



Liberal or Social Democracy? Aspects of the EU's Democracy Promotion Agenda in the Middle East

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Abstract

This paper questions how liberal democracy has come to symbolize an ideal, or a universal set of values ready to be exported elsewhere in the world. It critically assesses the EU's almost messianic mission to promote its successful project of liberal democracy, and the ways in which the EU seeks to teach others about its meaning while refusing to aspect learn about alternative forms of political organization in different contexts. It discusses the implications of such a narrow framing of EU conceptions of liberal democracy, drawing on extensive fieldwork carried out in Palestine and Egypt in September 2007 and March 2008, respectively. The paper argues for a new framing of political transformation in the Middle East and North Africa. It concludes by employing Aletta Norval's notion of Aversive Democracy to highlight the need for recognition of crucial aspects of political change that stem from what is emerging in the Middle East.

Summary of Recommendations

The EU should focus on small changes through the articulations being made by and between different elements in Middle Eastern societies. EU actors need to consider how change occurs under different conditions, and must acknowledge how people in the Middle East come to identify as democrats in their own context. This will require some reflexivity on the part of EU actors over what they seek to promote by promoting a European model of democracy, particularly in the context of the Middle East where such a model clearly has not worked. Unless the EU moves away from such *aspect blindness*, it cannot move on to new ideas on how best to support change in the region.

If the EU is to consider alternatives to its model of democracy which are more in line with the reality on the ground in the Middle East, it needs first to recognize that because most Middle East countries are in the main Muslim societies, no state in the region can have any legitimacy in the eyes of its citizens without observing the main teachings of the Shari`a.

In the case of Palestine, the EU may wish to give serious attention to the concept of autonomy as a distinct form of political order and reconceptualize Palestine as a

potential site for such autonomy. Such an examination of autonomy as a potential means of supporting diversity in societies as well as efforts from within societies calling for political change enriches the EU's chances of aspect learning on forms of territorial government as a group-based political regime, which in turn can provide powerful democratic alternatives to statist politics.

The EU should undertake a conceptual exercise or take some time to reflect on democracy promotion. This would require organized and regular discussions among officials of the Council of the European Union, the European Commission and the European Parliament about the real *raison d'être* for this aspect of the EU's external policy. Critical voices in the region are calling for the EU to support their own internal efforts at change rather than impose a particular model of democracy or democracy promotion. The EU has to understand that what is needed in the region is a social

welfare type of democracy that has the people's needs as its primary focus. Linked to the above, the EU should organize regular symposia with specific experts from each country in the region. These symposia should be organized in the form of closed workshops away from the attention of the international media, and act as a listening and learning process for the EU without any preconditions.

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1. Introduction

In the post-Cold War era, a key hegemonic discourse dominates the framing of the 'best' model for exporting liberal democracy as 'the ideal form of political organization'. Other models, such as people's democracy or social democracy, have been ignored. In the context of EU relations with the Middle East, this discourse plays an indispensable role in maintaining EU attempts at economic, political and cultural 'global actorness' in the region. During the colonial era, the *mission civilatrice* performed a similar role for European colonial powers. Thus, Europe's self-proclaimed role of transforming the practices and norms of non-European societies and of making the latter emulate Eurocentric standards remains constant across the centuries. The 'triumph' of liberal democracy in Europe should not be underestimated. However, it remains a highly questionable concept in Europe as well as in different parts of the world.

This paper questions how liberal democracy has come to symbolize an ideal, or a universal set of values ready to be exported elsewhere in the world. It critically assesses the EU's almost messianic mission to promote Europe's successful and moral project of liberal democracy and the ways in which the EU seeks to teach others about its meaning, while refusing to aspect learn about alternative forms of political organization in different contexts.¹

Section 2 provides a thorough discourse analysis of EU documentation on democracy promotion in the Middle East to date. It argues that the EU's framing of this external policy area may best be described in two broad dimensions: first, as *dispositional*, that is, a disposition not to question liberal democracy conceptually but to take this as *the* model to export to other regions; and, second, as *procedural/institutional*, that is, as having a main focus on elections and institutions. The paper discusses the implications

¹ I borrow this term from Aletta Norval's work on *Aversive Democracy*.

of such a narrow framing of EU conceptions of liberal democracy and draws on extensive fieldwork carried out by the author in Palestine and Egypt in September 2007 and March 2008, respectively. Section 3 argues for a new framing of political transformation in the Middle East and North Africa, which I call *reflexive framing*, to address the key social transformations that accompany articulations made by and between different elements in these societies.

I conclude by employing Aletta Norval's (2007) notion of Aversive Democracy to highlight the need for recognition of a number of crucial aspects of political change stemming from what is emerging in the Middle East. First, that in focusing on change, the EU should expect neither a revolution in the region nor change along reformist lines. The EU should instead focus on small changes through the articulations being made by and between different elements in Middle Eastern societies. Second, EU actors need to question how change occurs under a different sets of conditions. Finally, the EU must acknowledge the importance of people's subjective dimension, which means that the EU needs to acknowledge how people in the Middle East come to identify as democrats in their own context.

2. The EU's Framing of a 'Liberal Democracy' Package for Export to the Middle East and North Africa

It is often argued in EU documentation that the processes of political liberalization and democratization have brought about peaceful co-existence in Europe and that such successful processes can be emulated elsewhere (see, e.g., European Commission 2001). The term liberal democracy is rarely used in EU rhetoric and texts as it is in US democracy promotion documents. Liberal and liberalization are used more in the economic sense, that is, referring to the breakdown of tariff and non-tariff barriers to trade. Some exceptional explicit references to liberal democracy may be found, for instance, in the debates of the European Parliament:

The European Union has become a global player, always on the basis of its principles such as respect for peace, the quest for compromise, plus the defence of human rights and of liberal democracy. In particular, it is engaged in an effort to promote democracy in countries in North Africa, the Middle East, the Caucasus and Eastern Europe (Jósef Pinior, 2006).

Otherwise, the notion of liberal democracy is implied. It is the model that the target audience in the Middle East and North Africa perceive that the EU is attempting to push for emulation by its neighbouring countries. There is a further assumption that democratic freedom is something very specific to the European experience.

In addition to the EU's discourse, there is a vibrant academic literature on the merits and legitimacy of liberal democracy as an instrument for the achievement of progress and equality. Some argue that liberal democracy is the best political system for ensuring Kant's *perpetual peace*. Kantian scholars assume that democratic states do not engage in wars against each other, although this theory was severely challenged during the Balkan wars of the 1990s.

The 'liberal' in liberal democracy denotes visions of a society made up of individuals and of the defence of their rights as the primary social good. The origins of liberal democracy

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are 18th century Europe and the Age of the Enlightenment, during which it was argued that human affairs should be guided by reason and the principles of equality and liberty. In the 19th century, the model of liberal democracy was also held to include the encouragement of a free market economy and free trade. However, the relation between liberalism

and democracy has been contested since. Liberalism is considered individualistic and concerns itself with limiting state power. In theory at least, democracy is concerned with the power of the people and is a collectivist ideal. Fareed Zakaria (1997), for example, has argued that constitutional liberalism and democratic government are not necessarily connected.

Winston Churchill famously argued that democracy is the worst form of government except for all the other forms that have been tried from time to time. Thus, there is an inherent disposition not to question liberal democracy: this model of democracy is not perfect as a political system but it is the best we have.

Democracy, however, is essentially a highly contested concept. The word originated in the classical Greek city states, and referred to the rule of the *Demos* – the citizen body – and the right of all citizens to decide on matters of general concern. The size of modern nation states has meant that democracy is no longer direct but indirect – through the election of representatives, hence the term *representative democracy*. Therefore the criteria of democracy become: (a) whether such elections are free; (b) whether such elections provide an effective choice; and (c) whether the elected body of representatives has the right to initiate legislation, the right to vote on taxes and control the budget, and the right publicly to question, discuss, criticize and oppose government measures without being subject to threats of interference or arrest (Pace 2008–2009).

For the EU, this predisposition to liberal democracy is extended and put into practice through a strong focus on elections and election observation missions, which form a vital component of its activities to promote democracy, human rights and the rule of law worldwide (European Commission 2000). This, Kurki (2008) argues, is more akin to *electoral* democracy than *liberal* democracy.

Democracy in the context of Palestine is about an ethos of questioning, and about political activity. According to Haitham Arar:

In Palestinian society, the ordinary Palestinian citizen has a lot of awareness and there is a lot of concern from the average Palestinian about politics and about what is going on here in Palestine. And this is combined with the freedom of expressing oneself in many ways. Using the media, going to any decision-making elite and saying whatever one has to say, and so on. People participate in daily politics here, everybody has the right to do so and he or she practices this right. We need to make some changes because a lot of people believe mainly in elections. This mentality has to change. Democracy is an embedded culture in Palestinian society.²

² Author's interview with Mrs Haitham Arar, Ministry of Interior, Democracy and Human Rights Division (Fatah) Ramallah, 5 September 2007.

It follows that the EU wrongly frames a cornerstone of its foreign and security policy – the promotion of democracy – in a *procedural* manner. For the EU, the organization of elections goes hand in hand with the consolidation of institutions, but there is very little by way of detail on how such institutions can be secured on a long term basis in particular contexts (see, e.g. Council of the European Union 2005). Nor is there much reflection on whether European models of institution-building fit contexts elsewhere. This reinforces the view that the EU has become comfortable with its own discomfort; that is, with its technical approach to external relations and external governance, with the resulting danger of an overly procedural conception of democracy.

EU democracy promotion policies are not alone in placing this emphasis on free and fair elections. Statements from other external actors, including the United States and international organizations such as International IDEA, highlight an embedded belief in the power of elections to transform the political landscape worldwide. Thus, the promotion of democracy is conceived as operating through processes familiar in a reality (the European context) that is external to the core roots of political configurations in the Middle East, specifically that of occupation in the case of Palestine and of authoritarianism in the case of Egypt. This EU framing of democracy promotion in procedural terms has been severely challenged in the case of Palestine. As Rami Nasrallah puts it:

We cannot talk about elections as tools for democratic transformation – elections in Palestine have nothing to do with democratic values. In reality they are either to support a political agreement like the elections in 1996,³ or an election is held to build a new political landscape and to integrate factors that are not part of the [Palestine Liberation Organization] PLO as when Hamas won in the 2006 election.⁴

In the academic debate, there are those who move beyond the procedural view of promoting liberal democracy and argue instead for a broader perspective that takes account of diverse contexts and cultural values. Zakaria's work (1997) shifts the discussion to the promotion of the gradual *liberalization* of societies. In practical terms, according to Haitham Arar, '[T]his means especially rights, the right of freedom of movement, the right of freedom of expression and of thought, and other rights. You cannot just import a model from the outside – one has to check if ideas are useful for Palestinian society or not'.

The so-called cultural turn in the democratization literature is further developed by David Chandler (1999), Cox et al (2000), Larry Diamond (1999), Nagel and Mahr (1999), Ottaway and Carothers (2000) and Youngs (2001). In the context of Egypt, for instance, this would entail addressing the authoritarian nature of the regime and external actors' political will to adopt strong sanctions against such governments (Brownlee, 2002). As Kamal Khalil (2008) argues:

³ The Oslo Agreement was signed by the PLO and Israel in 1993. It was renegotiated in 1995 as Oslo 2, partly because there were several unclear elements in the first agreement.

⁴ Author's interview with Mr Rami Nasrallah, Head of International Peace and Cooperation Center (IPCC), East Jerusalem, 3 September 2007.

Change will come from outside the regime, because the government's interest goes in line with oppressing freedoms ... starting from the middle class to the poor classes, because even 10,000 intellectuals won't make a difference unless followed by millions. And the way I see it, Gamal [Mubarak's son] or whatever military successor will be a dictator as well and won't care for a real democracy. So the core of change comes from inside – yet, we cannot deny the supporting role of our worldwide friends in the struggle for freedom.

Although the cultural turn in International Relations debates on democracy attempted a move away from a focus on procedures, institutions and elections, it did little to contest the liberal model of democracy at a deeper level. There has been no such reflexive move in the EU. For instance, in the run up to the December 2007 Annapolis meeting, Javier Solana and Benita Ferrero-Waldner (Solana and Ferrero-Waldner 2007) focused on what they called Palestinian state-building as a key pillar for a 'new momentum in the peace process', stating under 'Comprehensive institution building and good governance' that: 'For over a decade the EU has been at the forefront of efforts to empower the Palestinian Authority (PA) via institution building and its work in the Jerusalem based "Governance Strategy Group". The EU foresees intensifying these activities, in areas which complement PA plans, for example health, education and the judiciary', without any mention of how the EU would engage with the democratically elected Hamas Government. The EU acted as if Hamas did not exist, despite the fact that the movement is a crucial aspect of the Palestinian political landscape whether the EU likes it or not, and controls the Gaza Strip.

Such shortcomings in the practice of democracy promotion take us back to the academic literature in search of broader ideas that might open up the possibility of alternative models. Peter Burnell (2000) is a strong advocate of thinking beyond the limitations of a liberal conception of democracy and refers to the use of the notions of democracy in such contexts as 'political constructs'. He calls for the inclusion of ideas from social and economic democracy and for a reflection on communitarian as opposed to individualistic notions of society, which in the end contribute to the ideal of a sustainable democracy. According to Haitham Arar:

Here people struggle because they think that democracy is a way of having influence on the political. This is very important. Having a democratic awareness relates to the economic situation because if you have a democratic system you have a good economic situation with employment and thereby less poverty and hunger. It is about ensuring that Palestinian laws are in line with international standards ... the rights of refugees.

This interesting insight goes hand in hand with this author's findings on the conceptions of democracy of key Hamas officials in the Islamist movement's political wing: 'My belief is in welfare democracy' (Naim, 2007. See also Pace 2008–2009). Yet, the EU, to this day, chooses not to attempt to listen to any of these progressive voices within the Hamas movement. As Khalil Shikaki (2007) argues:

There is a confused notion in Europe, the USA and Israel that Hamas is essentially anti-peace, anti-democratic and that it is impossible to make peace with a Hamas Administration. I think that is false. There are many divisions within Hamas.

But one can say there is a consensus within Hamas about the *hudna* [ceasefire]. This is the relevant issue in this domestic political situation.⁵

It appears that the EU prefers to work on the basis of a model of democracy that protects perceived stability, by retaining authoritarian regimes in power and maintaining the status quo in conflict situations, at the expense of taking bold moves to deal with the reality on the ground for the very targets it seeks to influence through its democracy promotion packages. A reality check may require the EU to move towards a social or welfare model of democracy. This will require some reflexivity on the part of EU actors over what exactly they seek to promote by promoting a European model of democracy, particularly in the context of the Middle East.⁶

It appears that the EU prefers to work on the basis of a model of democracy that protects perceived stability, by retaining authoritarian regimes in power and maintaining the status quo in conflict situations, at the expense of taking bold moves to deal with the reality on the ground for the very targets it seeks to influence through its democracy promotion packages.

3. Alternative Ways of Thinking Democracy

The term reflexivity stems from the seminal work of Pierre Bourdieu and Loïc J. D. Wacquant, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology* (1992). In social theory, reflexivity refers to the need to reflect and examine one's role as investigator or actor in a particular field rather than just an examination of the subjects under study. In EU-Middle East relations this would refer to a *bidirectional* relationship where the EU recognizes that its own targets also affect the EU at the same time as EU actions have implications for its targets on the ground. As Walid Salem (2007) notes:

The lack of democracy here in the Middle East does not only have to do with Western practices of supporting authoritarian regimes: there is an internal reason too which in turn impacts on Western practices: people here are still conducive to authoritarianism. They are not yet conducive to act as responsible citizens. That is why we are working on a project of Middle East citizenry. One of the main reasons for the absence of democracy is the absence of citizenship. The West thinks along the line of elections alone.⁷

Thus, reflexivity calls on the EU to move away from attempts to 'promote' and export its conception of democracy building in the Middle East by attempting to make others just like us or emulate our model of democracy. The EU must understand what it has been trying to do by promoting a particular model of democracy that clearly has not worked in the Middle East. Unless the EU moves away from such *aspect blindness*, it cannot move on to new ideas on how best to support change in the region.

By recognizing alternative concerns, priorities and norms, the EU need not negate its own values. Through such recognition, the EU could possibly emerge from its crisis in democracy promotion with alternative ways of thinking about democracy and the Middle East.

⁵ Author's interview with Dr Khalil Shikaki, Palestinian Centre for Policy & Survey Research, PSR, Ramallah, 4 September, 2007.

⁶ According to Aletta Norval (2007) such reflexivity requires moving away from what she terms aspect blindness to aspect dawning to aspect learning and eventually aspect change. See also Pace 2008.

⁷ Author's interview with Mr Walid Salem, former director of Jerusalem Office, PANORAMA, The Palestinian Center for the Dissemination of Democracy and Community Development, East Jerusalem, 3 September 2007.

It also follows that, rather than being blinded by preconceived perceptions and mis-readings of the Middle East, the EU needs to experience an ‘aspect dawning’, through which it is possible to understand alternative conceptions of democracy (El-Affendi, 2004; Pace, 2008). By recognizing alternative concerns, priorities and norms, the EU need not negate its own values. Through such recognition, the EU could possibly emerge from its crisis in democracy promotion with alternative ways of thinking about democracy and the Middle East. This is what Norval calls ‘aspect change’. For Norval, this requires a rethinking of liberal democracy.⁸ It is through people’s ordinary contestations and everyday struggles in their political spheres that their democratic freedoms and responsibilities are constituted. As George Ishak (2008) of the *Kefaya* movement in Cairo stipulates:

People here are angry, that is why they are out demonstrating. This is new for Egypt. They have started to protest, they have started to talk, to make their voices heard, they started to strike, they are refusing anyone’s orders: this is new issue for Egypt. So we have to prepare to make change: the main issue now is how to balance between the demands of the workers and the political issue.⁹

It follows that reflexivity highlights the need for the EU to open itself up to diverse understandings and interpretations of concepts such as ‘liberal’ and ‘democracy’ – that is, to the meaning of the ideal of democracy in different contexts. As Rami Nasrallah states:

You cannot talk about democratic transformations in Palestine without a real economic, political and social transformation. First, one cannot talk about reform¹⁰ without making concrete moves on the peace transformation front. Second, because our political circumstances do not allow it, none of our organizations or movements has had the chance to develop into democratic political parties: neither Fatah nor Hamas. They still see themselves as resistance movements. They see their agendas as twofold: first a peace-building agenda and

⁸ Drawing on deliberative (Habermas, Rawls) and post-structuralist (Mouffe and Laclau) approaches to democracy, Norval offers a Wittgenstein-inspired way of understanding the global complexities of the formation of a democratic subjectivity through what she terms ‘aversive democracy’.

⁹ Author’s interview with Mr George Ishak, *Kefaya* movement, Cairo, 24 March 2008. Thus, we need ‘to think change in a more nuanced manner than is traditionally the case. Most work on change is caught between the horns of revolution and reformism. Wittgenstein’s conception of aspect dawning helps [us] to think about quite radical change, which would not be reducible to a revolutionary break, yet which could occur as a result of quite small changes in articulations between elements. I draw a distinction between aspect dawning and change to capture the senses in which we think of change in relation to democracy. Again, much of the literature works with a distinction between ‘societies in transition’ and ‘well established liberal democracies’... [T]his tends to be a dichotomy that also has teleological overtones. I feel that we need to question the distinction in kind between *change under different conditions*... Finally, Wittgenstein’s conception of aspect change requires a shift of/in perspective, which ... emphasizes the importance of the *subjective dimension*’. Communication between Aletta Norval and the author, (my own emphasis). October 24, 2008. See also Pace, *Interrogating* 2008.

¹⁰ Western understandings of the word reform may be different from the original Arabic term. As Dr Mohamed Kadry Said argues: ‘the word reform when translated into Arabic is the word *islah*, which means repairing . . . this is an unfortunate translation. Reform means sometimes reshaping or advancing, for example, but unfortunately it was translated as *islah* ... and of course this is a heavy blow for anybody or any institution here especially when it is imposed from outside’. Author’s interview with Dr Mohamed Kadry Said, Al Ahram Centre, Cairo, 23 March 2008.

second the resistance agenda – they’ve never been able to move to a civil agenda of a political party. What we have had here with the PLO is a democracy of guns, whereby political figures like Arafat used to buy power through loyalty. In a patrimonial system like this one loyalty buys you benefits and in return you give your support to a political movement. The donors for their part seek to protect Israel and Israeli civilians. The international community has no intention for a real democracy to emerge in Palestine.¹¹

In the case of Palestine, the EU’s support of a particular political faction, Fatah, has come at the expense of the marginalization of progressive voices within Hamas as well as of more general support for indigenous and vital political, rather than civil, society organizations and institutions which cater for the real needs of society, including leadership training for young people.

In concrete terms, aspect learning requires the EU to reflect on the apportionment of its ‘democratization’ financial assistance packages towards the Middle East and North Africa. These funds have not been allocated on the basis of basic needs. People’s needs in the two case studies examined here are not primarily related to democracy issues, but to occupation and a sense of fear and insecurity, in the case of Palestinians, and the iron fist of an authoritarian regime, poverty and illiteracy, in the case of Egypt. As Rafik Habib argues:

Politics in Egypt is different from politics in other countries, especially Western countries, because politics for the ordinary Egyptian people is about three specific issues: one, the essentials of life like food, housing, medical services, and so on; two, the state’s role in protecting their country; and, three, the protection of religious rules and principles. When the government does not address these issues, the people get angry and they protest, making the government feel fear for the first time. When people protest about specific issues they get a positive result. The Egyptian street is now demanding change and reforms. Democratic transformation will not happen in an organized, planned and gradual process. It will occur unexpectedly due to popular activities led by the Egyptian street that reflects its discontent with the system. This transformation will impose new political realities on the system.¹²

In the case of Palestine, the EU’s support of a particular political faction, Fatah, has come at the expense of the marginalization of progressive voices within Hamas (Youssef 2007) as well as of more general support for indigenous and vital political, rather than civil, society organizations¹³ and institutions which cater for the real needs of society, including leadership training for young people:

“Our job has been made much harder over the past two years and thus our intervention needs to be micro-sized. We need a concept that is based on a sensible moral imperative. Our projects should be based on developing society and the fundamentals of ethics. Any project needs to be conducted by the people for the people. The so-called external development projects are parachuted here in accordance with various political agendas or donor ‘beliefs’. These projects

¹¹ See note 4.

¹² Author’s interview with Dr Rafik Habib, Coptic intellectual, 25 March 2008.

¹³ Author’s interview with Dr Ahmed Youssef, Political Adviser to Ismail Haniyeh, Office of the Prime Minister, Gaza, 11 September, 2007. The term political society organizations refers to the fact that democracy is at its roots about questioning the political.

never really take off here ... people in the region are poorer, less capable and more vulnerable and susceptible to extremism *despite* the financial surplus from external actors.”¹⁴

A democracy promotion policy based on selective measures and serving EU political and economic interests is doomed to fail – especially as it does not reflect the general will of the citizens of the Middle East for reform and change.

More specifically, through a policy aimed at marginalizing the democratically elected Islamist-resistance-nationalist movement, Hamas, the EU has promoted failed institutions rather than encouraged democracy building. Through its boycott of Hamas the EU has refused to recognize the popular will, attempted to mask Fatah’s loss of popular legitimacy, infringed the autonomy of the Palestinian people and undermined Palestinian national unity efforts. The EU’s decision to take sides in its allegedly objective democracy

promotion programmes clearly damaged the legitimizing effects of reform by interfering in internal Palestinian affairs and introducing its own patronage dimension into Palestinian indigenous institutions (Kaye et al 2008). A democracy promotion policy based on such selective measures and serving EU political and economic interests is doomed to fail – especially as it does not reflect the general will of the citizens of the Middle East for reform and change.

Aspect Change

The only way to unite our efforts towards solving our problem as Palestinians in terms of the occupation is democracy. However, democracy is a way of life, it is a culture, it is a way of thinking. The basis of this should be citizenship, rights – the basis of the relationship between leader and citizens . . . not religion or gender or ethnic group. The reality, moreover, is that we are Muslims with an Islamic background, and therefore we consider this as part of our form of government.¹⁵

If the EU is to consider alternatives to its model of democracy which are more in line with the reality on the ground in the Middle East, it needs first to recognize that because most Middle East countries are in the main Muslim societies, no state in the region can have any legitimacy in the eyes of its citizens without observing the main teachings of the Shari’a. What we see across the region today is regimes, such as that of Mubarak in Egypt, that pose as secular rulers when it suits them but coerce obedience from their subjects through the iron fist of authoritarianism.¹⁶ The EU needs to recognize that Islam is the *main* frame of reference in predominantly Muslim countries (See Al-Beshri 2006, Elhachmi Hamdi 1996, Hourani 1983).

If the EU is to consider alternatives to its model of democracy which are more in line with the reality on the ground in the Middle East, it needs first to recognize that because most Middle East countries are in the main Muslim societies, no state in the region can have any legitimacy in the eyes of its citizens without observing the main teachings of the Shari’a.

¹⁴ Author’s interview with Dr Sabri Saidam, Centre for Continuing Education, BirZeit University, Ramallah, 15 September, 2007.

¹⁵ Author’s interview with Dr Basem N Naim, Minister of Youth, Sport and Health, PNA, Gaza, 11 September 2007.

¹⁶ Thus, EU funding for so-called democracy building projects since the 1990s has had little or no impact on actual democratization in the Middle East. The key recipients of these funds, governments in the Middle East and North Africa, have shown little interest in real political reform and change.

4. Conclusions and Policy Prescriptions

If this paper is to serve a purpose, it is written in the hope that the EU will address the model of democracy it has thus far been attempting to promote in other regions of the world, and ensure that its future decisions on democracy promotion are informed by a principled public discourse; that is, a direct, ongoing and critical engagement with the people of these regions. If the EU is sincere in its attempt to play a global role, it will continue to be confronted with the reality of multiple polities and Demoi. At the time of writing, the new US Administration has admitted that in Afghanistan, it is more interested in security than democracy (Traynor 2009). The EU would do well to undertake a similar reality-check in its democracy promotion initiatives in the Middle East. Thus far, its present structures have invested more time and energy in accommodationist types of reforms (Chrysochoou 2009) in the region, rather than core fundamental changes that address the root causes of the lack of real democracy in the Middle East.

If the EU wants to revisit its promotion of a particular model of democracy, such a move requires political imagination of the democratic alternatives in complex settings such as those of the Middle East. In the case of Palestine, where the illusion of a democratic, independent and viable state – whatever that means – looms in EU discourse (See, e.g. Council of the European Union 2008), the EU may wish to give serious attention to the concept of autonomy as a distinct form of political order and reconceptualize Palestine as a potential site for such autonomy. Such an examination of autonomy as a potential means of supporting diversity in societies as well as efforts from within societies calling for political change enriches the EU's chances of aspect learning on forms of territorial government as a group-based political regime, which in turn can provide powerful democratic alternatives to statist politics.¹⁷ If the EU removes the political wing of Hamas from its terrorist list and supports reconciliation efforts between Fatah and Hamas, it need not fear the decision of the majority of Palestinian voters. If democracy is to be taken as a political activity then people in the Middle East should be left alone to negotiate what they believe are their rights and freedoms. The EU should then support the claims and struggles of the people of this region.

If democracy is to be taken as a political activity then people in the Middle East should be left alone to negotiate what they believe are their rights and freedoms. The EU should then support the claims and struggles of the people of this region.

In the case of Egypt, the EU should support current political figures and tendencies that are putting internal pressure on the Mubarak regime to change, but which remain sidelined in the EU's democracy promotion efforts. The EU should cooperate with such voices by placing its own pressure on the government through its economic leverage. Its legitimacy in the eyes of its targets in Egypt will otherwise deteriorate even further. As El ElaMady argues:

We believe that the outside 'pressure' – they have their own special agendas, special interests when speaking about change. They do not have our interests – I mean the Egyptian people's interests – in their minds. After the results of the elections in 2005 here in Egypt and in early 2006 in Palestine brought Hamas

¹⁷ Such a critical debate on the concept of autonomy is the subject of a forthcoming Ethnicity and Democratic Governance (EDG) workshop to be held in Barcelona in March 2010 and coordinated by Alain-G Gagnon and Michael Keating.

to power and the Muslim Brotherhood 20 per cent of the seats, the Western administrations changed their mind about democracy. They reduced their pressure on this issue – so in my view they are not serious about change.¹⁸

First, the EU should undertake a conceptual exercise or reflective period on democracy promotion. This would require organized and regular discussions among officials of the Council of the European Union, the European Commission and the European Parliament about the real *raison d'être* for this aspect of the EU's external policy. Is it really political change that the EU seeks to promote in the Middle East and North Africa? Or is the EU more interested in securing a stable neighbourhood in the south? Why pursue liberal democracy when this model has clearly not worked in this region? What instruments have thus far been employed in the promotion of this model of democracy – and why have they not worked? Which actors have the EU been dealing with in its democracy promotion efforts? Have they been accountable to their own people? Have they provided specific change in their specific contexts?

Second, if the EU is to continue with its democracy promotion efforts, it needs to change the model and change the players it works with in the Middle East and North Africa. Critical voices in the region are calling for the EU to support their own internal efforts at change rather than impose a particular model of democracy or democracy promotion. Change can only come about through initiatives initiated by people on the ground, starting with the most basic necessities and needs of the people: education, employment, medical facilities and food. The EU has to understand that what is needed in the region is a social welfare type of democracy that has the people's needs as its primary focus. From the interviews conducted by this author, it is clear that there are genuine civil society and opposition voices in the Middle East and North Africa that have thus far been sidelined by the EU and the international community, and towards which the EU must turn its attention if it is genuinely interested in political change in this region. Only through a change of track will the EU have any hope of rebuilding its legitimacy in the eyes of the people in the region.

Third, and linked to the above, the EU should organize regular symposia with specific experts from each country in the region. These symposia should be organized in the form of closed workshops away from the attention of the international media. This exercise should act as a listening and learning process for the EU – providing a dialogic platform without any conditions for all voices from the Middle East and North Africa. Rethinking and redirecting democracy towards a social welfare model requires breaking it down into individual components and having professional people trained in each area (education, health, water, employment, citizenship and citizenship rights and so on) discuss, argue and debate the contours around each issue. People in the region want real change in their lives, and this should be the guiding light of these symposia. Working closely on a day-to-day basis with people from the region will give the EU an opportunity to learn and understand more how small changes can bring about real transformations for the people in the Middle East and North Africa by recognizing the articulations they make in their respective societies. The EU will also be able to appreciate change under different sets of conditions and in diverse contexts. By acknowledging that the people of the Middle East and North Africa have their

¹⁸ Author's interview with Mr Abou El Ela-Mady, *Al-Wasat Party*, Cairo, 24 March 2008. *Al-Wasat* is a moderate Islamist organisation which, nonetheless, is not recognized in Egypt.

own subjectivity, the EU can support their efforts to identify as democrats in their own context.

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