Can external promotion of democracy in North Africa and the Near East succeed?

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At the moment, democratization is one of the key concepts and "mot d'ordre" shaping cooperation with North African and the Near Eastern states. Western countries give a high priority to any efforts to encourage transformation of the political systems within those regions. The idea of employing external measures to kick start moves towards democracy in North Africa and the Near East, however, are not new[1]: As early as the 1990s, Western heads of state, including the government of the USA, international development agencies, and the EU all called for the following measures: human rights to be respected; the rule of law to be applied; good governance; participation in political decision making to be expanded; and civil society and private business structures to be promoted in the hope that they would initiate the collapse of authoritarian structures and their replacement with other forms more amenable to social and economic development. Spectacular successes, however, have not been forthcoming. No North African or (Arab) Near Eastern state has introduced reforms that have led to democratic transformation, although in North Africa in particular and some oil-poor states in the Near East there has been some attempt within the system frameworks to adapt the political and economic systems to domestic and foreign conditions.

For security reasons US foreign policy underwent a reorientation after September 11, 2001. As a result, "democratization of North Africa and the Near East" took centre stage once again. The best known projects to this end were conceived by the US government: one is the *Middle East Partnership Initiative* (MEPI); and the other is the *Broader Middle East and North Africa Initiative* (BMENAI), a G-8 led initiative to democratize North Africa and the Near East. In North Africa and the Near East since 2002/2003 they have been the most intensively discussed external concepts for promoting democracy in the region.

The MEPI and the BMENAI have been using incentives (more aid, more money, closer cooperation etc.) to *directly* influence those active within government to transform their political and economic systems. In addition, NGOs have been incorporated into assistance programmes and projects as supporters of pro-democratic reforms in order to apply *indirect* (civil) social pressure on countries to transform. These latest external democracy initiatives contain implicit terms and conditions while outwardly emphasizing "partnership" and the "volentariness" of implementation or non-implementation, even though these would immediately weaken any of the conditions set.

External initiatives towards political democratization cannot make any constructive contribution to democratization until the addressees accept and absorb them. For this to happen the following pre-requisites must be in place:

- Firstly, government activists and influential social representatives must have a positive basic attitude towards democracy as a system of order per se or as a system of order for state and society and
- secondly, they must have a positive attitude towards external support for democratic change.

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[1] Unless a definition specific to a particular person or group is given, democratic system will be understood to mean a political system that through separation of power, control of power, rule of law, guarantees basic rights (political and civil rights and freedoms) to all citizens and is characterized by the exclusive exercise of political power through elected representatives.

Is this the case in North Africa and the Near East? Seven countries of the region have been analyzed to provide necessary insights concerning this question: Algeria, Morocco, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Lebanon and Syria. During their field studies the authors examined: the attitudes and reactions of important political actors towards external initiatives; general attitudes to reform of the political system; and endogenous projects to reform (does democracy play a role at all in these projects?) in order to judge the potential for success of external attempts to promote political transformation.

1. Results of the country studies

1.1. Reactions to external initiatives and the pressure to democratize

In the states examined almost all government leaders, political parties and social organizations, whatever their political persuasion and proximity to their regimes, rejected external demands for democracy (MEPI, BMENAI) on the grounds that they are "US initiatives" and interference in internal affairs.

The following arguments were used to explain such views. The Algerian government said the initiatives did not apply to them since it did not reject reforms in the first place, parties were permitted, and regular elections took place (in contrast to the Gulf States they claimed). The Egyptian President, meanwhile, directed attention to the democratic achievements of his country (for example, the legal system), and pointed to ongoing reform initiatives. In particular, some groups within Egyptian society and left wing opposition parties decisively rejected liberalization of the economy owing to the higher social costs that would cause. The Jordanian leadership felt that the initiatives only had indirect relevance for it because they simply supported the comprehensive reforms it had already instituted. The Saudi royal family has not publicly rejected reform but resists growing US pressure for change because it insists ideas for change are to come from within the country. The vast majority of the Saudi population, for whom Western culture is totally alien, the very anti-American (Wahhabi and Shiite) opposition, "pro-reformers" and conservatives, all share the royal family's views on this. That reforms must come from within and that each country needs to devise its reform programmes individually is also the tenor of the Moroccan King's and the Lebanese leadership's thinking. The Syrian government rigorously rejects all external initiatives as interference.

Although external initiatives to democratize are resisted no matter what their political and confessional orientation is, not all foreign aid and support is automatically turned down. Western support is welcomed if it supports local initiatives, doesn't interfere with law and order issues and makes activities possible that could not be implemented without it, such as NGO work done by women in Jordan. Any assistance which is autonomously conceived and coercively implemented is rejected; for example, the USA's S*yria Accountability Act* and the UNO Security Council's Resolution 1559, a US supported move to alter the domestic political situation in Lebanon by putting pressure on Syria to withdraw from Lebanon. The Lebanese did not reject the content of these initiatives but they objected to this unrequested interference in their internal affairs. In other words, they did not object to the idea that Syria withdraw from the Lebanon but they criticised that the demand was made.

In Syria the rejection of external initiatives is widespread, yet Syrian intellectual circles insist that internal discussions should not simply ignore the content of the initiatives because they come from the West. Barring a small number of people, *pressure* designed to enforce reforms is rejected in all the countries analyzed. [2]

Conclusion: In all the countries examined external (US) pro-democracy initiatives are decisively rejected and regarded as intolerable interference in internal affairs. Similarly, governments, social groups, even critics and opponents of regimes, all refuse to bow to pressure put on their governments.

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[2]   So, for example the Egyptian opposition group, the so-called "Kifaya Movement" supported foreign pressure put on the country's leadership to block President Mubarek's renewed candidature for the presidential election in 2005 because they wanted to lossen up the ossified structures. Nevertheless, they also rejected external reform proposals. Human rights organizations did likewise.

There is almost complete agreement that initiatives for political reform must come from within if they are to be durable and workable.

Any external support for endogenous reform projects for which prior agreement is obtained is not rejected out of hand. The exception being Islamist organizations. In Saudi Arabia, however, there is within society widespread rejection of any kind of external initiative.

In other words, if external support for local measures is offered free of accompanying demands for normative changes to the political system and social organization of a country, or if technical programmes and support are normatively "open", the majority of political and social protagonists in most of the countries in the region would not categorically refuse to make use of them. Only a small number of states (Saudi Arabia) and Islamist organizations would categorically reject such offers. There are fewer reservations when the initiatives are not seen as American.

1.2. The perception that there is an ulterior motive for the initiatives

The "US Initiatives". From Morocco to Syria both government and non-government activists, no matter what political orientation they have, judge US initiatives in a very similar way. They are seen as a means of implementing American interests in the region and of securing control over states there. Thus, the US administration is seeking to establish its hegemony there in order to protect Israeli, American business and American oil industry interests.[3] In the Near Eastern states, but not the Maghreb states, the conviction is widespread that the initiatives aim to promote the normalization of relations with Israel. Islamists in every state see the initiatives as culturally alien and a threat to their Islamic and cultural identity.

The mistrust of the US administration, its policies and its "real" intentions is pronounced among all protagonists, even those heads of state that cooperate with the USA. The lack of credibility of the US administration is emphasized; the substance of every political initiative, including those promoting democracy, and every statement of intent by the US government is subject to doubt. The same reasons are usually given for mistrusting and doubting the sincerity of US administration's rhetoric. Among the most common reasons are: the "double standards" practiced by the regime, (namely the unequal way in which Palestinians and Israelis, Arab states and Israel, and Israel and Iran concerning atomic power are treated); the one-sided and unconditional support of Israel; the lack of effort to resolve the Palestine-Israel conflict; the Iraq policy; the abuse of human rights in Iraq and Guantanamo; finally, its unilateralism. Opposition groups also mention the US government's tendency to support authoritarian regimes at the expense of democracy when it suits them. Even the few liberal democratic oriented activists in the region do not believe that Bush's administration will adopt policies that are more favorable to democratization.

The EU Initiatives. In contrast to the above assessment of the "US initiatives" for promoting reform in North Africa and the Near East, judgment concerning the EU initiatives has been more differentiated because they are felt to be less aggressive: In fact they tend to be seen as "offers" of support for reform and not measures to be forced onto the recipients. Prior to the G-8 summit and the approval of the BMENAI, the American administration and EU representatives discussed some modifications to the BMENAI. These included: greater emphasis on partnership; and clearer references to the planned support of ongoing reforms. Although these discussions were positively received in North Africa and the Near East, the BMENAI was still perceived as being a US government project and as such a source of criticism of American policies and interference.

That the EU initiatives are also motivated by self-interest is clear to all but this is accepted as "entirely normal". Governments, political parties and social groups in the Maghreb states were unanimous in rejecting any "pre-fabricated" concepts. In other words, programs and projects that had not been devised in cooperation. This criticism was especially directed at the Barcelona Process and the existing form of the Mediterranean Dialogue.

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[3]   See, for example, Center for Strategic Studies. University of Jordan: Revisiting the Arab street. Research from within, Amman, February 2005, pp. 58-79 (Section 3. Perceptions of Western foreign policies).

Generally the EU is trusted and seen as reliable. Heads of state, political parties and social representatives claim the EU has greater understanding of and sympathy for the local situation than the USA.

The EU's relatively lack of power is acknowledged by all the participants and is usually regretted. The inequality in the power potential of the EU and the USA is also regarded by Jordan and Syria as an obstacle to the EU adopting a formative role in the Near East. In the Maghreb states (especially in Morocco and Tunisia) their fixation with the EU and their willingness to cooperate in projects based on "partnership" is markedly greater than it is in the Near East where the presence of the US military is a much bigger power factor.

Conclusion: A vast majority of those active in politics and society accused the US administration of having negative motives. Political orientation is not important in these convictions even if the arguments of Islamist organizations are more pronounced and emotional than the arguments of non-Islamist protagonists. Islamists point out how American political interference endangers religion and identity. The EU's foreign policy does not suffer the same degree of mistrust.

1.3. Attitudes to reform

The necessity of "reforms" in the sense of measures or activities designed to increase the performance of the state and improve ways of coping with acute economic and social problems is acknowledged equally by government leaders, political parties of all persuasions, NGOs and the Islamist organizations. In Saudi Arabia there is only a small group striving for political and social change, (e.g. expansion of the structures of participation and the greater participation of women within society). Although, they do not want the total collapse of the system, they have little hope of gaining support within society. Resistance to such intrusions upon tradition is so strong that those within the royal family who are willing to reform always have to use make allowances for it in their decision making.

Governments emphasize their willingness to reform while insisting they have sole discretion over the speed of reform, which aims to allow long-term gradual change. This change must be appropriate to the individual social conditions and political systems of each nation and may not endanger stability. The priorities set within the reforms must follow the dictates of local needs and any outside interference is to be rejected.

Governments clearly see economic and social reforms as their priorities. In Morocco and Tunisia social modernization (e.g. women's rights, reform of education and vocational training) have equal priority. Although the gradual reform approach dominates thinking within the country's leadership and among society's leading figures, there are various pro-reform factions that have different opinions about which priorities to set, the speed of the reforms, and their reach. This all tends to slow down the process of change.

Reform efforts are *always* overshadowed by concerns for stability. In particular, those who have profited up to now wish to guarantee their own power and privileges. As a consequence, the reforms may be slowed down or even obstructed (as in Syria or Algeria). How to maintain harmony between different groups within the population and to secure their willingness to cooperate peacefully also plays a major role in the instigation of political reforms. This is the case in the Lebanon, for example, where the maintenance of a balance of power between the confessional groups in a proportional system based on confessions and region has become a key issue since the end of the civil war. In fact, it is only the withdrawal of Syrian troops in 2005 that theoretically opened up possible ways of tackling political reforms. The fear that the precarious balance could be endangered and that a society whose actions and structures are regional and confessional in character could end up polarized, has so far ensured that Lebanon's political leaders, political parties and NGOs have focused their energies on the issue of Syrian troop withdrawal and non-interference in the country's internal affairs and pushed political reform into the background.

In demanding reforms the Islamists have added to the problems. As far as the Islamist movements are concerned, the Islamization of society has yet to be achieved. In order to reach their aim the

Islamists have demanded, for example, that the political system in Morocco, Algeria, Egypt, Syria and Jordan be opened up, political freedom be guaranteed, participation be expanded, and that restrictions on the forming of associations and political parties be removed; all measures necessary to increase their own freedom to act. Even the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and Syria accepted the use of the term "democracy" when presenting their manifesto and aims in 2005, albeit with the caveat that "democracy" should be based on the Sharia or should fall within the „Islamic framework".

In Saudi Arabia, whose system is based on Islam and whose society is very Islamic, the Royal family are faced, on the one hand, by certain elements in favor of gradual reform and, on the other, by conservatives. The latter are backed by large sections of society. The risk that the introduction of elections for the National Consultative Council would enable more extreme conservatives to triumph – as happened in the first Saudi communal elections in 2004 – has deterred pro-reformists from demanding the opening up mentioned above. Reformists are afraid that the extreme fundamentalist influence on politics and society could become anchored in government institutions and further marginalize pro-reformists.

Like the Egyptian Islamists, who expect greater political participation and greater freedom to increase political and social power, the Jordanian Islamists have spoken out in favor of such liberalizations plus changes to election law. As soon as the issue of social order is discussed, however, their ideas about reform become vague. "Charters", "Petitions" and "Political Manifestos" published by the Islamists soon just become tired lists of demands – as the plans of opposition parties generally do.

Conclusion: Acceptance of "reform", including political reform, and an over effusive use of the terms "democracy" and "democratization" by governmental leaders, and those playing an active role in politics and society have been observed throughout North Africa and the Near East. This is also true of Tunisia, Yemen and the smaller Gulf States not included in the analysis of countries in this study. Only Saudi Arabia and Syria do not accept the need for reform.

Rejection of external insistence on reform is a factor uniting all the countries in the region and most of the social activists within those countries. This does not mean that endogenous reform concepts are widely accepted by the population. Generally, the more reforms impact on the privileges of those who have profited from the system or threaten their influence and the rental economy, the more the resistance within government coalitions and (organized) society grows. The analyses of individual countries made it clear that it was the balance of power within each country plus the strength of resistance to reform or conversely the willingness of individual groups within the population to support reforms that determined the rhythm and scope of reforms. Nevertheless, these reactions, and the reforms themselves, varied from country to country.

1.4. Liberal-democratic reformers and their influence

There are few liberal democrats who are strategically important for the heads of state in the region. As a result, such domestic political pressure is completely absent. Liberals, in other words, pro-reformers in a Western style democratic and social system, have been forced to go on the defensive since the USA upped their presence and adopted a more aggressive effort to democratize the region after September 11, 2001.

States have initiated reforms designed to modernize some sections of society. In part, they have done this to fend off the influence of Islamists. For example, Tunisia, Morocco and Libya were the first to institute reforms in the support given to women. So far, however, no general concept has emerged in any of the countries for ending the taboos surrounding re-interpretation of Islam and the separation of state/politics and religion. This can be explained by the fear that an end to these taboos would cause massive resistance among religious conservatives and fundamentalists. This in turn would rob reformers of the opportunity to use religion for their own ends and to control institutionalized religion. In consequence fundamentalist activists would gain greater scope to act.

Whenever Islamist parties and organizations demand "democracy" they exclude social components of democracy, arguing that that the Sharia provides the framework for state *and* society. Their demands for democracy, without exception, aim to make it easier for them to expand their room for maneuver and to systematically penetrate state institutions.

Conclusion: The organizationally weak liberal democratic reformers, who already lack any real social influence, have been put more and more on the defensive by US policies and efforts to democratize the region. The scope for action of liberal democratic reformers is very limited. Their selective incorporation into government reform programs, for example, in Morocco where they are participating in the promotion of women's interests, is dependent on the governments' concepts for modernization. The lack of liberal democratic organizations capable of having an impact on society beyond their own small circle of members, makes it difficult for external activists keen on founding development projects built on political cooperation to find suitable partners to work on social modernization and pro-democracy projects within the region.

1.5. Leading activists within the region

Even if the governments in North Africa and the Near East are in possession of much of the power base and control the distribution of resources, their positions depend on balancing and trading interests. Support and loyalty are exchanged for material and immaterial goods (including allowing others certain "freedom" to act so long as they remain loyal). The ability of leaders to determine the political and social direction and orientation of their countries, whether these countries are monarchies or republics, is dependent on their followers, made up of key political, economic and religious groups loyal to them, and the diffuse backing of the unorganized majority of the population. This loyal following and diffuse legitimacy is, for example, dependent on a rulers' ability to monopolize the power over state institutions, on the ability of the state to perform and, finally, on the political culture of the country in question.

This close relationship between the states and their followers, means that the success of any interference with the political, economic and social order resulting in a break with the past depends on the state's leaders being sure of broad support, whether among the key actors within society or among the population at large. It also depends on the degree of social influence exerted by each key actor supporting the state (or his potential to initiate mass mobilization). In addition, success depends on the majority of the population having positive expectations of the impact of the intervention. Any expected negative consequences must be adequately compensated, for example, in material or immaterial form or through social cushioning.

Conclusion: Without a doubt the governments in North Africa and the Near East are largely responsible for making adjustments to the system or parts of the system to take into account altered external circumstances. Their positive or negative attitude to political or economic reforms and to democratization or external efforts to promote democracy, is decisive for foreign cooperation, whether it comes from countries or private organizations. Yet, it is also true that it is seldom the *only* factor determining the political course of a country in the region.

2. Can external promotion of democracy in North Africa and the Near East succeed?

When asked about the prospects for democratization in North Africa and the Near East, Marina Ottaway,[4] academic at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, stated that three consequences of a liberalization of the system, which were thought to pose a threat to stability, were standing in the way of democratic transformation. These are: firstly, the fear of sectarian unrest in countries with pronounced ethnic and religious heterogeneity (e.g. Syria, Lebanon, and Iraq); secondly, the fear of the sectarian nationalism that can develop out of ethnic and religious heterogeneity; and lastly, the fear that the political influence of Islamic fundamentalism will grow (e.g.

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[4]   See Democracy: Rising tide or mirage?, in: Middle East Policy, Washington D.C., Vol. 12, No. 2, 2005, pp. 3-4.

in Egypt Jordan, Morocco, and Algeria). It was assumed that these fundamentalists would exploit comprehensive political liberalization to take power and establish an Islam inspired autocratic system.

The fear that territorial unity might dissolve and state structures might collapse appears justified when one looks at developments in Iraq since 2003 or the precarious balance of power maintained in the ethnically and religiously heterogenic Lebanon. Equally justified is the fear that the continuing efforts of Islamist organizations to gain greater political and social freedom are not only aimed at participation in power or in sharing power. Rather it is more likely that they will want to realize their vision of a society unified in lifestyle and moral attitude once they have gained power. In which case domestic conflicts would threaten stability. Such a development is to be expected in Egypt, Jordan, Morocco and Algeria.

The findings of the country studies presented here indicate further endogenous factors that obstruct democratic openness and which doom any external promotion of democracy.

2.1. Unfavorable endogenous pre-conditions for the promotion of democracy

One of the pre-requisites for choosing a pro-democracy strategy and accepting the offer of external support for democratization processes is the determination of the country's leadership to democratize and the willingness of key actors within the government and society to help make such a democratization strategy work. That means that both the country's leaders and the key figures of that country must be convinced that the introduction of a process of democratic transformation would result in positive effects not only for the development of the whole state but also for their own group, and that any negative effects would be controllable.

A renunciation of the hierarchic concept of government and control requires, however, that all those involved in the political process, have been suitably socialized at home and in school, so that state institutions no longer function according to an authoritarian and clientalist pattern. Until now, most of the countries in the region have state institutions whose members have been chosen in pluralist elections but who regard protection of group interests and power over resource allocation as central to their tasks. This problematic treatment of social, religious, and political pluralism is a consequence of socialization in conformist thinking and paternalistic structures, which have been reinforced by religious upbringing and state education.

The political culture of a country decisively influences the willingness of that country to choose a democratic style of government and social order or whether it simply clings to an existing model while making a few minor adjustments. The analyses of countries in North Africa and the Near East show that a fundamental disposition in favor of a Western style liberal democracy does not exist among the key actors. In these very personalized systems the democratic model is not regarded as a viable alternative system by a country's leaders, key figures for stability, or influential opposition groups.

2.2. The external promotion of democracy and its effect on endogenous reforms

Western promotion of democracy in North Africa and the Near East has compounded the endogenously unfavorable structural conditions for the introduction of pro-democratic processes by inciting resistance and negative emotions. This is particularly true of the US administration's aggressive rhetoric and threats of "negative consequences" for non-compliance with their demands. The attempt to "democratize" Iraq by military means and its failure to establish law and order and security for the population has only increased criticism of Western interference. The view that "the West" is not interested in democratization at all but rather is trying to gain control over the region, protect Israel and prevent the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction has been underpinned.

The discrepancy between voiced support for democratization and offers of assistance made by the various initiatives (MEPI, BMENAI and the European Neighbourhood Policy) and the proposed modules for realizing these aims is obvious. In contrast to the rhetoric, which concentrates on making "demands" and exerting pressure, the initiatives themselves offer the participants the chance to choose which measures they want to accept and to what degree they want to participate in them. The external

initiatives, MEPI and BMENAI as conceived are only able to support ongoing reforms and to provide technical not normative know-how by means of specific instruction. They can only help promote democracy if the key protagonists in North Africa and the Near East have put democratization on their agendas and actively requested external assistance. Unless this occurs external promotion of democracy is doomed to failure.

Western promotion of democracy is a misnomer: at the moment the West is merely supporting reforms that may not fundamentally alter the basis of the system and change it. The bulk of Western states' cooperation with North Africa and the Near East has always focused on supporting economic reforms (developments in the market economy, privatization) and developmental policies (women's rights; fighting poverty), and in some countries education and training and administration and law. Reforms in the latter can lead to improvements in relations between the state and its citizens and the rule of law but may not lead to democratization as such.

3. Future prospects of external support of transformation

Numerous contributions to the debate on how to promote democracy in North Africa and the Near East recommend that external initiatives increase "pressure" on the region if Western states really want to achieve democratization and not just make do with modernization. The application of pressure as a way of promoting democracy has proven to be ineffective in other areas of the world, however. In comparison, more positive results have been gained by combining "pressure" with "incentives" that encourage cooperation when steps have already been taken towards democratization.

Since the initiation of a process towards democracy in the countries of North Africa and the Near East, for the reasons already given, is not to be expected in the mid-term, and because the cooperation of Western states has been concentrating on reform processes within the respective political systems, it would be sensible to express this in discourse about reform. This could contribute to building trust or, to put it another way, to reducing mistrust in the intentions of Western states. If discussion in Western states were to be freed of normative ideas about what can be achieved by external cooperation with North African and Near Eastern states, expectation in Western states would be more realistic. As a result, the cooperative projects conceived for North Africa and the Near East could more accurately reflect the conditions and reform capacities specific to each country. The approach of the *European Neighbourhood Policy*, which, on the one hand, offers greater incentives if the partner states undertake measures to conform to EU norms, and, on the other hand, prefers to cooperate with partners to set reform targets and steps within defined limits is in that sense a constructive external approach.