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**EUROPE'S
UNCERTAIN
PURSUIT OF
MIDDLE EAST
REFORM**

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DELIBERATION OF DEMOCRACY PROMOTION IN THE MIDDLE EAST intensified after the attacks of 9/11, and has been further energized by the transatlantic debates that were progeny of the Iraqi conflict. More intense debate over support for political change in the Middle East has forced the United States and Europe into a closer exploration of each other's actual and intended approaches to democracy promotion in the region. Debates have centered, in particular, on preparations for June's Group of Eight (G8) and EU-U.S. summits and the United States' proposed Greater Middle East Initiative. While many in the U.S. bemoan European irresolution, others acknowledge the need for American policy to understand and harness the EU's more pervasive presence in much of the Middle East. While Europeans express dismay at the Bush administration's heavy-handed instrumentalism, they have also been forced to engage with new U.S. initiatives that appear to heed the EU's own pleas for a focus on the root causes of instability. With the U.S. and EU eyeing each other over the parapets of their Iraqi-inspired wrangles, it is an opportune moment to delineate and critically assess how Europeans have developed their democracy promotion policies in the Middle East.

This paper outlines the way in which the EU introduced a limited and selective Middle Eastern democracy policy in the 1990s; catalogues some of the new initiatives introduced by both European governments and the EU collectively since the terrorist attacks of 9/11; identifies the distinctive conceptual features of Europe's approach to political reform; and concludes by suggesting ways in which EU strategy in the Middle East should be strengthened. The paper contends that Europe's determination to reinforce distinctiveness from the U.S. has been a source of strength but also an obstacle to tempering persistent insufficiencies in EU strategy. While enjoying both quantitative and qualitative advantages relative to U.S. efforts, European democracy policies in the Middle East require significant revision if they are to attain the sophisticated holistic gradualism to which they aspire.

LAYING THE FOUNDATIONS: EUROPEAN STRATEGIES IN THE 1990s

Piqued at what they see as the United States' recent conversion to democracy promotion in the Middle East, Europeans lay claim to a longer-standing reform discourse in many parts of the region.

Most notably, the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP, or Barcelona Process) created in 1995 formally enshrined a commitment to foster "political pluralism" in the Maghreb and Mashreq states (Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, along with Israel and the Palestinian Authority). Formal dialogue on political reform commenced, new trade agreements incorporated sanctions-triggering democracy clauses, and an EU democracy assistance budget was created for the region. In practice, European strategy, even in this part of the Middle East, was cautious during the late 1990s. Little coercive pressure for political change was exerted, as the EU adhered

to a philosophy of gradualism that relied on notions of soft power, peer pressure, persuasion, and cooperative partnership. European governments were highly indulgent of limited signs of progress, for example in Morocco, Algeria, and Jordan. No systematic dialogue was developed on democracy with Islamist opposition forces, and there was little correlation between aid flows and states' respective degrees of political openness—Egypt remained by far the largest recipient of European aid. Even in these EMP states, where the EU established a wide-ranging and firmly institutionalized partnership, democracy remained well down the list of priorities, with significantly more resources devoted to economic reform, drug eradication, the environment, and population control.

Outside the framework of the EMP, the focus on political change was more difficult to detect. EU relations with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) were restricted to trade issues, while several EU member states dramatically increased their defense cooperation with the region's regimes. Exploratory efforts at establishing an EU-GCC human rights dialogue were firmly rebuffed, in particular by Saudi Arabia, and the Gulf attracted virtually no political aid work from European donors.

The EU's "critical dialogue" with Iran was acknowledged to have concerned itself with Iran's alleged development of nuclear weapons and support for international terrorism, as well as being dominated for long periods by the Rushdie fatwa. The focus on internal politics was negligible. The conditions set by the EU for upgrading relations with Iran related to the country's external actions and not democratic reform. The EU's rapprochement with President Khatami after 1997 reflected a confidence that Iran's hybrid theocratic-democratic mix could be capable of resolving strategic difficulties. Indeed, as European governments sought to encourage reform through Khatami, the concern was to make progress on specific human rights issues—the use of stoning being a particular European focus—without pushing for systemic "regime change."

The two cases where democracy promotion was even more obviously subjugated to other concerns were Iraq and the Palestinian Territories. As has since been amply demonstrated, debates on Iraq were concerned almost entirely with the weapons of mass destruction (WMD) issue. A well-known range of views was evident among European governments on the rightful mix of containment versus engagement in the commonly agreed need to tackle Iraq's presumed weapons development program. But common to the range of these perspectives was the relegation of democracy promotion to something of an afterthought. In terms of concrete policy little was done pertinent to internal political change. Most conspicuously, European states declined to offer direct support for Iraqi democracy movements; indeed, several governments became increasingly skeptical of the democratic credentials of many of these groups. Senior EU officials have acknowledged a complete lack of debate during this period within the EU's common foreign and security policy on Iraq's possible democratization.

In the Palestinian Occupied Territories, the EU provided the largest slice of funds for setting up the new quasi-state institutions of the Palestinian Authority. In doing so they backed an executive-dominated institutional structure that enabled Yasser Arafat to prevail more easily over those elements of Palestinian civil society hostile to the peace process. After the Oslo Accords, aid was diverted from civil society organizations toward the new Palestinian security apparatus; repression and nepotism were overlooked; and the postponement of elections toward the end of the decade elicited little critical reaction from European governments.

In the case of Turkey during the 1990s, a degree of political openness and prospective accession to the EU lent European influence a qualitative difference to elsewhere in the Middle East, but here too doubts remained over Europe's commitment to supporting democracy. The EU insisted that the

decision to exclude Turkey from its list of applicant countries in 1997 was motivated by a genuine desire to defend efforts to deepen Turkey's democratic process in the wake of the army's ousting of Prime Minister Erbakan and the subsequent banning of the Islamist Refah party. Once accession negotiations commenced after the Helsinki European Council of December 1999, European governments were firm in seeking to use this new purchase to press Turkey to strengthen civilian control over the army, and increased spending on human rights, democracy, and governance initiatives. The EU's high profile focus on Kurdish rights in Turkey has long been one of the most prominent features of its foreign policy and a point of difference with U.S. policy. At the same time, however, because Turkey's accession remained a distant prospect, critics charged European states with manipulating democratic entry conditions as a means of indefinitely delaying the entry of a Muslim state into the EU.

Across the Middle East, the hesitancy of European democracy strategy was reflected in the nature of incipient democracy assistance programs. While some political aid projects were started, these were of limited magnitude and nearly entirely of the "softer" type of democracy assistance. The Middle East received just under €10 million per year between 1996 and 1999 from the European Commission's new democracy budget, but the region remained that most conspicuously absent from most governments' political aid profiles. The British, German, Danish, Swedish, and Dutch governments all supported no more than a handful of human rights projects, totaling no more than €1–2 million a year. European governments declined to create formal "Middle East democracy" funds, classifying aid only in terms of more broadly defined "governance" categories. European democracy assistance at this juncture was directed mainly at reforming states in Eastern Europe, Latin America, and sub-Saharan Africa. Notwithstanding such caution and imprecision, the overall level of European reform-related funding still compared favorably with the \$15 million spent annually by the United States on democracy aid in the Middle East between 1991 and 2001.¹

Those political aid projects that were funded invariably related only indirectly to democracy. They were aimed, for example, at small business development, environmental and service delivery associations, or cooperation in the cultural sphere. France provided the largest official aid allocations for human rights in the Middle East, but the largest slice of its human rights budgets in practice went to cultural projects, overwhelmingly with tenuous political aspects. Where the EU met resistance to democracy assistance projects, political conditionality provisions were not invoked and the critical political content of many projects was consequently diluted. In the region's most closed societies, European governments did little more than fund European-based NGOs to develop an information-gathering and monitoring role. Barely measurable amounts of political aid went to Iran, Syria, Libya, or Saudi Arabia. Generous support for security forces—in particular in Algeria and the Gulf states—was oriented toward capacity building and incorporated few measures relevant to increasing democratic civilian oversight of security operations. None of this is to suggest that conditions were propitious to democracy aid creating major breakthroughs in the Middle East, but the limitations of EU programs militated against even more modest positive impact.

EUROPEAN RESPONSES TO 9/11

Against this background, the lessons that Europeans drew from the attacks of September 11 exhibited elements of striking commonality with U.S. policy reassessments. European ministers and policy makers have regularly asserted a link between terrorism and political repression. Tony Blair has

argued on many occasions that security can best be achieved by “spreading our values.” European Commissioner Chris Patten has opined that “fostering human rights should become an integral part of the fight against terrorism.”² The new European security strategy, agreed upon in December 2003, concludes that “the best protection of our security is a world of well-governed democratic states.”³ Recently, German Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer has argued that “security is a broader concept in this fight against terrorism: social and cultural modernization, as well as democracy. . . are of almost greater importance [than traditional security issues].”⁴ Although in characteristically more elliptical fashion, the then French Foreign Minister Dominique de Villepin also asserted something of the same logic, in acknowledging that security thinking could “no longer be explained by a series of alliances.”⁵

And efforts to revitalize a policy of democracy promotion can indeed be witnessed through a number of new initiatives introduced by national governments. In Germany, a Task Force for Dialogue with the Islamic World was set up within Joschka Fischer’s office; a 1 million euro Anti-Terror Package identified support for governance reform as a top priority; overall aid to the Middle East and North Africa increased 20 percent after 2002; and work on a new strategy for democracy assistance was commissioned with a view to injecting political aid with greater strategic thrust in the hitherto uncharted area of the Middle East. France devoted an increased 474 million francs to governance work in 2002–2003, primarily through an expanded *zone de solidarité prioritaire* that included Lebanon, the Palestinian Territories, Yemen, Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia.

In the UK, the Foreign Office elaborated a new Arab Reform strategy and established a number of programs, including a reform-oriented fund for Engaging with the Islamic World. An additional £7 million was made available for the Middle East under a new cross-Whitehall conflict prevention fund, with governance, security sector reform, and “engagement with political movements” outlined as priority areas. The Danish government has introduced a similar initiative on Arab reform, with €15 million a year available for new projects currently being identified; the effort has initially focused on more reformist states, but also targets Saudi Arabia and Syria. Sweden likewise moved for the first time to begin political work in the Middle East through a new 2003 Middle East and North Africa (MENA) regional program, which included an annual 5 million euro allocation to governance and democracy—approximately 13 percent of the Swedish investment in political aid. The Dutch government expanded eligibility for its human rights programs to non-LLDC (least developed country) states, in large part to include Arab states.

At the EU level, new initiatives have been developed within the framework of the EMP. New EU guidelines for democracy and human rights promotion were agreed upon in 2003. These commit the EU to elaborating national plans for human rights to be agreed with EMP Arab states, in consultation with local civil societies. Agreement to a national plan will qualify the government in question for a “political premium” increase in aid. This idea was pushed most enthusiastically by the British, Dutch, and Danish governments; particularly significant was that the initially ambivalent French and Spanish governments did eventually support the guidelines. Separately, further sets of political benchmarks have been built into the EU’s new Wider Europe initiative, aimed at re-energizing strategy toward Europe’s post-enlargement periphery. Aiming to widen the pool of resources available for political reform, in December 2003 the European Commission for the first time allocated 1 million euro to human rights projects (in Jordan) from its mainstream development budget. Most recently, a new paper on Europe’s relations with the Arab world was agreed in December 2003 and commits the EU to ploughing increased resources into assisting Middle East political reform.⁶

Although much EU-level activity has been focused on the EMP, a more political dimension was also introduced into engagement with Iran. The offer of a new trade and cooperation agreement was linked to political dialogue in a tighter and higher profile than was originally proposed, and in December 2002, a regular EU-Iran human rights dialogue commenced. Tentative proposals were put forward for initiating an EU political aid profile in Iran; a number of European states—notably, the UK and Germany—developed judicial reform programs for Iran; and parliamentary exchanges between the European Parliament and the Iranian parliament began.

The focus on Palestinian “institutional reform” intensified after the start of the second *intifada*, which was seen as provoked in part by Palestinian Authority (PA) corruption. The Occupied Territories have been by far the main destination for European political aid in the Middle East and are the one place where all donors have run comprehensive packages of governance aid. After September 2000, the EU channeled €10 million a month to support the PA budget; it used these funds to ratchet up conditionality on greater judicial independence, increased financial reporting provisions, a freeze on hiring to the PA, and the transfer of funds to a single IMF-monitored account. Although some European states expressed fears that a national vote would be destabilizing, the EU did come to press for new Palestinian elections and imposed conditions relating to the independence of the National Electoral Commission. Pressure was exerted on Yasser Arafat to widen the political space available to NGOs receiving European funds. New projects were funded that aimed at strengthening an independent media along with human rights training courses for security services under the umbrella of the EU Special Advisor’s office in Ramallah.

The EU has pressed for the creation of a formal EU-GCC human rights dialogue, politicizing diplomacy with the Gulf region to an unprecedented degree. Although the approach toward Saudi Arabia has been extremely cautious, some degree of European criticism of human rights abuses has been heard for the first time; and all EU donors now stress in similar terms their desire to identify and support “agents of change” in the kingdom. Several European governments have offered support for the (partly) competitive municipal elections proposed by the ruling family. At the same time, Yemen has become a prominent political aid destination for European donors, with new projects prioritizing judicial reform and parliamentary training. Denmark has initiated a partnering initiative with the Yemeni parliament, the UK is increasing its governance work in the country fivefold by 2005, and Germany has embarked on a program of democratic awareness-raising with Yemeni civil society.

Remaining something of a case apart, discussion in Turkey has been dominated by debates over the setting of a date for accession negotiations. The compromise eventually reached—to assess Turkey’s preparedness in December 2004—has been judged in various ways: as a reinforced commitment to supporting Turkish democracy, as a new willingness to circumvent democracy criteria in preference to an alliance-deepening logic, and as further prevarication using the democracy requirement to serve a logic of exclusion. Assessing European democracy promotion policy toward Turkey is subject to the confusing sleights of multiple diplomatic smoke and mirrors. A whole series of issues—Cyprus, bilateral Greek-Turkish tensions, the EU’s own internal reforms, the relationship between the European Security and Defense Policy and NATO—have dragged debates over democracy into their orbit. Perhaps less noticed than this high politics, political aid support on the ground in Turkey has significantly increased. An additional 250 million euro package for 2004–2005 was targeted overwhelmingly toward political and administration reform, while a revised accession partnership agreed upon in 2003 linked aid more tightly to a set of detailed stipulations

over reform. It is certainly the case that as Recep Tayyip Erdogan's efforts to deepen democracy fused with the prime minister's lead role in cajoling army hardliners into more flexible positions on both ESDP and Cyprus, direct European self-interest tipped the scales in favor of firmer support for a deepening of Turkish democracy.

A EUROPEAN THIRD WAY?

Such trends and initiatives suggest heightened concern with Middle East reform. At the same time, it is significant that Europeans assert a guiding philosophy that they perceive to be qualitatively distinct from that of the United States—a difference compounded by but extending beyond the ideological tenor of the Bush administration. The European approach might be likened to a desired “third way” between regime change and undimmed support for autocrats; one focused on gradual, step-by-step political reform. This has expressed itself through a number of characteristics.

First, in the general presentation of their aims, European policies have been couched in discourse very different from that guiding current U.S. strategy. Europeans have most commonly eschewed a directly instrumental presentation of democracy's virtues, advocating political reform as part of a general process of social and economic modernization. European states have in this sense gone to great lengths to distance their discourse on “the spread of liberal values” from U.S. language on “regime change.” Europeans visibly wince at the directness of some U.S. statements—for example, the suggestion that anti-Americanism can be reduced to autocratic manipulation of popular sentiment and thus spirited away by democratic freedom.⁷ Even as they assert their desire to see political opening in the Middle East, European policy makers invariably show greater relish in adumbrating the *dangers* of precipitate political change.

An express desire to avoid the language of “democracy promotion” is often apparent. German aims are defined as “the transformation of particular sectors,” rather than democratization. The UK's new Arab reform strategy targets “the rule of law” rather than democracy. In discussions on the EU's new security strategy, a commanding majority of member states insisted on objectives in the Middle East being defined as an increase in “pluralism” not democracy. One European diplomat responsible for devising his government's new Middle East reform policy suggests that a “neutral cover” has been sought for gaining access to influence the broad direction of political change in the region, admonishing what he judges to be the United States' fixation with the end result of regime change. Another policy maker likens the European approach to reform to “crossing the stream by feeling the stones on the riverbed.”

Second, the notion of “partnership” is strikingly prominent in the way that European governments and the Brussels institutions frame their new reform policies. Famed for its proclivity to “positive engagement,” the EU is unsurprisingly not converting wholesale to strongly coercive strategy in pursuit of political change. Some more critical pressure has been exerted in relation to specific cases, such as Egypt's restrictive 1999 nongovernmental organization (NGO) law or Tunisia's frustration of a number of European aid projects—indeed relations with Tunisia have become stormy enough for some assistance to be held back. But overt punitive conditionality remains anathema to most European states. Even the northern “like-minded” states judge talk of conditionality as “too pushy.” While Spain has always been one of the states most reluctant to contemplate coercive

measures, new prime minister Zapatero is committing himself to returning to an even more strongly “traditional” approach of convivial alliance-building in the Middle East. Any European-level measure that could be deemed interventionist is studiously avoided. Language in the EU’s draft security strategy suggesting that the EU would intervene to “defend democracy” was removed at the behest of member states. Europeans are united in opposing the notion of certain states—Syria, Iran, and Libya—being excluded from the United States’ new proposed initiatives in the region. Indeed, European engagement with these states aimed at counterproliferation has—almost openly—been bought at the cost of diminished leverage over political reform.

Few European statements on Arab reform fail to reassure that there will be no question of “imposing change from outside,” of “dictating” change, or of “prescribing” any “template” for moving to democracy. Indeed, the common usage of these same stock phrases has been remarkable. European statements nominally concerned with democracy and human rights are in practice most notably replete with references to the “shared historical experiences,” the “common cultural heritage” and the “deep sense of partnership” that are said to exist between the EU and the Middle East. Any reference to the EU’s suspension clause is invariably accompanied by a reassurance that the latter’s purpose is not punitive but “positive.” One European government deliberately changed the language in its new Middle East policy initiative from “reform” to “partnership.” The severest European complaint of the U.S. Greater Middle East Initiative is that this was not drawn up in consultation with either governments or civil society in the Middle East.

In his first speech dedicated specifically to Middle East reform, British foreign secretary Jack Straw proposed developing a “network of friendships” around democratic reform, involving both governments and civil society.⁸ Indicative of the French approach, Dominique de Villepin proposed a noncoercive, multilateral human rights corps for the Muslim world.⁹ One senior French diplomat expressed his government’s concern that change had been seen too much in terms of circumventing regimes through the civil society dimension rather than negotiating gradual change from within the elite. In a key statement of French policy aims in February 2004, de Villepin argued that political reform efforts must “start from the needs of Middle Eastern states themselves” and cautioned that “we need to associate [Middle Eastern states] as much as possible in our thinking in a genuine partnership.” His suggested strategy was structured around political dialogue, especially with the Arab League; agreement on nonintervention; and a disassociation of democracy from Western self-interest.¹⁰

In new EU recommendations for national human rights plans and democracy assistance projects, the emphasis is firmly on using the EU’s broader partnerships to match such political measures *with* authoritarian regimes. The proposed human rights plans are an offer, not a stipulation; so far, only Morocco and Jordan have shown interest. A key feature of recent European policy is the attempt to harness the UN’s two Arab Human Development Reports and the Sana’a Declaration as “internal” pro-reform statements. There is, for instance, talk of supporting an Arab-run fund backing reform projects pursuant to the Sana’a declaration. The tendency to caution is compounded by the situating of many new reform initiatives within chancelleries’ Middle East departments—staffed, of course, by those most sympathetic to the notion of Arab specificities.

A third feature of EU gradualism is seen in the limited amounts of new democracy aid. The surfeit of new action plans, papers and initiatives is not yet translating itself into significant increases in democracy promotion support. The beefing-up of democracy aid budgets is slow and pitifully

modest in scale. Certainly, democracy aid remains negligible compared with the funding of immigration controls, anti-terrorist cooperation, law enforcement measures, and security cooperation with non-democratic regimes across the Middle East. The speed at which the EU's "justice and home affairs" instruments are expanding throws into even sharper relief the procrastination that sees European governments only now—nearly three years on from 9/11—beginning to intimate political aid profiles in the Middle East.

Funding for the Middle East from the Commission-managed European Initiative for Democracy and Human Rights was actually halved to €7 million between 2001 and 2003—with a modest 4.5 million euro increase proposed for 2004–2007. In the year after 9/11, the EU gave over twenty times more money for the preservation of historical sites in the Middle East than for democracy building. Only Tunisia, Algeria, and the West Bank were included in the Commission's new list of recipient countries, with Morocco's exclusion attracting particular attention. Dominant constituencies in the European Commission and the European Parliament have resisted any diversion of funds away from the EU's African (Cotonou convention) partners into the Middle East.

The Middle East remains underrepresented in most member states' political aid budgets. With its focus on the poorest developing countries, the UK continues to draw aid away from the MENA region, winding down bilateral programs in Egypt and Jordan. Discordant with post-9/11 rhetoric linking terrorism to Middle Eastern underdevelopment, the UK's development ministry laments that the region is still "over-aided."¹¹ The Foreign and Commonwealth Office's (FCO) Human Rights Fund had, by 2003, supported only twenty-three projects in the Middle East, out of a total of several hundred, while the new fund for Arab reform totaled only £4 million by 2004—this comparing, for example, with the extra £15 million released immediately to counterterrorist agencies after the Madrid bombings. A new "Democracy unit" within the FCO's human rights policy department has thus far developed no role in relation to the Middle East reform agenda.

The Dutch have initiated only a handful of modest governance projects in Yemen and Egypt. Norway funds no political aid projects outside the Occupied Territories. Spain has formal bilateral programs incorporating governance elements only in Morocco, Tunisia and the Occupied Territories. The European donors with the broadest profile in the region are in fact the Swiss development agency and the German Stiftungen (party foundations). In 2004, the German development ministry allocated a sizable €78 million—about one-tenth of its bilateral aid to MENA—to "democracy and governance" projects in the Middle East and North Africa, but recognized that this category contained primarily technical cooperation.

Fourth, European distinctiveness also expresses itself in a preference for indirect forms of reform support. European donors have declined to support the kind of direct democracy propaganda pursued by the U.S. *inter alia* through funded radio stations. They have given negligible support to prominent exiles, opposing the notion of "picking winners" amongst reformers in the Middle East. Overall European aid to the Arab world is well in excess of U.S. assistance; just European Commission aid to the EMP states tops €1 billion a year. But, while the U.S. explicitly apportions nearly a third of its relatively small Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI) budget for democracy assistance, the vast majority of European governments still do not compile single "democracy" aid budgets. The guiding logic is almost one of wanting "to do democracy promotion" without actually saying it is being done—a situation many European officials judge to be the inverse of U.S. intentions.

European funding priorities stress human rights more than democracy. The aim is tangibly to advance particular “islands” of basic human rights far more than broader systemic reform. In 2002, 70 percent of EIDHR spending went to basic human rights categories—the death penalty, torture, minorities and racism, international justice, and impunity—and only 30 percent to democracy and the rule of law.¹² Indeed, the EIDHR is managed by national government representatives on the “Human Rights Committee,” which fights to retain the primacy of traditional human rights projects over the broader democracy agenda. Democracy assistance in more politicized spheres—elections, parties, parliaments, and civil-military relations—continues to account for a lower share of political aid in the Middle East than elsewhere. While in other regions donor nations are increasingly seeking to link civil society work to parties and parliaments, this new focus remains largely absent in the Middle East. Nearly all parliamentary work takes the form of training for actual or would-be women parliamentarians. The EU’s new guidelines for democracy promotion in the Mediterranean recognize the need for a broader focus, going beyond standard human rights legislation to include work on elections and other more political issues; in practice, little has been done beyond this statement of intent. While new security dialogue now has a more prominent “security sector reform” brief, policy makers acknowledge that this still appears almost indistinguishable from traditional defense diplomacy and is doing little to check militaries’ political power in the Middle East.

European “reform” support is oriented notably toward cultural, education, development, and governance projects. Germany’s 100 million euro Task Force for Dialogue with the Islamic World supports cultural and education projects—this focus exceeding democracy funding several times over. New work in the Middle East from Germany’s main political aid budget includes a focus on education that seeks to open up a national level policy-making process in this sector. Nearly half of French aid to the Middle East similarly goes to education and culture, and Sweden’s largest single slice of funding goes to the Swedish cultural institute in Alexandria. Several member states advocate cultural cooperation initiatives—such as the inception of a Euro-Mediterranean Foundation, which will support a range of cultural exchanges—as a softer and more palatable alternative to muscular democracy promotion.

The “developmentalist” feel to EU funding is seen in the stress on principles such as communal self-administration and participation. Political aid projects are commonly aimed at enhancing the capacity of the NGO sector to contribute effectively to social development. Some donors, such as Sweden and Italy, work uniquely through NGOs. A particular European focus is the funding of structured dialogues between the state and NGOs on social development. Support for unions in the region targets social rights issues and bargaining techniques rather than political independence. Denmark, for example, supports Danish unions to convene tripartite dialogue in Morocco. Such social dialogue is also a priority of the Stiftungen. Spain classifies its political work as “institutional development, social participation, and good governance”—a category rising to account for 13 percent of Spanish aid generally for 2001–2004.

EU good governance work prioritizes technical and regulatory harmonization with European single market rules. It is at this level—working on the transparency of procurement procedures, the design of new fiscal systems to replace revenues lost through tariff removal, and microcredit projects aimed at strengthening local level decision-making capacities—rather than in the headline-grabbing high-politics sphere that European influence is most significant. The central logic of EU policy toward Iran is to try to use negotiations for a trade and cooperation agreement as a stepping-stone to prepare Iran for WTO membership, with all the economic governance reform this would entail. This

is similarly now the prominent strand of policy under the EU's new agreement with Saudi Arabia, while initial ideas for aid work in Libya also prioritize economic governance reform as a vehicle for tying the erstwhile "rogue" into the international community. Resources and conditionality in the Palestinian Territories primarily target issues such as financial transparency, auditing provisions, pensions restructuring, and the streamlining of public administration.

UK aid is especially wed to this governance orientation, and is most strongly focused on integrating grassroots capacity-building work into support for standard public administration reform programs. In its Arab reform work, the UK emphasizes support for the chamber of commerce in Saudi Arabia and help for women's involvement in business in Egypt. A stress on local level cross-ethnic representation in technocratic departments also gives UK work in Iraq a nuanced distinctiveness from U.S. strategy in that country. Germany's most significant new initiative is the creation of two new sub-regional governance funds for the Maghreb and Mashreq, respectively. Other German projects aim to incorporate governance components into sectoral work on issues such as resource management and the "genderization" of economic policy. European funding in Turkey is allocated mainly for approximation to EU legislative frameworks, with this presented as a means of indirectly facilitating change at the political level.

A fifth and crucial element of European caution lies in the paucity of support for moderate Islamist opposition forces. Despite the commitments made by countless ministerial statements and policy documents, in practice little new engagement with Islam has been forthcoming. Donors have proceeded no further than including general discussion on "Islam and democracy" in some civil society forums. A plethora of initiatives aim at "cultural understanding" between Islam and the West, but concrete support is lacking for moderate Islamists concerned to widen political participation within their own societies. The UK government in fact stopped talking to a number of the prominent Islamist opposition groups based in London after 9/11. Even those states most overtly critical toward incumbent regimes—such as Sweden—eschew support for politically active Islamist groups. The EU's new guidelines on democracy and human rights promotion in the Middle East fail even to mention the Islamist issue. The EU largely avoids working with Islamists even on fairly apolitical issues: for example, declining to work through professional syndicates captured by Islamists. In short, Islamists continue to be the apparent untouchables of the democracy assistance world.

There is much stated official recognition that this is the single most important area in which European approaches must change. One assertion now ritually made by donors themselves is that support must move beyond the traditional range of advocacy and service delivery NGOs that have less local legitimacy than Islamist welfare organizations. And yet, uncertainty continues to paralyze any implementation of such strictures. When delegations in a number of Arab states asked Brussels for a line on whether they should engage with and/or fund Islamist-oriented social NGOs, no reply was forthcoming. A senior representative of one EU member state admits that the decision of whether to engage with local Islamists has depended almost entirely on the views of the ambassador in the state in question and that the case for a systematic policy on this most crucial of issues "is a battle still to be won" at the ministerial level. Preferences so far remain limited to backing the kind of modest increases in officially sanctioned Islamist representation in still-weak parliaments, rather than seeking any more pervasive support for Islamists as potential agents of genuine democratization. Some observe that the decentralization of many spending decisions to European Commission delegations—relatively small in-country teams bereft of significant political weight—has, in fact, compounded the reluctance to back controversial and openly critical local organizations. European

policy makers acknowledge that it is the United States that has gone furthest in trying to identify “moderate” Islamists within local communities—somewhat the reverse of what one might expect from the ritual comparing of European subtleties with American intolerance for local forms.

SELF-DEFINITION OR SELF-DELUSION?

In sum, European approaches have exhibited a socio-economic, techno-governance character, combining relatively innocuous grassroots initiatives with top-down cooperation purporting to “nudge” unthreateningly the outlooks of entrenched elites. It is through a combination of governance initiatives and service delivery NGOs that the EU has sought to walk—what it perceives to be—the thin line left between regimes and radical Islamists. The gradualism of European strategy clearly has much to commend it. It undoubtedly chimes well with the broad consensus that democracy must be generated primarily from within and mesh with concomitant economic and social change.

And yet, a challenge remains for the EU to imbue its policy of democracy promotion with greater tangible thrust without ceding the virtues of locally attuned gradualism. Excelling in holistic conceptual design, European strategies suffer from an unduly tentative and amorphous operationalization of such reasoning in practice. The weaknesses and strengths of European policy are almost inherent in each other. EU policies are imbued with subtlety and balance, but it is of their same essence that a lack of singular clarity and dramatism is born. European democracy policy resembles a man trying to learn to swim without letting go of the riverbank: keen to reach the deep, rewarding waters of political transformation but reluctant to let go of the supportive engagement built up with Middle Eastern regimes.

The sheer extent to which European policy has been defined in contradistinction to U.S. strategy risks clouding judgment. The almost existential venality of such proclaimed “otherness” has diverted attention from more prosaic consideration of what measures might actually have an impact on Middle East political reform. Through its ubiquitous warnings that democracy “cannot be imposed”—especially “from the barrel of a gun”—the EU might have suitably admonished recidivist tendencies in the Bush administration. But these strictures have shed little light on what the EU might indeed consider a more effective approach to Middle East reform.

Notwithstanding genuine aspects of distinctive thinking on political reform, Europe’s strategies have, in practice, emerged from strikingly inchoate decision-making processes. Rather than European policy representing a sophisticated and carefully reasoned conceptual approach, arbitrary accidentalism abounds. The urgency injected by 9/11 has done little to attenuate the EU’s well-known problems of coordination. Within the multi-layered European foreign policy machinery, policy is hampered by a labyrinth of poor linkages—between different ministries, between different states, between different institutions within the EU, and between different departments within the same institutions. Much analysis of U.S. polices attests to the same paucity of coordination, but Europe’s complexities are many times more bewildering: Germany alone has a dozen, highly dispersed agencies involved in democracy promotion. Coherence is required if Europe’s vaunted gradualism is not in practice to equate to little more than ad hoc muddle.

While rightfully aiming to mold the social, economic and cultural processes that underpin political reform, the EU should not entirely eschew a concern with the tangible institutional

attributes of multiparty democracy. Positive changes to underlying process cannot be sustained in institutional thin air; rather, exploration would be apposite of how bottom-up and top-down reform can be mutually reinforcing. European approaches need to redress a general imprecision in how process-oriented initiatives relate to formal institutional reforms. This is requisite to a more comprehensively political approach transcending the scattering of isolated civil society and governance initiatives that has been ineffectual in making any impact on de facto power relations in the Middle East. Such a comprehensive approach would ensure that these individual initiatives serve as building blocks toward identifiable institutional reforms.

This is not to advocate a less process-oriented approach, but rather to suggest that the EU should harness the social and political domains within single cross-cutting projects and initiatives. Concrete purchase is needed, in particular, in effecting a leap from gradual changes in economic governance to the tangible results of political reform. European policy also needs to be less reluctant to respond politically to reform opportunities. The EU's highly formalized and institutionalized partnerships tend to work to their own internal momentum, in a complete vacuum from outside events. Policy aimed at the gradual conveyor belt of underlying change needs to be complemented by more dexterous and nimble political interventions targeting visible change when break-through opportunities present themselves. If the EU's rejection of sweeping punitive conditionality has merit, it is difficult to see how its failure to react to democratic backsliding forms part of a "partnership" for reform in places like Yemen, Bahrain, Jordan, Morocco, and Egypt.

The juncture is clearly one of considerable fluidity. European democracy promotion is now a far more self-reflexive enterprise than ten, even five, years ago. Many of what are now the well-rehearsed pleas for democracy aid to extend itself beyond the narrow circle of "usual suspects" appear fully incorporated into the official mind-set. And yet, it remains to be determined whether will, means, and analytical design combine to generate fundamentally more effective policy. If they do not, Europe's timorous slithering from one riverbed stone to the next is unlikely to take it appreciably closer to the far bank of a politically reformed and stable Middle East.

NOTES

- ¹ Amy Hawthorne, *Middle Eastern Democracy: Is Civil Society the Answer?*, Carnegie Paper 44 (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment, 2004), p.15, available at <http://www.ceip.org/files/pdf/CarnegiePaper44.pdf> (accessed May 17, 2004).
- ² Chris Patten, Special Seminar with NGOs (speech, Brussels, July 14, 2003), available at http://europa.eu.int/comm/external_relations/w29/2.htm (accessed May 17, 2004).
- ³ *A Secure Europe in a Better World: European Security Strategy*, adopted by the heads of State and Government at the European Council (Brussels, December 2003) p.10, available at <http://www.iss-eu.org/solana/solanae.pdf> (accessed May 17, 2004).
- ⁴ Joschka Fischer, Speech to the 40th Munich conference on Security Policy, February 7, 2004, available at www.security-conference.de/ (accessed May 17, 2004).
- ⁵ Dominique de Villepin, *Law, Force and Justice* (speech, International Institute for Strategic Studies London, March 27, 2003), available at www.ambafrance-us.org/news/statmnts/2003/villepin_iraq032703.asp (accessed May 17, 2004).
- ⁶ Council of the European Union and The European Commission, *Strengthening the EU's Relations with the Arab World* (December 2003), available at www.medeas.be/files/UE_monde_arabe_12_2003_EN.pdf (accessed May 17, 2004).
- ⁷ Richard N. Haass, "Toward Greater Democracy in the Muslim World," *The Washington Quarterly* (Summer 2003), pp. 137–148, available at www.twq.com/03summer/docs/03summer_haass.pdf (accessed May 17, 2004).
- ⁸ Jack Straw, Launch of the Civility Programme on Middle East Reform (speech, Foreign Policy Centre, March 1, 2004), available at <http://fpc.org.uk/articles/242> (accessed May 17, 2004).
- ⁹ Dominique de Villepin, *Discours au Senat*, June 14, 2003, available at www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/atu/article.asp (accessed May 17, 2004).
- ¹⁰ Interview in *Le Figaro*, February 19, 2004.
- ¹¹ Department for International Development, *Regional Action Plan: Middle East and North Africa*, Consultation draft, June 2003.
- ¹² 70 percent of 2003 EIDHR funding went to these four human rights categories, leaving only €30 million for "democracy" good governance and the rule of law, available at http://europa.eu.int/comm/europeaid/projects/eidhr/projects_2003_en.htm (accessed May 17, 2004).

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