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## POLICY OUTLOOK

Democracy and Rule of Law Project

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# Political Reform in the Middle East

## *Can the United States and Europe Work Together?*

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The United States and Europe share a common concern about the dangers of political instability and economic stagnation in the Middle East, and the threat of terrorism emanating from that region. Consequently, they share a common interest in socio-economic and political reforms in the area, assuming that such reforms would help prevent instability and eventually lead to a subsiding of terrorism.

This commonality of concerns, interests, and assumptions has led recently to attempts to launch joint U.S./E.U. reform initiatives in the Middle East. The push for these joint efforts has come from the United States, with major European powers going along—despite considerable misgivings—in order to avoid another confrontation such as that over the invasion of Iraq. After the rift created by the war in Iraq, no country on either side of the Atlantic wants a new clash. A flurry of transatlantic meetings in June 2004—the G-8 meeting, the brief U.S./E.U. summit, and the NATO summit—demonstrated this desire for reconciliation. The most concrete initiative on the subject of Middle East reform to emerge from these encounters was the Broader Middle East and North Africa (BMENA) Initiative launched at the G-8 meeting.

Even this initiative is vague, however. It establishes a Forum for the Future, which will periodically convene representatives from the region and the G-8 in parallel gatherings of ministers, civil society, and business leaders—a first round of meetings took place in New York in September. With no clear organizational framework and above all no funding to give it substance, the BMENA initiative risks producing little, particularly since it is not the main tool for either U.S. or European efforts to encourage reform in the Middle East.

The United States at present relies heavily on the president's constant, forceful calls for democratic change to bring political pressure on Arab regimes, and on the Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI) to implement concrete initiatives. Since 2002, MEPI has spent about \$129 million on mostly small projects to promote private entrepreneurship, political change, educational reform, and women's rights. The European Union still considers its own initiatives to be its principal tools for change. A cooperation agreement was signed between the then European Community and the members of the Gulf Cooperation Council in 1989. The Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP), also known as the Barcelona Process, was

launched in 1995, and has led to the signing of Association Agreements between the European Union and most Arab countries on the rim of the Mediterranean (in E.U. parlance, the “Southern and Eastern Mediterranean countries”). More recently, the European Union has launched the European Neighborhood Policy, first outlined in March 2003 as the Wider Europe Scheme, which is designed to deepen economic and political ties with the countries on the Mediterranean rim and Eastern Europe that are the enlarged European Union’s new neighbors. The new BMENA activities remain a secondary focus for both the United States and the European Union.

This lukewarm commitment to joint initiatives is not an aberration resulting from poor planning or from the obstructionist tendencies of some European countries. Rather, it is the result of real differences between the two sides concerning how to deal with the Middle East. In order to be acceptable to all, joint initiatives have to be whittled down to the least common denominator, and as a result do not have much substance. This kind of transatlantic cooperation in promoting democratic change in the Middle East is likely to be ineffective.

Transatlantic cooperation in promoting political reform thus needs to be rethought. European countries and the United States must work together to send Middle Eastern governments, opposition movements, and political activists similar messages about the need for reform. However, it is better for the United States and the European Union to develop distinct policies to facilitate reform, drawing on their respective assets in the region, rather than to launch joint policies that do not maximize anybody’s strengths. The promotion of political and economic reform is a long process that will need decades to have a real impact. It is thus crucial that the players do not lose interest. They are less likely to do so if they are pursuing policies that fit their own worldviews and institutional strengths.

## **The United States and Europe: Differences in Approach**

The foreign policy differences between the United States and the members of the European Union, old or new, have been the object of much recent discussion. There is little disagreement about the nature of the differences, but it is worthwhile revisiting them briefly since they are being ignored in the current discussions of BMENA and, more generally, of future U.S.-European cooperation in promoting reform in the Middle East.

The United States is both more capable and more willing to project power and thus tends to take a hectoring, menacing position in its relations with other countries. European states are more reluctant to threaten, both as a matter of principle and because they are short of the means to project power outside the old continent. Whether the differences are due to discrepancies in military strength or in ethical and political choices is immaterial. Either way, they are real and well-rooted, and affect how the two sides approach Middle East political reform.

The United States is also impatient to obtain results, often unrealistically so, and thus tends to push harder and more abrasively for change. Conversely, in its haste to show success, it sometimes chooses to exaggerate the political significance of minor changes, such as the appointment of a woman to high position or amendments to family codes. When the United States in the wake of the September 11 attacks moved from its long-standing support of friendly authoritarian regimes in the Middle East to democracy promotion, it wanted quick results. By November 2003, in a speech at the National Endowment for Democracy, President George W. Bush was already pointing to a long list of so-called reforms in the

region which, he claimed, had been brought about by the new policy. By that time, the European Union had been working on the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership for over eight years; it was not making any extravagant claims of success, but appeared determined to keep the course indefinitely.

The different time horizon of the United States and Europe is deeply embedded in the policy making process and unlikely to change. Foreign policy in the United States is dominated by political appointees, who are typically replaced every four years even if the president is re-elected; long-term plans are thus difficult to sustain. Foreign policy in the European Union is driven to a much larger extent by bureaucracies with staying power. The result is that the United States can modify its approach quickly to accommodate changing circumstances, but finds it difficult to follow a consistent course over time. European countries are much better equipped to implement long-term strategies, but are slow to adapt to changing circumstances, and to abandon policies that produce scant results.

## **The United States and Europe: Assets and Liabilities in the Middle East**

In addition to the basic characters of their foreign policies, the United States and Europe bring different assets and liabilities to their dealings with the Middle East.

### **United States**

The United States' major asset in the region is power, and this asset cannot be ignored by any of the Middle Eastern regimes. Arab countries might not like what the United States says, but they have to listen, because there could be consequences if they do not. Listening does not mean complying with American requests, but it means responding in some fashion. When President Bush decided to make democracy promotion a priority in the Middle East, many Arab governments felt that they had to acquire some reformist credentials by taking at least modest, cosmetic steps. Eight years of cautious Euro-Mediterranean Dialogue have not elicited a similar desire to show compliance.

But the United States brings a similarly large and constant liability to the table when it deals with Arab countries, namely its policy toward Israel. The United States' attempt to separate the issue of Arab domestic reform from that of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict—the original BMENA proposal did not even mention the conflict—has proven unrealistic. Neither Arabs nor the majority of European governments accept the contention that the two issues can be compartmentalized, and that the United States can demand reform from Arab countries without pursuing more vigorous efforts on the problem of Israel and Palestine.

Other significant assets the United States historically brought to its relations with the Middle East were that it did not colonize any part of the Arab world, it was sympathetic to the 1956 decision by then Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser to expel British and French troops from the Suez Canal zone after its nationalization, and it supported the war of liberation in Algeria. But these assets have been whittled away by more recent actions. American troops have been in the Gulf for over ten years now. They are occupying Iraq. The United States does not have a colonial past but, in the eyes of many Arabs, it has an imperial present.

Other U.S. assets are also declining in value, although for reasons that are not directly attributable to U.S. policy. The United States today needs to buy oil from the Middle East much more than the Middle East needs to sell oil to the United States. The growing demand for oil in the exploding economies of China and India frees oil-producing countries from dependence on the United States. The constant refrain by U.S. officials about the need to

reduce U.S. dependence on Middle East oil further weakens the importance of oil in the relation between the U.S. and the Middle East, even if the rhetoric is not matched by action.

## Europe

The European Union's major assets in its relations with Arab countries are their strong economic and trade relations, as well as Europe's geographical proximity and cultural affinity with the Middle East. The European Union is the major economic partner for all Southern and Eastern Mediterranean countries except Jordan, which has a Free Trade Agreement with the United States. Despite the British and French colonial past in the Middle East, European countries enjoy a higher level of credibility and popularity than the United States, because Arabs believe the European position on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is more balanced. The European Union has recognized the Palestinian right to self-determination and has been committed to a two-state solution since issuing the 1980 Declaration of Venice. It has also pursued less aggressive and more Arab-sensitive policies in times of acute crisis. For example, the French and German refusal to support the war in Iraq has been well received by Arab governments and publics opposed to the occupation of sovereign Iraq and fearful of the potential dismantling of its territorial integrity. Even when the United States and Europe acted together during the first Gulf War in 1990-1991, Arabs did not accuse European countries, as they did the United States, of having helped liberate Kuwait in order to ensure their imperial interests and the security of their strategic ally in the region, Israel.

However, when it comes to the objective of pressuring Arab regimes to introduce political reforms, the European Union's assets are slim and they are not used effectively. Arab governments know that Europe's major interests in the region are economic and security-driven, and thus do not take seriously E.U. pressure to reform politically. The liberalization and privatization of vital economic sectors, a condition for the signing of Association Agreements between the European Union and the Arab countries around the Mediterranean, have not created severe challenges for most Arab countries. Except in Syria and Libya, economic liberalization has been an integral part of the policies of Arab governments at least since the early 1990s. The incentives offered by the European Union—better access to the Union's internal market and more development aid—have made economic reform even more attractive.

As far as political reform is concerned, however, Arab regimes usually resist and the European Union has not put much pressure on them. Indeed, there are no well-defined political benchmarks in the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership. The weakness of the European Union's political reform efforts has been partially obscured by European financial assistance to civil society actors in the region and pleas for sensitivity about the cultural and political uniqueness of the Arab path to democracy. Furthermore, in the wake of September 11, the European Union's effort to gradually engage Middle East countries on the sensitive question of political reform through a series of so-called constructive dialogues has been undermined by the global focus on the threats of terrorism and Islamist radicalism. Finally, the European incapacity to move the Arab-Israeli peace process forward has further diminished the strategic significance of the European Union in the Middle East as compared to that of the United States. The European Union, in short, has not effectively used its assets to promote political reform.

The articulation of the Wider Europe Scheme in 2003 and its further development in the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP) represent an attempt to deal with the shortcomings of the Barcelona process in promoting democratic change in the Middle East. The ENP

introduces a new, assertive declaration that political reforms leading to democracy and the rule of law are vital to Europe's interests in the region. It also spells out, at least in broad terms, benchmarks of progress for individual countries, offering those which successfully initiate political reforms accelerated levels of integration into the European market and significantly more funds. Even this approach has considerable weaknesses, however. The incentives offered by the European Union are predominantly economic and appeal mainly to countries such as Morocco and Tunisia, whose economies are structurally dependent upon the European Union. The incentives might not work for other Arab countries that are less dependent on the European market and less likely to benefit from a closer association to it.

## **Playing to Strength**

The United States' great power cannot be ignored, but is counterbalanced by enormous skepticism about U.S. intentions on the part of Arab governments and by the Arab public's hostility toward the United States. The European Union brings credibility based on its long term engagement, counterbalanced by a sense among Arab governments that there is no urgent need to respond to European initiatives when they address political reform.

Can close cooperation between the United States and Europe increase U.S. credibility and European clout? American officials believe that transatlantic cooperation would enhance their credibility, hence they seek to convince members of the European Union to join them in common projects. The Europeans fear, however, that such an approach would be more likely to drag down their own credibility than to pull up that of the United States.

Unfortunately, Europeans are probably right on this account, because anti-American sentiments in the Arab world are extremely high, while attitudes toward Europe are positive but not enthusiastic. Above all, Arabs do not believe that European countries can rein in the United States. As a result, joint initiatives tend to be perceived as essentially American ones and Europe does not gain new clout in Arab eyes.

Neither the United States nor the European Union gains much by trying to partner in promoting political reform in the Middle East. And while the United States would not lose anything by intensifying its cooperation with Europe, European countries would lose the opportunities they have gained by operating quietly in the background. For the last few decades, the European Union has kept a low profile in the Middle East, which gives it opportunities to experiment with different approaches without immediately causing strong reactions in the region. Unfortunately, Europe has not taken advantage of this opportunity for experimentation. Rather than give it up to join the United States in high profile initiatives certain to stir controversy and likely to achieve few results, Europe should make much better use of this asset.

The issue of reform in Middle Eastern countries is too important for the United States and Europe to launch joint efforts simply because this might help them overcome the transatlantic tensions caused by the war in Iraq. The region is unstable and it is unlikely to settle down again until genuine political change takes place. The United States and Europe need to maximize their effectiveness and they can do this much more easily separately than together. The United States cannot refurbish its image and rebuild its credibility by associating with Europe. Instead, it needs to implement pro-reform policies consistently, over a long period of time, and in a less contradictory fashion than it does now. It cannot indulge in resounding rhetoric about democracy and freedom, while in practice overlooking the failings of some of its major allies, because this encourages even Arab liberals to be

cynical about U.S. intentions. It cannot hail cosmetic reforms as signs of the advance of democracy because Arab publics can judge for themselves whether things are or are not changing. Restoring credibility will be a long process. The United States needs to make clear what kind of reform it is seeking. At present, many Arabs feel threatened by the resounding rhetoric about democracy and liberty, which many interpret as meaning “regime change” as in Iraq. At the same time, they are also convinced that pro-U.S. authoritarian regimes will continue to receive U.S. support for the sake of stability, and even gain praise for small cosmetic changes.

Europe must overcome its own timidity in using the potential assets it has accumulated by keeping a low profile, taking a long-term view of political reform, and emphasizing patient dialogue and partnership over drastic regime-change strategies. It should broaden the scope of its dialogue with Arab governments, stressing political rather than economic reform. It needs to make the dialogue more inclusive, seeking to bring in not only governments and moderate, mainstream intellectuals and civil society groups, but also the more difficult actors, in particular the Islamist organizations and networks that have the ear of a large segment of the public. European countries have tended to talk only to those secular or Islamist opposition groups that incumbent authoritarian regimes are willing to accept. In practice, it was the Arab countries that introduced the notion of political conditionality in their relations with the European Union, and not vice versa.

To strengthen its effectiveness, Europe should introduce benchmarks of compliance into the process of long-term dialogue, putting more pressure on Arab countries and conveying to them a sense of urgency. Like re-establishing America’s credibility in the Middle East, creating an assertive image of Europe in the region will take time. Encouraging signs of this new assertiveness are evident in the ENP, but Europe needs to maintain this stance in a consistent manner. Of course, broadening the dialogue to include interlocutors Arab regimes would like to exclude and imposing conditions could make European countries more controversial. But as long as Europe’s strength as promoter of democracy resides in its capacity to engage in dialogue over the long run, it is important that it be less timid about on what and with whom to engage.

The changes we are suggesting here are not extreme. They would not fundamentally affect the general thrust of U.S. or European policies, but simply try to address some of the most obvious failures on both sides. However, the change would not make European and U.S. policies more similar to each other and would not enhance the possibility of close cooperation. Europe and the United States should pursue separate but complementary policies, rather than trying to develop an integrated approach. Effectiveness in promoting political reform in the Middle East should be the paramount concern of both sides, and such effectiveness should not be subordinated to the goal of healing the transatlantic rift. ■

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