

Working Paper

Research Unit
Middle East and Africa
Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik
German Institute for
International and Security Affairs



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Promoting Democracy in the Middle East - Challenges for Transatlantic Cooperation

(contribution to a panel discussion at the
premises of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung in
Berlin, 7 September 2004)

Working Paper FG 6, 2004/03
September 2004
Berlin

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Preliminary Remark

By nature, the following text is not an extensive analysis but a kick-off paper meant to animate a discussion among American and German experts on the topic of democracy promotion and political reforms in the Middle East and the consequences for transatlantic cooperation and strategy formulation. The questions dealt with below were suggested by the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung.

Diverging European and American priorities: advantage or disadvantage?

I would challenge the assumption that there is a difference in priorities. Neither for the US, nor for the EU nor single European governments, democracy promotion as such seems to be a top priority. Rather, most EU governments are mainly motivated by concerns about mass immigration, energy security and the like when they ask for reform in the Middle East. The same is true for the Bush administration which has used rather unspecific slogans like "forward strategy for freedom" when formulating the GME Initiative. Like the Europeans, the US government is not so much driven by concern for the people in the region but by domestic policy concerns. It would enhance their already weakened credibility in the region if the EU and the US would be honest about their motivations.

Different approaches and difference in scope

In their political analysis regional experts on both sides of the Atlantic do not considerably differ. The same is probably true for those who are responsible for implementing programs: For instance, training schemes for Arab parliamentarians hardly vary according to their organization by European, American, Canadian or Japanese institutions. On the decision-making level in the US, however, there is a different view which entails limited trust in scholarly expertise (from both sides of the Atlantic). An extreme example is the decision about the Iraq war. In contrast, it would be hard to imagine the German government rather following advice by Achmad Chalabi than by Anthony Cordesman. This might follow from a different political culture, but it might also have to do with 9/11. The senseless discussion about the failure of academic scholars to predict this horrific event, right after 9/11, is still memorable in this respect.

There is another major conceptual difference be-

tween the EU and the US. Since the early 1990s the EU has been following an integrated and long-term approach as described by the three chapters of the EMP. The European concept is based on the assumption that economy, security and democracy (human rights) are necessarily connected. Rather few politicians in Europe seriously believe that democracy promotion is the single key or the overall solution to regional problems. The EU approach is about developing democratic models together with a variety of Middle Eastern actors and expanding the space for political participation. The keyword here is joint or shared ownership. By contrast, in the US democracy promotion seems to be en vogue only every ten years or so, with the last respective programs having been launched in the early 1990s by President Clinton. Now President Bush has picked up the topic as a kind of counter-terrorism strategy. Its underlying idea appears to be that the lack of freedom in the region is the root cause for terrorism and that democracy could cure everything. Yet neither president has spent a considerable amount of money for democracy promotion in the Middle East. Moreover, the link between peace and reform seems to be a rather recent discovery at the political top-level.

Does this divergence foster or hinder democracy and reform in the Middle East?

Arguably, the differing EU/US approaches mainly have an advantageous effect. Most importantly, and both in the American and the European interest, they send out the message to the region that there is no transatlantic anti-Arab or anti-Muslim coalition. While the EU-US divergence might be perceived by some as a severe crisis in transatlantic relations, it is also a chance: After all, it raises questions and encourages actors from the region to challenge and overcome stereotypes dominant about the West in public discourse. It also provides opportunities for Europeans and Americans to come in with their own explanations and world views. Not least this plurality of agents might foster reform projects and hence be helpful for the people in the region, as it means more money for programs and more attention to the problems of the Middle East – beyond those extensively dealt with in the Arab Human Development Reports that have been cited over and over again, sometimes very selectively. Moreover, the US and the EU engagement in democracy promotion reduces the dependency of local reformers on a single external actor.

What to learn from each other?

Certainly the Europeans and Americans can still learn a lot from each other, but it might be more helpful to ask what they have already learned over the past two years. For one, the Europeans have found that they have to improve their ways of communication, given the fact, for instance, that the Barcelona process and its underlying concept supposedly are not widely known in the US. Also, the EU may have discovered that the Middle East reaches beyond the Mediterranean, that the Arab Gulf states are not an American colony and hence the EU-GCC dialogue deserves more attention. Compared to its US counterpart, the EU could be more courageous, yet without replacing strategies by a trial-and-error method. After all, the US is much faster in decision-making, less hesitant and more energetic when it comes to implementation.

The current US approach evolved in different stages, at first stage it entailed bringing democracy to the Middle East by whatever means, including forced regime change. Hopefully, the latter concept has now been abandoned. This is certainly due to a learning process that has nothing to do with Europe, but with the experiences made in Afghanistan and Iraq. At its second stage, the US approach claimed to reform the region with programs based on the Arab Human Development Reports which are by definition not meant to deal with two important Middle Eastern actors: Israel and Iran. However, a look at the US G-8 working-paper that was leaked to the Arab press showed that the specific suggestions were easy to agree on, like some other recent US projects that look familiar to Europeans, for example the Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI) or the U.S. Middle East Free Trade Area (MEFTA). At the third stage – and this was already developed together with the Europeans during the G-8 preparations – the US approach sought to cooperate with the governments, if necessary, and with the civil society or business organizations, if possible. The G-8 declaration finally called for peace and followed a broad approach to reform at the same time. Also, the principle of shared ownership was very prominent. However, the plan of support that came with the declaration left out the security dimension completely. This was a serious mistake, as it is hard to imagine the Middle East to undergo any serious reform while the region is more or less in a state of war.

What consequences for defining strategies for democracy promotion?

Division of labour might be the key word here – not as an accident but as a strategy. There are comparative advantages we should make use of: Obviously, the US-President can put any issue onto the international agenda – the GME initiative was high on the agenda of the last G-8 summit – and he can influence the discourse within the Middle East. For instance, there was a debate about reform in the Arab world after the first Arab Human Development Report (AHDR 2002) came out, but it broke down with the Iraq war, a decision taken by the US-President. Since early 2004 this debate has revived – not least because the US-President raised the issue of reform in the Middle East. The EU on the other hand seems to have more staying power, perhaps more comprehensive programs, more experience and staff in the region, more "hands-on experience".

But we need more than that. A set of tri-lateral working groups or networks should be established, made up by American, European and Middle Eastern partners to deal with both the problems within the region and between the Middle East (including Israel and Iran) and Europe and the US. In order to develop a common platform, country by country and problem by problem need to be discussed, bearing in mind that all sides share the same interest, even if the motives differ. Do not expect this process to be smooth or quick.

The risk remains that reformers might be left out in the cold again: Does the fact that demands for reform in the Middle East have softened after the G-8 summit in June really only result from the summer break and upcoming presidential elections? The best to hope for is that reform efforts and peace initiatives from the region are supported from both sides of the Atlantic. There is some reason to be suspicious that – given the situation in Afghanistan and Iraq – a silent transatlantic consensus might emerge. The new paradigm ahead may not be "democracy first" but "stability first". What would this stability mean? Probably it would just be an attempt to keep violence at a comparatively low level without looking at human rights violations if they are called counter-terrorism measures. And this certainly does not enhance our credibility in the region.