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A dozen prescriptions for Europe to push Arab reform

By Volker Perthes and Rami G. Khouri

Europe's commitment to engage Arabs, the United States and other interested parties to prod political, economic and social reforms throughout the Arab world requires a clear consensus on how to bring about reforms. Based on the lessons of European and American efforts to promote Arab reform in the past two years, we offer the following general, policy-oriented prescriptions for European, Arab and American consideration.

Accept real partnership with partner countries. The well-intentioned trans-Atlantic policy debate on reform needs in the broader Middle East and North Africa region has largely stalled because civil society activists and political elites alike always resist outside actors telling them what to do in the realm of their own sovereignty. Europe must avoid initiating a reform process and then making lofty declarations about how the Arabs own that process, which inevitably gives the impression of yet another European or trans-Atlantic mission civilisatrice.

Support societal actors of all orientations who strive for peaceful, pluralistic change. Europe must not support only those civil society actors who reflect its own democratic experience, foreign policy agenda, or financial aid criteria. It should resist American, Israeli or Arab regime pressures to refrain from engaging credible Arab civil society actors with Islamist orientations, as well as pan-Arab, anti-colonial, leftist, progressive, and tribalist elements.

Focus on structures, not individuals. Reform takes time because it requires changing entrenched socio-economic and political structures, including local balances of forces, institutional development, and new rules and rights. Europe and the West should not focus on changing individual rulers, but rather should help local actors build credible structures and movements that would themselves enhance reform and change. The desired democratic transformation must include peacefully and regularly changing those in executive power who control the guns and the money, including introducing accountability mechanisms to oversee executive and legislative power.

Accept gradualism, but keep focused on the agreed goals. Credible, lasting change happens slowly and gradually, responding best to nuanced, differentiated, targeted strategies for democratic reforms devised jointly by Arabs and their foreign partners. Progress must occur at a realistic pace, avoiding a hasty opening-up of societies that frightens many people with the specter of Iraqi-like chaos or possible Islamist takeovers. Reform efforts must also acknowledge the reality that Arab public opinion does

not express widespread, vocal demands for democratic systems as such, but rather wants regimes to respond to calls for basic human needs (jobs, schools, health care) and, equally importantly, to treat Arab citizens with more dignity and justice.

Work together to achieve realistic, differentiated reform goals in various sectors. The broad quest for freedom, free markets and democratic elections is noble, but overly simplistic. Reform agendas must grapple with a variety of legitimate aims and real constraints, in fields such as education, economy, security, religion, governance, the rule of law, elections, accountability, women's status, minority rights, civil society, judicial systems, and others. Progress will vary, reflecting local conditions, values and capabilities. Most Arabs will fear and resist a single, overarching, aggressive reform agenda that they see as a drive to change their culture and values, or change their regimes and governance systems. A more nuanced, sector-based reform agenda could engage local elites and create common interests. Simultaneously, Europeans must not leave any doubt about the universal applicability of basic concepts of human rights.

Acknowledge the fragility of most Arab states in the absence of the centralized security state. Quickly changing and opening up societies that have never defined concepts of citizenship rights might lead to chaos, as Iraq seems to indicate these days. Built into any long-term Arab reform agenda should be the capacity for Arab citizenries to engage in a formal process of national self-determination, deciding themselves, for the first time in modern history, their own frontiers, ideological and economic systems, security-sector roles, relations with neighbors, and rights and responsibilities of citizen and state.

Remember the intangible but real impact of Arab historical memory. Many Arabs routinely complain about the legacy of Western military and political interference in their societies, going back centuries in some cases - from Napoleonic and other military invasions and colonial occupations, to recent and continuing Western support of Arab autocrats and their security states. Western governments that approach the Middle East with armies and reform agendas understandably elicit strong skepticism, along with political and other forms of resistance.

Do not forget the crucial socio-economic foundations of reform. Pluralistic, democratic practices are more likely to flourish in the context of economic progress, rising education levels, increasing societal differentiation, and the emergence of strong middle classes. Essential tools for promoting Arab reform, therefore, should include backing small and medium enterprises, European direct investment in Arab partner countries, and support for training, universities and greater opportunities for Arab students to study and train in Europe.

Do not allow geopolitical goals to marginalize human rights concerns. The credibility that is crucial for successful European or American roles in promoting Arab reform is quickly compromised once geopolitical aims take priority over reform agendas and respect for human rights. A current example is the West's embrace of Libya for giving up its weapons of mass destruction program, without requiring any changes in Libya's autocracy or poor human rights practices.

Do not ignore the relevance of the Arab-Israeli and other regional conflicts. The Arab-Israeli conflict has helped to entrench autocratic rulers in some Arab states for over half a century, and underpins extreme religious and nationalist appeals in the region. A comprehensive peace would make Arab political and other reforms much easier and faster. The overall credibility of Western policy initiatives in the region is heavily linked in Arab minds to the seriousness of American and European efforts to resolve fairly the Arab-Israeli conflict, Iraq, and other such major conflicts in which Western states are deeply involved.

Be honest about the rationale for reform demands. The call for political reform in the Arab world, particularly when linked with aid conditionalities, constitutes an act of intervention - a legitimate one, we maintain, if the reform agenda combines legitimate Western goals, interests and concerns with equally important Arab ones, thereby achieving a common agenda that is jointly defined and implemented. Externally-driven reform efforts will not succeed if they mainly aim to ensure security for the U.S. and Europe, rather than stability and wellbeing for Arabs.

Don't make European Middle East policy or the issue of Arab reforms an object of trans-Atlantic psychotherapy. The trans-Atlantic policy debate on the Middle East and any common policy agenda for the region must ultimately be determined by what is needed in and for the Middle East and the Arab world, not by what might help to heal the rift between an increasingly Mideast-stressed American administration and individual European leaders.

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