

Euro-Arab Relations Redefined

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This analytical review of Euro-Arab relations is written from an activist civil society perspective. If the review has a critical tilt, it is done in order to balance the claims of official Progress Reports, especially those of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP). The latter is understandably disposed to be self-congratulatory, and while this review does not deny several achievements since the initiation of ENP in 2004, it does attempt to bring a more comprehensive picture to the complex relationship between Europe and the Arab world. Since the ENP has made a point of taking an active interest in the neighbours of the EU, it is important to point out that only occasional reference is made to countries and events outside the immediate five countries which signed the ENP Articles of Association or Partnership Agreements. Consequently, I will make every effort to expand the scope of the ENP in my analysis and comment when appropriate on emerging trends and patterns that are relevant to Euro-Arab relations.

A Non-State Actor in Euro-Arab Space

The year 2006 witnessed a new populist factor that is relevant when discussing current Euro-Arab relations. The stormy entrance of this factor was a controversy over a series of Danish newspaper cartoons depicting the Prophet Mohammed. The year ended with yet another controversy involving Pope Benedict XVI, who was quoted making what many perceived to be unflattering statements about Islam.

In both cases it was not governments disputing or disagreeing, but street politics at work. Governments on both sides were reluctant to get involved, yet as events progressed their intervention became necessary as the tension escalated in both the EU and in several Arab countries. Consequently, the growing Arab-Muslim population in many EU countries presents a new variable complicating the dynamics on both sides. In the Danish cartoon episode, it is instructive to look into the fine print of how the tempest unfolded. The cartoons were first published in the Danish newspaper, *Jyllands-Posten*, in September 2005. Yet the uproar over the issue did not begin until five months later, when the London-based Muslim Clerics Council (MCC) heeded an outcry by Danish Muslim leaders. These leaders decided to appeal for outside support because they felt that their protests within Denmark had fallen on deaf ears. To Muslims in Denmark and elsewhere, portraying sacred religious symbols such as God and any of his prophets in human form is sacrilege, let alone singling out the Muslim Prophet and depicting him as a terrorist. This was construed by many Muslims as a triple affront. To the Danish authorities and media, this same act was a simple exercise of the basic right of freedom of expression. For this reason, no party in Denmark was ready or willing to apologize for an action that they felt was protected as a sacred right within a democracy. In reaction the small Muslim community of Denmark dispatched some of its leaders to Mecca, where an Islamic Summit was being held in January 2006 to plead its case. The Summit obliged and issued a statement condemning the Danish cartoons and demanding an apology. With the Islamic Summit's statement in hand, the Muslim Danes made the rounds in several Muslim capitals. Their campaign paid off and several angry demonstrations marched in various Muslim capitals to Danish embassies, consulates and companies. The worst of these were in the Syrian

capital of Damascus, in which the Danish Consulate was set on fire. Since the Syrian regime has total control over its society, many observers thought the anti-Danish demonstrations were either allowed or orchestrated by the Syrian state in order to deflect attention from its domestic and regional problems. As to the second episode, Pope Benedict XVI gave a lecture on September 12th, 2006 to the faculty of

the University of Regensburg, in which he quoted a medieval Byzantine Emperor as having alleged that the Prophet Mohammed had preached nothing of value but only violence and hatred. As soon as news of the lecture became public many in the Muslim world were outraged once again. Given the respect with which the Pope is held worldwide, Muslim Arab governments stayed out of the fray, leaving it to other Muslim clerics

BENCHMARKING HUMAN RIGHTS AND DEMOCRATIC DEVELOPMENT WITHIN THE EMP

How Feasible and How Useful?

How to set about the task of overcoming shortcomings in the crucial area of human rights and democratic development is a central concern for the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership and has featured prominently in EuroMeSCo's 2006 programme. The main findings of two reports addressing the issue of benchmarking from two different, complementary angles were discussed in the course of the year within the network as well as in official circles concerned with the EMP. EuroMeSCo's work on benchmarking suggests that, although a greater clarity of vision on the part of the EU concerning its democracy-promotion strategy is needed, especially as to the involvement of civil societies and ascertaining whether appropriate incentives indeed exist, devising a benchmarking system within the EMP is a useful exercise provided a joint sense of responsibility in achieving the desired outcomes is present from the start. As to feasibility, the wealth of available indicators suggests that setting an EMP-wide system in place depends mostly on the willingness to do so.

The first report, written by Azzam Mahjoub (University of Tunis), aims to design a framework for the evaluation of progress within the Partnership in the broad category of human rights – political and civil rights – and democratic development which relates primarily to the first chapter and marginally to the third chapter of the Barcelona Process. The basic assumption underlying the study is that objectively monitoring progress towards commonly targeted goals is a powerful tool that civil societies and governments can use to foster their achievement. Monitoring is thus regarded as a partnership-building instrument.

The study identifies a set of priority areas for a common benchmarking system which are directly derived from the set of "founding documents" of the EMP relevant to human rights and democratic development, from the Barcelona Declaration to Neighbourhood Action Plans. Having briefly discussed methodological issues relating to the task of compiling suitable indicators and included a set of practical recommendations, the study presents the main sources that guided the selection of the eight priority areas identified as crucial for the evaluation of progress in human rights and democratic development, i.e. the commitment to human rights, the right to physical integrity, political participation, the rule of law, civil liberties, civil society, empowerment and women's rights, rights of migrants and minorities. In a subsequent step, the pre-selected sources producing appropriate indicators are described at length, in order to ascertain which would be more suited to evaluate progress within the EMP.

Although the study recommends mutual scrutiny as a precondition for benchmarking to successfully achieve its stated objectives – fostering real and widespread progress in areas which are crucial to the emergence of a regional partnership –, it is no less obvious that in certain areas, namely formal commitment to human rights, the South has

generally a longer way to go than the North; but in other areas, namely migrants and minority rights and the associated issues of intolerance and xenophobia, it is the North that can be more consistently scrutinised so that benchmarking can perform the constructive role for which it is designed.

The study concludes that designing a benchmarking system to monitor progress towards commonly stated goals in human rights and democratic development is a useful task conducive to the achievement of those same goals within the EMP, provided the sense of joint ownership, based on shared responsibility and common understanding, is present from the very early stages of its implementation.

The second report, written by Raffaella Del Sarto (EUI, Florence), with contributions from Tobias Schumacher (IEEI, Lisbon) and Erwan Lannon (EI, University of Ghent), and with the collaboration of Ahmed Driss (AEI; University of Tunis), takes a somewhat different angle. It critically analyses key concepts in the realm of democratisation and human rights, such as the notions of 'democracy', 'rule of law' and 'human rights' – terms which are often employed without providing clear definitions – the concept of benchmarking, as well as the action plans concluded with Morocco, Tunisia, the Palestinian Authority, Jordan and Israel. It furthermore points out problems associated with the process of *democratic transition* and discusses the necessary ingredients for any benchmarking process to be successful. The report argues that the EU's current benchmarking approach suffers from a number of conceptual and analytical flaws, all of which may have serious implications for the successful and sustainable implementation of benchmarking political development in the Euro-Mediterranean area. It proposes taking the conceptualisation of democratisation as a process that entails different phases as a starting point for any democracy-promotion strategy. It suggests that such a model may be used as a 'check list' of sorts in a cross-country comparison and may serve as a 'meta-scheme' within which specific 'benchmarks' in the realm of 'human rights' or 'the rule of law' may be defined and evaluated in the specific context of Euro-Mediterranean relations.

Recognising that the respect for human rights is the first and most essential building block of democratic development, the report suggests ways to establish what could be called an 'intelligent benchmarking' strategy. This entails, among other issues, the need to clearly define the objectives and strategies in the EU's democratisation approach ('democracy' vs. some sort of 'political liberalisation?'), and thus clear indicators and ex-ante decisions on timetables and regular monitoring, as well as the necessity to increase the incentives – along with the proper use of conditionality – and a decision as to what extent the southern Mediterranean civil society should be part of EU democracy-promotion strategies.

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to wage a counter offensive. The leading cleric of Al-Azhar, the oldest Islamic university, took on the task. The Vatican was wise enough to distance themselves from the speech, claiming that the Pope did not mean to insult either the Prophet or Islam. They stated that he was merely narrating a historical event and that his remarks were misinterpreted. When that retraction was deemed insufficient in many quarters of the Muslim world, the Pope followed the Vatican's statement with an explicit apology for having unintentionally hurt the feelings of Muslims.

While various intrigues were no doubt involved in both episodes, the passionate debates that ensued brought into focus the complexity of Euro-Arab relations. In the process, all concerned were forced to confront the fact that Islam has become the second largest religion in Europe with its numbers hovering around 50 million. It is also the fastest growing religion thanks to both migration and higher birth rates. Additionally, native born European Muslims also have begun taking a more active role in the European public space bringing their own demands and complaints on the scene. The governments and publics of the home countries of origin have also been equally pressed to get involved by this young and dynamic section of the population. Although Huntington's 'Clash of Civilization' thesis was occasionally invoked throughout these conflicts, many on both sides were eager to dismiss it, as if to suggest that dialogue and coexistence are not only possible but also inevitable.

Little Trust Between Neighbours

The EU Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) has been hailed as a fresh operationalization of the limping 1995 Barcelona Accords. However, ten years after its signing, European partners were to discover that they had been outmanoeuvred by autocratic Arab regimes of the southern Mediterranean. Thus, the ENP was established to help rectify previous failings through the closer monitoring of progress in both human rights and democratization. The ENP shied away from the language of conditionality and instead heavily relied on incentives for those Arab countries which would speed up their reform agenda.

The ENP's founding document makes the point early on that in dealing with its neighbours in the southern Mediterranean, the EU recognizes their vast diversity and would tailor its approaches accordingly. While this is a commendable proposition, too much cultural

relativity could play into the hands of indigenous autocrats, as indeed happened with the first Barcelona Accord (1995 -2005). Of the three baskets proposed, the economic aid and security measures were readily embraced by the autocrats but managed to put the third basket, civil society and democratization, on hold.

It is true that, following 9/11, the US possibly went to the other extreme. They imposed a cookie-cutter approach towards democratization that ended with disastrous results in Iraq and to a lesser extent in Afghanistan. However, Europe should not use the American example as an excuse to back further away from civil society and democratization efforts in the Arab world. The best practice approach would suggest a stick-and-carrot strategy as was the case with the 1975 Helsinki Accord between NATO and Warsaw countries. What the Arab countries witnessed in 2006 represented a wholesale Western retreat on the democracy promotion front. As the Islamists scored significant gains in recent elections, both the EU and the US back-tracked. They preferred the stability that is found with autocrats over the unknown and perhaps unpopular outcomes of electoral democracy. Such change of heart has reinforced the widespread belief that there exists a Western double-standard when it

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comes to the Arab world.

The fears that are evident in the ENP could have been assuaged if the EU had considered the example of Turkey. The Turkish Islamic party called the Justice and Development Party has evolved into a Muslim Democratic institution akin to those of the Christian Democrats in several EU countries. Something similar is equally emerging in Morocco, and should be encouraged instead of being shunned, feared or boycotted. In fact the EU, not particularly its ENP, has fared better than the US with regard to the Palestinians, as we see later.

Is It Business As Usual

The ongoing issues of common concern continued to appropriate sizable volume of interstate and media attention on both sides. These included what the EU

labels as Frozen Conflicts – namely in Palestine, Iraq, Afghanistan and Sudan. While some countries continued to be more involved than others, the EU as a whole has kept an active attention, through its respective media, NGO's and humanitarian assistance. The deteriorating situation in Darfur is another case in point. As some of the conflicts thawed or took an unexpected turn to the worst, EU policy battled to ameliorate the situation, even by distancing itself from the position of the US.

Though not a signatory to ENP, Sudan is an important neighbour of other actual or potential members. It is noteworthy that the EU and a majority of the African countries have seen eye to eye on the tragic issue of Darfur. They supported the international military and humanitarian intervention against the wishes of the Sudanese government, backed by the Arab League. This pan-Arab solidarity vis-à-vis the will of the international community will be recurred with regard to Syria and Somalia.

A different Euro-Arab alignment took place with regard to the 2006 Summer War between Israel and a non-state actor, Hezbollah. Without officially taking sides, the so called moderate Arab states of Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Jordan were on the side of the EU and the US against Hezbollah. Those Arab states were of the view that the latter provoked Israel into attacking Lebanon when it captured two and killed six of its soldiers. Syria and Iran, on the other hand, stood by Hezbollah. The rest of the Arab governments were silent. Meanwhile, the vast majority of Arabs surveyed on the issue backed Hezbollah, often in defiance of

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their own Governments.

In keeping with the emerging prominence of non-state actors in the Arab World, Hezbollah's leader, Hassan Nasrallah in various surveys has led in popularity over other Arab leaders. In fact none of the Arab kings or presidents made it into the top ten. One public opinion survey, conducted in September by the Cairo-based Ibn Khaldun Center, revealed that defiant militant leaders tend to capture the imagination of the majority of those surveyed. Thus Iran's Ahmed Ahmadinejad came second;

followed by Khaled Mishaal of Palestinian Hamas; and Magdi Akef, leader of Egypt's Muslim Brothers. Early on in 2006, the election of Islamic Hamas in Palestine took the Europeans, as everyone else, by surprise. As member of the International Quartet, the EU had committed itself to withholding aid and recognition from organizations unwilling to renounce violence or who refused to abide by previously signed agreements by the Palestinian Authority (PA). Meanwhile, there were some three million Palestinians in dire need of international aid to merely survive. While the US stood firm on boycotting Hamas the EU was more flexible and channelled much of its allotted aid either to civil society organizations or through the non-Hamas Presidency of Mr. Mahmoud Abbas. It also maintained low level contacts with some Hamas officials.

It is noted that whenever Europeans take an independent stand from the US, they immediately draw editorial praise. This is due to Arabs' popular wisdom that the US is always on Israel's side against Arabs and Palestinians. Thus being independent from the latter carries with it the possibility of being fair, and hence pro Palestinian.

While Lebanon had been on the Euro-Arab agenda since the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri in February 2005, the summer of 2006 witnessed an eruption of yet another war between Israel and the Shiite militia Hezbollah. Europe would get involved both in an early mediation for a cease-fire, and later in peace-keeping. In the fall of 2006 Hezbollah and the democratically elected government of Prime Minister Fuad Siniora became locked in a confrontation over the issue of the International Tribunal. This tribunal was authorized by an earlier UN Security Council resolution and was deemed necessary in order to determine who was responsible for the assassination of Hariri. The EU along with the US and the Arab regimes sided with the Siniora government.

Conclusion

ENP did not do badly in 2006. In view of its mission statement, however, it could have been more robust and more visible. Two years after its initiation, it has remained quite shy and mostly confined to intergovernmental dealings. Arab civil society organizations have not significantly benefited from its resources. Hopefully ENP will expand its outreach in 2007.