – both political and intellectual – as well as the Arab street, the media and civil society must be undertaken. Detailed data are lacking on the perceptions and attitudes of Arabs towards the West in general, and we have to rely on expert opinions and the general perceptions that stem from observation. Although useful and informative, these opinions do not constitute a reliable and scientific measurement of attitudes.

That said, the conclusions from the case studies echo those from the section on general Arab perceptions. The decline in the credibility of the EU is evident in both the Lebanese and the Palestinian case studies, albeit for different reasons. In both cases there is a common perception of EU double standards, whereby the EU’s long-term interest in a more democratic neighbourhood comes second to short-term preferences for security and regime stability. In other words, avoidance of Hamas and Hezbollah overrides any action to achieve fair and democratic electoral processes.

A number of recommendations arise in the light of the above, and given the genuine desire for reform in both the EU and the Arab world:

- The EU must define a concrete and realistic approach to ‘democracy themes’: *participation*, covering issues such as civil society, elections, gender, legislatures and local government; *the rule of law*, covering the constitution and constitutional affairs, the judiciary and human rights; and *transparency and accountability*, covering issues

such as financial transparency and fighting corruption. Although the EU makes a strong case for the need for political reform in the Arab world, there is no equally detailed and systematic indication of the role the EU will play in order to help the countries concerned to achieve the desired changes.

- There is an obvious gap in the EU democracy discourse between the way it is perceived by its intended recipients and the way the EU thinks it is perceived. Consequently, it becomes important to know how EU democracy promotion initiatives are perceived by Arab opinion in order to be able to affect these views in a constructive way. Given the scarcity, the EU should invest in an academically sound analysis of the opinions of elites, the media, citizens and civil society. Arabs must feel that the EU has a genuine desire to promote political reforms. What better way to start than by showing that the EU listens to them?
- The EU must build a real partnership. The limited yet revealing case studies outlined in this paper suggest that the target countries advocate greater EU engagement with all the domestic forces already active in social and political reform. Apart from NGOs and other civil society actors, this should also include moderate Islamist parties. Several studies (see El-Muhtaseb 2008, Asseburg 2007) indicate that some Islamists, such as the Islamic Action Front (IAF) in Jordan, the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood and the Justice and Development Party in Morocco, have moderated their positions. These parties have rejected violence and are committed to pluralist politics with a check on executive powers as well as fair and independent legal processes, a free press and media, and the protection of minority and human rights. Engaging with these actors could perhaps weaken the accusation of double standards, which strongly characterizes Lebanese and Palestinian perceptions of the EU.
- The EU democratization agenda should be framed as part of EURO-MED security policy and not as a Western Security policy. Consequently, the EU must invest in its public diplomacy efforts and send the message that the Arab world is an equal partner that shares its security perceptions and is not just the cause of security concerns.

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