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## **THE DEBATE ON PROMOTING DEMOCRACY: LESSONS LEARNED AND FUTURE CHALLENGES**

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Paper presented at the Third session, Seminar organised by the Mediterranean Special Group, NATO  
Parliamentary Assembly  
*Naples 9-10 July 2004*

IAI0411

**ISTITUTO AFFARI INTERNAZIONALI**

## THE DEBATE ON PROMOTING DEMOCRACY: LESSONS LEARNED AND FUTURE CHALLENGES

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In June 2004 the MENA region and the issue of democracy were at the forefront of the international stage. Indeed, the issue was on the Sea Island 9 June G-8 agenda, under the heading of the US-initiated “Partnership for Progress and a Common Future with the Region of the Broader Middle East and North Africa” (formerly “Greater Middle East Initiative”), as well as on that of the Brussels 17-18 June European Council. The latter approved the final versions of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) and the Strategic Partnership for the Mediterranean and the Middle East. In both these policies the issue of democracy is prominent.

While the geographic scope of the initiatives by the US (the Broader Middle East) and EU (North Africa and the Near East, i.e. the Mediterranean area) may differ, the focus is nevertheless on the necessity to promote democracy. The Western countries, although not always in tune with one another, are strongly committed to the perceived need to promote democracy in the MENA (Middle East and North Africa) area.

It must be pointed out that this commitment to promoting democracy has just gone through a very controversial stage because of the US-led Coalition’s intervention in Iraq with the aim, among others, to replace the totalitarian Ba’athist regime with a democratic one. This kind of coercive democracy promotion is rather unusual in Western post-Second World War thinking. Rather, it resembles the thinking prevailing in the post-First World War mandates period. With the end of June take-over by the Iraqi interim government, this country’s domestic situation will hopefully move towards normalisation.

It is very likely that the idea of using coercive regime changes to give birth to democratic polities will quietly disappear from Western-MENA relations and democracy promotion policies will reacquire a peaceful and co-operative nature. However, for the time being, “regime change” has become a part of the lessons learned in the last few years. What are these lessons in the field of democracy promotion - be it cooperative or coercive? This is a question the West has to answer if it wants to be able to understand coming challenges at the very time when - with the June 2004 decisions - Western commitments to promote democracy has been renewed and perhaps strengthened.

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Democracy promotion is all but a new idea or policy. It stems, first, from Wilsonian democratic interventionism. Then, it has been strongly promoted and supported by the rise of neo-liberal theories attempting to supersede more traditional realistic thinking in international relations. After the Second World War and the defeat of European and Japanese totalitarianism, neo-liberal thinking contributed to and received from the new multilateral trends in international relations and Western Europe’s integration further

impulses. These impulses turned into a number of policy approaches and measures intended to promote democracy in international relations.

During the Cold War, the West was less engaged in expanding democracy elsewhere than in defending existing Western democracies. In this sense, the CSCE (Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe) was rather modest in promoting democracy; it worked to some degree in human rights application in the Soviet Union and, above all, the Eastern European countries. The idea of an expansion of democracy took on full importance with the collapse of Communism. Two concerns emerged: (a) in the broader international sphere, a concern for stabilisation in view of the eruption of numerous ethnic, religious and national conflicts, especially in the area of the former Soviet empire; (b) in the lesser European sphere, a concern to prevent such conflicts from seizing, involving and destroying the democratic regime painfully and brilliantly built up in Western Europe during the Cold War.

Both concerns led to Western and European policies aimed at including the countries returning from the Communist collapse by promoting democratic regimes in their domestic arenas. Promoting democracy was regarded not only as a moral duty but also as a security strategy. Thus, in the last ten-fifteen years, democracy promotion essentially involved the West itself (a wider West, now including Russia) and seemed to be a combination of idealism and security. However, this combination very quickly became important beyond Western borders as well, so democracy promotion started to expand beyond the West.

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The Europeans were quick to build on their integrationist post-Second World War experience to set out a doctrine pinpointing the broad and universal benefits of democracy. This doctrine stresses the inherent correlation between democracy, on one hand, and peace and economic development, on the other. On the other hand, economic co-operation and integration strengthen countries' interest in peaceful relations. Democracy directs governments and institutions towards a dominant concern for the civil, political and human rights of citizens over and above the interests of nations. Thus, war becomes unlikely or obsolete and tensions are negotiated. At the European Council of Copenhagen, in December 1993, the European Union (EU) member states pointed out that democracy, respect for human rights and minorities, and the rule of law constitute their identity and at the same time the platform of their foreign policy. So, democracy promotion, from the internal sea of the West and Europe, set sail for more distant shores. This platform informs the EU policy of enlargement towards the European East, the war in the Balkans, the relations with Africa South of Sahara, Latin America and Asia. In particular, it shapes the EU approach towards the Mediterranean and, broadly speaking, the Middle East. Ultimately, in 1995 it brought about the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP).

In the EMP framework, there are at least two important lessons to be learned that I would like to talk about briefly in this paper. The first lesson is the incompatibility of the EU and Arab governments' interests with respect to political reform. The second regards European misconceptions about political Islam and, more in general, the actors actually playing on the MENA stage.

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To illustrate the incompatibility just referred to, we have to go back to the birth of the Barcelona process. The Barcelona Declaration was initiated by the Europeans essentially with a view to promoting political reform in the Arab countries and, as a consequence, peaceful and more secure relations in the region. It was the Mediterranean application of the European doctrine about the expected beneficial impact of democracy on international security, and the consequent necessity to promote it, particularly in the EU neighbourhood.

In the very extensive talks subsequent to the inception of the Barcelona process in November 1995, the political reforms aimed at by the Declaration practically vanished. In fact, the Arab diplomats very aptly made clear that, for the sake of the principle whereby in a regional security arrangement all the members have to enjoy the same level of security, European demands for political reform in the Arab countries with a view to assuring their interest in regional long-term security and stability had to be balanced by Arab demands for security and stability in their domestic arena. The undercutting argument was that the political reform intended to assure European security could put the stability of Arab regimes at risk. The EMP partners, so the argument ran, had to act according to a principle of comprehensive or equal security so as to reconcile different security requirements in the region.

The EMP partners started negotiating in this perspective with a view to setting out a Charter stating principles and instruments to assure a reciprocal “comprehensive” security. However, they failed to come to a solution. In fact, between the second semester of 1996, when the Senior Officials started talks on the Charter, and 2000, when the *intifada Al-Aqsa* erupted after the failure of Camp David II, the gap between the Euro-Med parties kept widening until the Foreign Ministers decided at the Marseilles ministerial conference to put the Charter talks on hold indefinitely. The breaking off of negotiations could have seemed to be a consequence of the Palestinian uprising and the strong Israeli reaction (or overreaction) to it. In reality, both merely provided an opportunity to discontinue a process of negotiations whose objectives were entirely unacceptable to and largely dreaded by Arab governments, even more so in the context of a peace process that was collapsing.

Thus, the first lesson to be learned from the Barcelona process is ambivalent. One interpretation could be that platforms of co-operation between Western and Arab countries cannot work because it is too difficult to reconcile their respective concepts of security. A second interpretation is that reconciling Western or European security requirements with Arab ones may not be easy, yet the partners have to keep on negotiating and talking to find limited compromises and dialogue formats which in the long run might generate momentum and give way to working agreements on both reforms and security. For the time being, the second interpretation is the driving force behind EU policies towards the Mediterranean, as recently rearranged in the framework of the so-called European Neighbourhood Policy. In this policy, in fact, the aim of reform is still prominent, yet it is pursued by more flexible and differentiated policies than was the case with the earlier Barcelona agenda.

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The second lesson to be learned from the EMP process concerns Europe’s (and the West’s) poor and inarticulate understanding of the Islamic revival in the Arab and - more broadly speaking - Muslim countries. The movement of Islamic reform stems from

the questions raised by the Arab-Muslim decline at the end of the 19th century in the face of Western economic, political and colonial expansion. The reform is a *jihad*. It is intended to enable Muslims to find their own responses to modernity and change by drawing on the correct reinterpretation of their authentic religious and cultural roots. From this large reform movement a violent and extremist minority has evolved, particularly since the end of the 1960s. From the 1980s onward, the war in Afghanistan triggered the further radicalisation that has brought about the present transnational stream of terrorism. Old and new extremists represent a minority, however, with respect to a majority of people who are not against the West and are ready to consider the challenges posed by modernity and inter-cultural relations, albeit on the condition that the West refrains from interfering and claiming its superiority under the mantle of universalism.

The West has largely ignored this state of affairs in the past, and even today remains partly unaware of it and substantially fails to realise the way things stand with respect to the Islamic reform movement. When the extremist wings of the Islamic reform movement emerged with their violence against the established secular and nationalist governments - for instance with the assassination of President Sadat - the Western countries were struck by a unilateral perception of political Islam. They saw the extremists and ignored the Islamic political mainstream of moderate reformers.

As a consequence of this misperception, the West has worked its way into an uneasy dilemma that, more often than not, remains unsolved even today. On one hand, the West and, in particular, the EU – within the framework of the EMP – insists that political reforms be implemented. On the other hand, it is inhibited in seriously claiming or pushing for such reforms out of fear of radical Islamism. As a result, despite Western commitment to democracy promotion, political reforms are just not promoted. It is well known that, when the Islamic Salvation Front was likely to win the 1991-92 electoral process in Algeria, Edward Djeredjan, then American Under-secretary of State, put the dilemma succinctly into words: “one man, one vote, one time”. And the military *coup d'état* was swallowed as the lesser evil. Subsequently, the EU grew very critical of the Algerian military regime. Still, because of the above dilemma, it has never implemented conditionality on economic aid against the Algerian government - nor any other Mediterranean Arab government.

Thus, the second important lesson to be learned is that Western and European governments are paralysed in their aspiration to promote democracy in the Arab-Muslim world by their belief that there is no alternative to Islamic radicals and extremists. Quite the contrary, there is a large religious movement of reform that could constitute an alternative to present governments, although it has reservations - but not prejudicial hostility - towards Europe and the West. In sum, the West believes it is supporting regime stability against religious radicals. In fact, the support it provides is directed equally against the liberal and democratic religious alternative it continues to ignore.

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A third important lesson is less sophisticated than the two previous ones and more topical. It does not concern the EU experience with its EMP initiative but the initiatives undertaken by the current US administration: the war on Iraq, the pressure exerted on the Palestinian National Authority to undertake a “little” regime change, and the agendas for co-operation with Arab and Muslim countries, in particular the Greater

Middle East Initiative (subsequently transformed into the Partnership for Progress and a Common Future with the Region of the Broader Middle East and North Africa endorsed by the G-8 at Sea Island on 9 June 2004). The lesson is that democracy cannot be promoted by coercion. Nor can it be promoted by unilateral agendas, as enlightened as they may be. Coercion and unilateralism, rather than supporting democrats and liberals in the Arab and Muslim countries, be they secular or religious, engender alliances against intrusion between the different political actors (including the regimes) and, at the end of the day, turn out to be more supportive of those who oppose reform than those who foster it.

To a large extent, this lesson does not require elaboration. The meaning is rather plain. An important aspect, however, deserves further comment. In fact, apart from the obvious contradiction in trying to promote democracy by using force, even where force is not employed democracy cannot be imposed by any kind of unilateral action or thinking.

The reference here is not to the indignant reactions of most MENA governments to the draft of the Greater Middle East Initiative. That draft, like other co-operative agendas initiated by Western or European governments, was proposing not imposing solutions. In general, these forums set up political and diplomatic dialogues in which solutions and proposals are debated and eventually endorsed. Their ability to coerce - for instance, by applying conditionality schemes - has proven very limited and almost non-existent.

The problem is not with these forums in themselves, but with the value-laden concept of democracy that the West has in mind as a blueprint for everybody else. The Western concept of democracy is a complex one. Democracy must be understood as a regime that is partly exportable and partly indigenous. The institutions meant to protect citizens from arbitrary acts and offences and to allow them free choice on a constitutional basis are the exportable component of democracy, whereas the substance of these choices has to remain fully in the hands of local citizens and should not be affected or imposed by outside powers. So, for example, Iraqi citizens should have been free to choose a legal order predicated on the *sharia* as the first source of law, even though we dislike it in the West (and probably rightly so). On the contrary, the co-operative agendas put forward by the West are - more or less inadvertently - based on a detailed and comprehensive definition of democracy. They thereby impose solutions or values that do not necessarily pertain to the concept of democracy. Or at least, this is the impression their interlocutors get.

Consequently, the important lesson to retain here is that democracy in international relations needs to be a limited and functional concept. It should be limited to promoting the institutions needed to attain consensus in addressing social issues. It should not concern the substance of the issues themselves.

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If we now take into consideration these main lessons of the events of the last ten years or so, we may have a better understanding of the challenges that lie ahead for the West and its policies of democracy promotion.

First, the West should carry out policies of democracy promotion primarily aimed at setting up constitutional mechanisms to guarantee citizens freedom of choice and security *vis-à-vis* domestic coercion. The substance of choices, their contents and significance ought definitely to be left up to them. The youngest Western democracies

that emerged in Southern Europe (Italy, Spain, Greece, and Portugal) set up, first, their democratic constitutional systems and only subsequently and gradually processed within their context a number of social issues and values (divorce, abortion, the role of women, etc.) which brought them closer to the standard concept of democracy of the West. For this reason, Western policies to promote democracy in the MENA area should aim first of all at promoting institutions, the rule of law and good governance, leaving it up to the people of the region to mature their own forms and layers of democracy.

This prescription is requiring less of a change in the existing platforms of co-operation than in the broad attitudes and expectations of Western governments and public opinions. The West, while asking immigrants for full respect of its own cultures and rules (keeping aloof of multiculturalist delusions), should be more relaxed and tolerant with respect to developments in the MENA countries. While it should remain adamant on the point of political constitutional reforms, it should largely disengage on all other issues.

Second, the West has to find its way out of the false dilemma between existing regimes and radical Islamists. Western countries must be aware that there is an alternative to this dilemma constituted by coalitions of secular and, most of all, religious liberals. The fear of a radical take-over has been and continues to be an interference in the political autonomy of the Arab-Muslim countries; it paralyzes Western policy and, ironically, acts as an obstacle to the West's very aspiration of promoting democratic change in the MENA countries. As a matter of fact, democracy promotion policies should focus on how to strengthen and support liberals, so as to enable them to do the job by themselves. It is very likely that religious-secular coalitions, were they to come to power, would not immediately undertake reform of a number of social aspects which, rightly or wrongly, are perceived by the West as qualifying a full-fledged democracy, or would not do it very soon. Yet, these coalitions will have a basically liberal orientation. As such, they would establish the political and institutional mechanisms which, sooner or later, would allow the national community to debate issues and make its choice in a democratic perspective. Over time, Western and Muslim societies would remain culturally distinctive, yet they would become very close from the point of view of their democratic political regimes.

Third and finally, any policy of democracy promotion needs to reassure all Muslim actors – regimes as well as the opposition – by strengthening international legality and reinforcing multilateral institutions. This means essentially two things: first, that the use of force should be kept out of promoting democracy; second, that Western double standards in international policies should be eliminated as much as possible, so as to bestow more credibility and effectiveness on Western democracy promotion policies in the eyes of both liberal and democratic Muslims.