A Strategy for Democratic Reform
Europe can promote political change in the Arab world—or hinder it
By Volker Perthes

In the Arab world and the Middle East today there is a vibrant discussion happening about democracy and Islam. Although it is not strictly "liberal democracy" in the Western sense, it contains many of its most important elements and needs to be encouraged by the European Union.

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The Iraq war is not the source of all recent changes in the Middle East. But this war has, without doubt, set more in the region in motion, and more radically, than the instigators of the war intended. The changes manifest themselves both on a geopolitical level and in the political debate within the region's states and societies. External actors, notably the United States and the European Union, have every reason to promote, indeed to demand, political change in the region; but so far they have lacked a strategy to deal with the unexpected consequences that have arisen from political openings in the region.

We can, in fact, speak of a kind of geopolitical revolution in the Middle East: for the first time since gaining independence an Arab state has been occupied by a power from outside the region. The United States is no longer merely a hegemonic power. It has become a regional power and a de facto neighbor of Iran, Saudi Arabia and Syria. But US attempts to engineer political relationships locally have revealed the limits to the power it is wielding in the region. Iranian influence in Iraq has grown and the territorial perimeters of Iraq imposed 95 years ago might now be called into question. The actual borders and the patterns of dominance in the Levant are also in flux. As a result of a mixture of civil protest and international pressure, Syria had to relinquish the hegemonic position it held over Lebanon for thirty years. For the first time, Israel has given up settlements in the region of historical Palestine and has begun to redefine the Gaza Strip borders that, though never internationally recognized, had nonetheless existed for forty years.

Political-ideological developments have paralleled these changes. The fall of the Baath government in Iraq and the expulsion of Syria from Lebanon have essentially dealt a death blow to the more étatist forms of pan-Arabian or Arab nationalism. The resulting ideological vacuum has been filled by diverse variations of Islamism. National Islamic movements with negotiable and practical agendas like the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, the Shiite Coalition in Iraq, the Lebanese Hezbollah and the Palestinian Hamas movement have profited, but so has the terrorist—in its practices nihilistic—jihadism of the Al Qaeda variety. The jihadists have not only acquired a certain popularity in states where development toward a nation-state had been relatively unsuccessful; more ominous is that segments of the Arab populations now observe jihadists' actions with indifference, as an inevitable conflict for which the West and the authoritarian Arab rulers are responsible. They do not want to take sides. Moreover, throughout the region there is a danger that sectarian or ethnic-nationalist trends will gain force wherever political orientations offer no viable perspective. Encouraged by the civil war-like conflict within Iraq, the concept of a "Shiite axis" is circulating in the neighboring Arab states. And in Iran some have come to refer to the oil reserves in southern Iraq, eastern Saudi Arabia and, of course, in Iran as "Shiite oil."

Democracy in the Bud

At the same time, however, a multifaceted democracy debate has developed. Admittedly, the concept of "liberal democracy" along Western lines does not mobilize the masses. Civil rights, human dignity, the rule of law, legal certainty and the distribution of power are, however, extremely popular concepts and have found their way into the political platforms of those Islamic forces challenging the existing authoritarian systems. The Hamas movement in the Palestinian territories won the parliamentary elections there with a Slate for Reform and Change. Yasir Arafat and Mahmoud Abbas' Fatah party sent their candidates into the elections as the Slate of Martyrs, a clear reference to the armed struggle. The election results showed which of the two concepts had more appeal to Palestinian voters.

The elections in the Palestinian territories have been free and fair, as were the parliamentary elections in spring 2005 in Lebanon and in December in Iraq. These standards were not met by the parliamentary and presidential elections in Egypt. However, the Egyptian president did allow more than one candidate to run for the highest office—a striking initial overture to the era after Hosni Mubarak. The first communal elections ever held in Saudi Arabia could not be considered more than a quarter step in the direction of true participation: women had no right to vote and only half of the existing seats were open to competition. Nonetheless, both the Egyptian and the Saudi examples indicate that holding elections that allow for some alternatives is gradually becoming the standard to which the ruling regimes must conform. At the same time, almost all elections have shown the popularity of Islamic discourse and the Islamic political groups' ability to mobilize.

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The political developments in Lebanon, in the Palestinian territories, and perhaps one day in Iraq as well, contribute to the rising significance of the democracy debate that is being led within the region and with respect to it in Europe and the United States. The fact that Israel is no longer "the only democracy in the Middle East" could be important for the revival and progress of a peace process. And if the Hamas-led government politicians in the Palestinian territories should succeed in actually governing better than their secular nationalist predecessors and manage to establish a modus vivendi with Israel, then the question of whether "democracy" and "Islam" are compatible will be answered positively and decisively. However, the Islamists' opponents will only believe it after the next Palestinian elections have been held as freely and fairly as the last. The success of a Hamas-led government—meaning at the very least a nonviolent coexistence with Israel and better standards of governance—would also have impact beyond the Palestinian-Israeli relationship. It would weaken those forces on the extremist wing of political Islam that reject democratic principles and institutional integration in favor of an eternal battle between "the West" and "Islam."

Aside from the resolution of acute conflicts between Israel and Palestine, around Iran, and in Iraq, the chances for political, economic and social development in the region are determined by structural deficits that one could argue exist in almost all states in northern Africa and the Middle East. Two political-economic problems must be highlighted in this context.

Almost all Arab states and Iran have failed to manage their resources effectively. These states are not actually poor but they lag behind according to almost all standards of economic development such as per capita income, growth rates and direct foreign investment. To give a few examples, in the 1950's Egypt and Syria were far ahead of South Korea and Malaysia, and approximately on a par with Romania and Bulgaria. Today the Arab states represent five percent of the world population but only produce two percent of the world's GDP, whereas in 1980 it still amounted to 3.5 percent. Even worse, in terms of the standard indicators of human progress—factors like level of education, life expectancy, equal rights or the fair distribution of wealth—almost all of these states rank lower than when measured for per capita income. That is, they are richer than their level of social development would suggest.

This discrepancy is closely linked to two problems generally associated with the concept of bad governance. Put concretely, there are blatant deficiencies in the rule of law and legal certainty; human rights are regularly disregarded; there is little transparency and corruption is rampant; and the possibilities for political participation are severely limited. The lack of access to political as well as to economic and social processes affects two

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groups in particular that both constitute a majority of their populations: women and today's young generation. Across the region about 60 percent of the population is younger than 20. This generation will have almost no chance to participate actively and effectively in the coming 20 years if today's political and administrative elites, the 35 to 50 year olds who are now establishing themselves in positions of power such as Bashar al-Assad in Syria or King Abdullah II of Jordan, intend to cling to their positions as their parents' generation had done. Authoritarian and patriarchal power structures must be replaced to provide for a fairer and more regular turnover of political elites.

Demands for political reform are key. But it is not surprising that the regimes resist such calls from the West. Whether presented in relatively temperate European formulation or in the more aggressive American tone, these demands do aim at a transformation toward greater participation and hence to a weakening of the ruling elites' control over their states and societies. The elites have attempted to dismiss demands for reform by arguing that foreign actors should keep out of the "internal affairs" of their states. Since 1991, when a military coup thwarted the election victory of the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) in Algeria, it has often been argued that too rash or too far-reaching democratization can endanger stability. The electoral victory of Hamas in the Palestinian territories has further fueled warnings about the dangers of "Islamization" as a reaction to "too much" democracy. The message, though at times indirect, is: either deal with us, the guarantors of stability and admittedly authoritarian but secular rule, or you had best be prepared for more political victories by Islamist groups.

Suggestions for Reform

The European Union and its member states would be ill advised to accept the protestations of those in power against calls for reform. The following six basic and of necessity over-generalized suggestions for a Western policy

for reform in the Middle East might serve as guideposts. Several of them may appear banal upon first consideration. But their relevance becomes clear whenever they are ignored.

First, Europe will have to take the concept "partnership" seriously with regard to so-called partner countries in the Mediterranean region and the Middle East. It is not enough to speak of "ownership" of reform processes that external actors ask local elites to implement. Conditionality of aid is a good idea, but beware: the combination of financial conditionality and the emphasis on ownership may make European actors dependent on the approval of partner governments for any cooperation with local civil society. Rather than involving local "ownership," Europe should make clear where its own interests in the reform of these states lie. This can help to reduce distrust and skepticism. The European Union and its members should, therefore, explain that well-governed states that are founded on the rule of law and have participatory political systems are also seen to be better partners for cooperation in the political, economic and security spheres. This, not a new mission civilisatrice, must constitute the background to our calls for reform in the Middle East.

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Secondly, Europe should work with and support actors within partner states that struggle for change in their societies in a peaceful way. This should be the core criterion for extending offers of cooperation with political and social forces in these countries, not avowals of secularism or Western liberalism. After all, the European countries themselves took a long time to develop these values and still do not share a uniform vision. This implies, among other things, to accept that civil society in Arab and other Middle Eastern countries includes Islamist elements and cannot be limited to groups and individuals that cultivate a secular dialog and are capable of formulating project proposals in English or French. It also clearly means that election results must be accepted wherever voters truly have a chance to choose their elected representatives and governments, which unfortunately remains the exception in the region. A justifiable skepticism concerning Islamist parties should not deter us from first congratulating the winner in free elections. Then we can move on to negotiating tough conditions for economic or political cooperation where necessary. Without the inclusion of moderate political Islam, reforms will be difficult to realize in the Arab world.

Thirdly, we must accept the complexity of political change. Democratization and political change are never linear processes. They involve political and social struggle over power and material resources. Inconsistency, detours and setbacks tend to be the rule rather than the exception. If Europe wishes to promote democratization in Arab and Middle Eastern countries it would be well advised to break down the concept of "democracy" into its constituent elements: the rule of law; respect for human rights; an independent judiciary; freedom of speech and a free press; the freedom to form parties and other political groups; and the obvious, but not necessarily first component: regular, free elections. European actors must make clear that basic human rights are not negotiable. Other elements of democracy and democratization can, however, be introduced incrementally; even in Europe the rule of law commonly came before regularly held elections. This approach would greatly facilitate forming alliances with local actors, which is crucial if we want to prevent the impression that reforms are being dictated by Europe or the United States. In many Arab states it is possible to introduce pro-

grams to strengthen judicial systems, thus winning over the local judges and lawyers and actually taking concrete steps to stabilize the legal system. Foundations and other NGOs can work with journalists to develop independent media. The European Union can propose programs in its "action plans" that would reinforce the rule of law. This would win the support of those administrative elites in most states in the region that have recognized that an instable legal system keeps both foreign investors and domestic entrepreneurs from making the long-term commitments so crucial to growth and social stability. These same elites, who are usually very aware of the deficits of their political systems, are nonetheless afraid of taking the plunge into the potentially dangerous waters of free elections. In fact—and this does not only apply to the Middle East—early elections in states where the structures of participation (parties, free press) are not yet stable and consolidated often promote the rise of populist forces.

Fourth, we must not lose sight of the socio-economic basis of political reform. Classic modernization theory that links the transition to democracy with a particular per capita income has fallen out of fashion for good reason. Nevertheless,

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we should not ignore that a non-mechanical connection does exist between economic progress, the levels of education and the growth of the middle classes on the one hand, and the chances that pluralism and democratic practices take root on the other. Thus, measures such as promoting small and mid-sized businesses, investing in vocational and technical schools, and establishing cooperation between universities transcend their direct repercussions for development and educational policy. They remain important elements of the societal infrastructure, as it were, for political change. Political reforms, after all, cannot be generated by a dialog between governments and civil societies alone. Continuous commitment of a material nature is also required.

Fifth, regarding the political development of the entire region, neither the Arab-Israeli conflict nor the war in Iraq can be ignored. For years the authoritarian ruling elites and certain Arab nationalist groups have used the Middle East conflict as an excuse to reject demands for reform. This has been and will continue to be easy for them, as long as a clear majority of the population in the region has the impression that neither the United States nor Europe is committed to encouraging a fair resolution of the conflict. Additionally, the US-led invasion and occupation of Iraq will be interpreted as the manifestation of America's sinister desire for dominance over the peoples and resources of the region. The unsolved Arab-Israeli conflict provides the strongest ideological source of extremist Islamist and nationalistic groups. The war, occupation and insurrection in Iraq threaten to provide the same benefits to the same forces. The political leaders of the Arab world, be they in power or in opposition, may not be terribly interested in the fate of the Palestinians and the Iraqis, but the people certainly are. Western credibility in the region will be measured by our willingness to work toward a peaceful and fair resolution of the Middle East conflict.

Avoid False Front Lines

We must avoid maneuvering ourselves into front lines that do not reflect the actual conflicts. Even if both Islamic jihadists and some believers in Western superiority actively seek a wider confrontation, we are not in fact facing a clash of cultures or civilizations that pits "the West" against "Islam." Rather,

we are witnessing an ingrained cultural conflict within Arab and Middle Eastern societies. Conflicts generated by modernization or power struggles are evolving against the backdrop of geopolitical turbulence. Many of the conflicts, be they violent, or only verbal or political—from the sectarian motivated murders in Iraq to the imprisonment of opposition leaders in Iran, Syria or Saudi Arabia, to the assassinations of Muslim freethinkers in Egypt and other countries—can be seen as part of an at times acute, but generally latent and most likely long-term, inner-Islamic civil war in slow motion. On one side are those who advocate peaceful evolution toward political modernity and support cooperation between their countries and the rest of the world. On the other side stand those who seek to impose a totalitarian straight jacket on their societies and see themselves in the middle of a timeless war that includes the crusades and the dismantling of the Ottoman Empire by the colonial powers, as well as the Arab-Israeli conflict, the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, the attacks on September 11 and the battle with the American troops in Iraq. The conflict with Islamic terrorism must be fought and won within the societies of the region.

Americans and Europeans will have to make clear to the forces of reform in the Arab world and the Middle East that they seek engagement rather than conflict with Arab and Muslim societies. Small but significant symbols such as visa regulations or access to European universities play an important role. The United States and the European Union should jointly focus their energies on the many areas where Western credibility has been thrown into question. The Arab-Israeli conflict is an important case in point. There is, after all, a "road map" for the conflict that has been accepted by all local parties. Without demonstrative solidarity and, where necessary, demonstrative pressure from the members of the so-called quartet, in particular from the United States and Europe, the local parties will continually

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try to back out of their obligations. Transatlantic cooperation proved to be most effective in dealing with Syria in the spring of 2005 when it took a combination of Lebanese civil protest and international pressure to move Syria to withdraw its security forces from Lebanon. Cooperation toward a diplomatic solution to the conflict over Iran's nuclear program is just as crucial, although success is only one possible outcome here.

However, in approaching the "softer" areas of politics where much can be accomplished through the power of persuasion and through our own political and societal models, we cannot necessarily expect to find similar synergies. For example, the states of the European Union have little to offer when it comes to questions of integration and the prospects of migrants from the Arab-Islamic world. Here, the United States remains the more attractive model, despite all its tightening of visa and residency requirements. Conversely, Guantanamo and Abu Ghraib have made it next to impossible to campaign together with the United States for human rights and the rule of law without losing all credibility in the Arab world. Here Europe can be more convincing when it develops its own programs with partners from within the local societies. Transatlantic cooperation in the Middle East should be measured not so much by the degree of agreement between European and American actors but by the degree of their success in promoting peace, security and political, as well as economic reform.