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Paradoxes and contradictions in EU democracy promotion in the Mediterranean: the limits of EU normative power

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Disciplinary debates about the challenge of liberal democracy in the Mediterranean suggest that the underlying constraints in the region, such as the nature of authoritarian regimes, economic underdevelopment, and the nature of rentier states, pose severe tests for external actors like the European Union (EU) seeking to encourage political reform. These debates have, however, failed to address the question of how and why liberal democracy per se achieved normative status. This article seeks to take this debate forward by examining the substance of the EU's efforts at democracy promotion in the Mediterranean. It does this first by explaining the EU's diagnosis of the Mediterranean 'condition', which highlights the logic behind the EU's prescription for democratization specifically in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. This sheds light, second, on the inherent paradoxes and contradictions in the EU's push for democracy in the MENA. The article concludes by arguing that EU actions limit any potential for normative impact in the MENA because of the lack of coherence in EU policy.

Keywords: democracy; international relations; normative power; EU; Middle East and North Africa (MENA); Mediterranean; stability; security; Middle East politics

Introduction

Since the 1990s, in the post-cold war context of the collapse of communist rule, the EU has been pursuing an almost messianic quest for the internationalization of liberal democracy abroad, as a key foreign policy instrument in its external relations. The European model of *liberal democracy* has been taken as a necessarily 'good' thing and its pursuit supposedly as a primary goal in and of itself. The often cited argument is that processes of *political liberalization and democratization* have served to bring about peaceful co-existence within Europe and that these successful processes can be emulated elsewhere. Although this policy has, to some

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extent, been successful in the case of former communist states in Central and Eastern Europe,¹ it has proven rather challenging in the case of the EU's efforts at exporting the model of liberal democracy to the Mediterranean.² Theorists of international democracy have asked the question: why is the introduction of liberal democracy in this region so difficult? The answers from both academics and policy-makers often highlight underlying constraints in the Mediterranean,³ including: the nature of authoritarian regimes⁴ and of rentier states,⁵ economic underdevelopment,⁶ and the alleged incompatibility of Islam with democracy (given that most MENA states are majority Muslim countries).

More broadly, scholars working within the international relations discipline, political theorists, comparative politics specialists, and historical sociologists have all attempted to theorize about international democracy and its promotion.⁷ These debates have, however, failed to answer the question of how and why liberal democracy has achieved normative status, a taken for granted state of affairs, a 'naturalism'. Some with a flair for pragmatism would argue that it is still the best extant system,⁸ and there is general consensus that liberal democracy is better than authoritarianism or dictatorship. Although it is understood that every political system has its weaknesses and that no functioning liberal democracy is perfect, it is important to question why liberal democracy is perceived as *the* model to be exported to undemocratic regions, including the MENA. In the case of the EU, while much of the literature on democracy promotion has looked at the EU's normative foundations for exporting democracy, little has been done by way of analysing what is 'normative' about the EU's democratization policy. Although there remains considerable concern about the apparent lack of a strong commitment to democracy in the Mediterranean, there is a lack of reflection, both in academic debates as well as in policy-making circles, as to what exactly the EU seeks to export to the region. An exception to this is Hazel Smith's edited collection,⁹ which offers a critical and dynamic research agenda for all those concerned with the problematic practices of those seeking to export democracy to other areas of the world.

This article seeks to take this work further by examining the EU's efforts at democracy promotion in the Mediterranean. The first section uncovers the EU's diagnosis of the Mediterranean's 'disease'. The following section looks at the logic behind the EU's prescription for democratization in the MENA. This leads to a further section on the paradoxes and contradictions inherent in the EU's push for democracy in the MENA. It concludes by arguing that *because* there is no coherence in EU policy, the goal of EU efforts at democracy promotion remains problematic. Thus, the EU limits itself in a policy area where it could potentially have normative impact.

The 1990s: EU diagnosis of the Mediterranean 'condition'

In November 1993, the Treaty on European Union (TEU) highlighted development and consolidation of 'democracy and the rule of law, and respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms' as an objective of the EU's Common

Foreign and Security Policy. It also stipulated that the EU's policy in the sphere of development cooperation must contribute to developing and consolidating democracy and the rule of law, and respect of human rights and fundamental freedoms. The EU draws on a wide range of instruments to promote democratization objectives in its external relations. Some of these are tools of traditional diplomacy and foreign policy, such as declarations, *demarches* (through diplomatic representations to third countries), as well as resolutions and interventions within the United Nations framework. In addition, the EU promotes human rights and democratization through various co-operation and assistance programmes it implements with third countries and through the political dialogues that it conducts with them. In doing so it uses a specific legal basis, a 'human rights clause', that is incorporated in nearly all EU agreements with third countries, as an *essential* element.

By the mid-1990s, the political situation in the MENA region was so unstable to European eyes that the EU sought to introduce a series of measures to address them. The principal 'threat' seemed to emanate from North Africa, where attacks by Islamic extremists threatened the stability of both Algeria and Egypt, with potential spillovers onto Europe. Conflict in these Mediterranean neighbours was thought potentially to challenge the fragile Middle East Peace Process (MEPP) involving Israel and the Palestinians. The situation became worse in Algeria between 1992 and late 1994. During this time, instability and concern over insecurity in the Maghreb, rooted in demographic and economic trends, worsened. The Algerian economy had suffered ever since oil prices started to drop in the mid-1980s, (although there was a rise in the mid-1990s). The country's situation was complicated by a swift growth in population, with 70% of the population aged under 30 years and with male unemployment for those between the ages of 18 and 24 rising to 70–75%.¹⁰ Following the victory by the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) in the first round of the 1992 elections, the army cancelled the second round and forced President Chadli Benjedid to resign.¹¹ The extreme horror of some of the state attacks on militants that followed, combined with the rhetoric of extremist militants, fed the worst stereotypes of the Islamic world in the West.¹² Terrorist attacks in France, where over 1.5 million people of Algerian descent lived, during the mid-1990s, fuelled concerns about a spread of the violence to Europe. The growing alarm about developments in the Mediterranean led the EU to sign (or at least initiate) a series of association agreements with Tunisia (1995), Israel (1995), Morocco (1996), Jordan (1997), the Palestinian Authority (Interim Agreement 1997), Egypt (2001), Algeria (2002), Lebanon (2002), and Syria (initialled 2004), and to launch the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP) in 1995 (giving Libya observer status). This drive stressed the need to safeguard Europe's southern sphere, a key source of inward migratory flows. Developments in the Mediterranean also affected other security concerns not only in terms of economic security (vital energy sources) but also in terms of ideological challenges from political Islam. Dialogue along three pillars (political, economic, and social) with the EU's Mediterranean partners was deemed crucial to provide for an exchange of information and discussion of subjects of common concern. This dialogue framed EU–Mediterranean relations in terms of principles, including respect for human rights

and democracy and the use of peaceful means for the settlement of disputes. Thus, through the EMP's institutionalized framework, the EU committed itself to democracy promotion and Mediterranean partners signed up to '[D]evelop the rule of law and democracy in their political systems'.¹³

The 1 May 2004 enlargement and further growth possibly to include Turkey in the future, prompted the EU to rethink its relations with neighbouring countries on both southern and eastern borders. The possibility of having borders with Syria, Iran, and Iraq led the EU to launch the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) in 2003. Now, fear of mass (in)migration, remains an important aspect of ongoing processes of socio-spatial bordering in and by the EU.¹⁴ On paper, the ENP's Action Plans make up the declared 'common' values and interests 'shared' between EU member states and their neighbours. The principles of democracy, human rights, rule of law, market economy, sustainable development, stability, security, prosperity, joint response to common challenges (border management, prosperity gaps, crime, environment, health, terrorism, etc.) have been further institutionalized through the 2003 (ENP) instrument.

Normative-power prescription for democratization in the MENA. What is the EU trying to do?

EU instruments exist for a serious engagement in political, economic, and social reform processes in the Mediterranean. However, the EU's democratization orthodoxy shows signs of flaws when unpacked and exposed to empirical enquiry. If by generally pursuing liberal democracy, the EU believes that it will lead to the expansion of zones of peace and thereby security and stability for all, why is it that, in the case of the Mediterranean, the situation is far from secure and stable? Rather than democratic progress, the region is more characterized by a *lack* of democratic governance, with increasing tensions between regimes and opposition forces; in effect, a lack of implementation of political reforms in the MENA.¹⁵

This article argues that, in seeking to claim the status of a 'normative power', the EU's democracy promotion efforts follow a (mistakenly) sequential logic. The 'normative' dimensions of this policy include the EU's favouring of some specific norms for export to other regions, including the MENA, such as democracy, rule of law, respect for human rights, liberty, and peace.¹⁶ In the EU's own words:

The EU doesn't believe in imposing reform, but we do want to do all we can to support *the region's own reforms* quite simply because we believe that democracy, good governance, rule of law, and gender equality are *essential for stability and prosperity*. This has always been an objective of the Barcelona process and it is the cornerstone of the Neighbourhood Policy.¹⁷

This telling quote highlights the fact that democracy in itself is not envisioned as an ultimate goal in EU eyes, but as one of the means to another objective – stability and prosperity. This EU narrative constructs a relational triad between

economic prosperity, stability, and peace. Arab regimes which have signed agreements with the EU (association agreements under the EMP and Action Plans under the ENP) also share an economic interest in such cooperation, knowing that the EU has thus far never used any sanctions against regimes which violate international principles. MENA governments have invested a lot of political capital into selective 'reform' (or 'managed democracy'). Although some would argue that a focus on economic development reflects a pragmatic realization of what is possible for the EU in the area of promoting reform in the Mediterranean, the general consensus among key societal actors in the Mediterranean region is that there is a problematic logic in the EU's thinking that the promotion of economic development will automatically lead to democratization.¹⁸ This article argues that crucial bases of democratization – including, the rule of law and well-functioning states – are not taken seriously by EU actors. Instead, as regional commentators argue, these core attributes should be in place *before* a society seeks to embark on a politically transformative process.

In Egypt, for example, President Hosni Mubarak's authoritarian rule is being challenged by a wide spectrum of discontented segments of Egyptian society, including the Egyptian Movement for Change, known as 'Kifaya' (Enough) which emerged in August 2004, accompanied by a consolidated National Rally for Democratic Transition, which has given itself the task of drafting a new constitution, and the Muslim Brotherhood (MB), the main and oldest Islamist opposition movement, which had significant successes in Egypt's elections late in 2005. However, because of Mubarak's authoritarian rule, Egypt still suffers from a lack of genuine democratization that impedes development of the rule of law. The problem is exacerbated by external actors such as the government of the USA and the EU which, given their priorities for 'stability' and counter-terrorism cooperation, tread very carefully in their relations with Mubarak. Egypt is closely watched by the international community not least in terms of political, economic, and cultural developments. Egypt has a long-standing regional reputation as the 'mother' of the MENA region. Moreover, it is the coordinator of the Arab group in the EMP as well as a venue of choice for a succession of important Euro-Mediterranean events – including at the highest level. This Mashrek country is also the home of the Euro-Med Anna Lindh Foundation for dialogue and is known for its mediating role in the MEPP. It also exerts cultural influence on the rest of the region. The Mubarak government's decision to allow multi-candidate elections in 2005 was widely interpreted as the regime's means of simply pre-empting pressure for meaningful political liberalization: nominations to stand against Mubarak were still controlled by the National Democratic Party, while the main opposition group, the MB, was still denied official recognition. In fact, during the early months of 2005, nearly 2,000 supporters of the MB were arrested and Kifaya-led demonstrations were strictly controlled. Despite some official EU complaints, there was no serious pressure to change the Mubarak government's familiar tactics of manipulation and voter intimidation. There seems to be a shared understanding among EU member states that if they

push Arab-Mediterranean regimes, such as that of Mubarak, too hard on political reform issues (respect for human rights, rule of law, etc.) then their likely replacements (in Egypt, potentially the MB if the latter were to have official recognition) might seriously challenge the status quo of EU–MENA cooperation on counter-terrorism strategies and ‘stability and peace’ policies.¹⁹

When, in January 2008, the European Parliament (EP) issued a critical resolution on the situation of human rights in Egypt, the Egyptian government was quick to respond that the EP was interfering in Egypt’s domestic affairs.²⁰ In spite of vowing not to yield to Egyptian pressure, just a few weeks later, EU lawmakers went ahead and signed a Memorandum of Understanding agreement regarding the National Indicative Programme (NIP, 2007–2010) with Egypt.²¹ This ‘assistance’ package totals €558 million.²² In sum, it appears that there is a clear tension between the EU’s stated objective of promoting democracy in MENA, on the one hand, and ensuring ‘security’ (economic security in terms of oil and gas supplies; political security in terms of relations with authoritarian regimes rather than Islamist actors, etc.), on the other.

This brings us to the related issue of the role of a vibrant civil society which is crucial for a well-functioning democratic state. Although the EMP highlighted the role of civil society within the third chapter, and given that the Barcelona Declaration was adopted *unanimously* by all Euro-Mediterranean partners, there was much difference in opinion on how to put such a civil society dialogue into practice. On the one hand, northern EU member states such as Germany, Sweden, and Denmark wished to encourage relatively free and self-sustained interaction between a variety of civil society actors across the Mediterranean. On the other, southern EU governments, such as Spain and France, insisted that it was necessary to try to control civil society development in MENA, due to fears of terrorist groups and other unsuitable political opposition. Using the EU’s own language on ‘countering terrorism threats’, North African and Middle Eastern governments managed to get southern EU member states on their side, culminating in a fudged ‘compromise’ for a very ‘timid and gradual’ opening for growing civil liberties over an unspecified period of time. The EU seemed happy to oblige in such contexts as when, in 2003, the Commission withdrew funding that had already been approved for civil society projects in Egypt, at the insistence of the country’s authorities that some of the actors involved in these projects were linked to Islamic terrorism.²³ As Menon argues, if the EU will not admit how its member states’ priorities influence its external policies, then at least there should be a clear incentive for these actors to decide and clearly state which objectives they prefer to prioritize.²⁴ This is another key paradox in EU democracy promotion, which highlights the limits of what the EU can actually do when national (member states’) politics supersede those of the European political community. This often leads to grandiose political declarations, initiatives, and statements made by individual, or a group of, leaders from the ‘core’ of the EU’s member states which commit the EU to promises it actually cannot keep. This was the case, for example, when in November 2006 Spain, France, and Italy unveiled a

Middle East peace plan amid frustration over developments between Israelis and Palestinians.²⁵

So, although EU actors declare that the EU pursues democratization in the MENA region, there is no coherent EU policy driven by a unified consensus on the strategy. As one Commission official from the European Commission delegation in Rabat, Morocco put it:

When it comes to supporting newly arising, reform agents in this region, we struggle to respond in a proactive and flexible manner because calls for proposals and selection procedures of democracy related projects are decided in Brussels. [In turn] . . . local agents for change complain about the complexity of application procedures, long lead times, onerous financial management and reporting requirements, without the necessary training for local actors to fit the bill.²⁶

The EU's so-called democratization agenda for the MENA region is flawed on at least two counts: its ultimate objective not being *clearly* and *explicitly* democracy in itself (that is, rather than having political transformation in the MENA as the core objective of EU policy, there is most concern with stability and security goals) and the timing of the democratization efforts. If the situation in Mediterranean societies is not acceptable to the EU and if it thereby seeks to order, modify, improve, and rearrange the current state of affairs in the region, then it should seriously reflect upon what it has been doing all along. There is a plethora of EU policy instruments supposedly aimed at 'democracy promotion in the MENA'. These include individual EU member states' initiatives,²⁷ and, at the EU level, the 1995 EMP with its association agreements, the 2003 strategy paper on the Arab world,²⁸ the ENP with its reform-oriented 'action plans', and the 2005 European Initiative on Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR). However, the ultimate objective of these initiatives is securing the EU's own concerns about (in)migration, security, and stability rather than 'transformation' in the MENA.²⁹

In order to examine further this crucial aspect of EU democratization policy in the Mediterranean, the following section seeks to draw out further key paradoxes and contradictions inherent in this aspect of the EU's external relations.

Further paradoxes and contradictions inherent in EU efforts at democracy promotion in the MENA region

Until at least January 2006, the EU's understanding of 'democracy' seemed to follow, on the one hand, the view of comparative politics specialists such as Huntington, Pridham and Vanhanen, Remmer, Schmitter, and Whitehead (who argue that democracy is electorally based with some allowances for freedoms of the press and of association)³⁰ and on the other hand, the position of modernization theorists including Boix and Stokes, Lipset et al., and Przeworski and Limongi (who stipulate that the prevalence of economic inequality requires a push for economic prosperity which will lead to progress, stability, and eventually

peace and democratization).³¹ EU actors also seem to be influenced by the democratic peace proposition that liberal democratic states are inherently unlikely to go to war with each other and that, due to the transnational connections between domestic, political, and economic structures and international politics in a globalized world, the EU should encourage democracy in order to secure, stable orders in and around its borders.³² Some analysts also consider the EU's pursuit of exporting its model of liberal democracy for stability as a realist conceptualization of stability, security, and order. We can add to this the constructivist argument that norms constitute EU action: the EU is embedded in social rules and conventions (treaties) that constitute its identification processes and which can give reasons for the ideas that motivate EU actors. But all these interpretations of liberal democracy were seriously challenged following the Palestinian elections of January 2006. In this case, a nation in its fortieth year under military occupation produced a fair, free, and transparent process, which was confirmed as such by the EU's own mission. The organization, however, reacted by freezing direct aid to the Palestinian Authority, since the elected Hamas was on the EU's black list of outlawed terrorist organizations.³³

The EU is the biggest aid donor to the Palestinian territories. However, its decision to freeze funds to the Hamas-led administration was circumvented through the setting up of a 'temporary' financial mechanism, which provides aid to public institutions, such as hospitals and the poorest inhabitants, while seeking to evade control by Hamas officials. During 2006, the sum amounted to €700m, which was €200m more than was provided before the crisis. Officials expect this system to remain in place until the conditions of both the EU and the wider international community are met, that is until the Hamas group moves more 'significantly' towards reconciliation with Israel.³⁴ Tanya Reinhart summed up this series of events (as regards the embargo imposed on the Palestinians since the election of a Hamas government) in this way: 'Europe chose not to force Israel to respect its obligations under international law.'³⁵

This action was also interpreted by most Palestinians and other observers in the MENA as a sign of the EU ignoring the democratic expression of the Palestinian people (even though it had made democracy one of the conditions for its aid) and depriving many Palestinians of their livelihood: in effect a contradiction – although Hamas had a legal mandate to govern through a fair, free, and transparent vote, it is considered as a terrorist organization by the EU and US.³⁶ So, paradoxically, while the democratically elected, Islamist Hamas government in Palestine has been boycotted by the EU, the authoritarian Mubarak-government in Egypt receives continued support – arguably for the sake of security – in spite of obvious, fundamental, democratic shortcomings in Egypt. As Youngs points out, the conditions imposed on Hamas have nothing to do with the standards of democratic governance or issues of civil rights within Palestinian territories, issues of considerable concern to many Palestinians.³⁷ Therefore, although Palestinians appeared to take their first steps toward a process of democratization, the EU's reactions to the electoral victory by Hamas stand in stark contrast to EU

actors' self-construction of the EU as a normative power in the region and its associated reform agenda for the Middle East.³⁸ At the same time, the EU is strengthening the perception that there is a permanent double reasoning when it comes to reform and democratization in the Middle East. So, while full democratization requires both competitiveness and inclusion, the success of certain (Islamist) parties does not seem to feature on the EU's democratization radar.³⁹ The EU as an international backer of reform in the MENA region nevertheless has an astonishingly short-term focus, a highly personalized view of the process, and a very instrumental view of reform, leading to a key paradox in the context of Palestine: the EU harshly turned against the achievements of the Palestinian reform movement when it brought unexpected results!⁴⁰ As one interviewee put it: 'The EU likes the ideal of democracy but they do not like its result'.⁴¹ From the Israeli perspective, the fact that Israel, albeit via a third party, has engaged with Hamas over a ceasefire, however imperfect, is tacit recognition by the Israeli government that Hamas does represent a legitimate expression of a substantial percentage of the Palestinian people.⁴²

Moreover, this action was interpreted by most Palestinians as the EU not being prepared to put equal pressure on Israel to recognize United Nations resolutions and Palestinian rights (as well as pressure on Hamas to renounce violence, recognize Israel, and accept all previous agreements between Israel and the Palestinian Authority). Added to this is an EU path dependency approach towards Israel: continued support for Israel even though this becomes a major burden at times.⁴³ At the June 2008 EU–Israel Association Council meeting in Luxembourg, the EU announced its decision to upgrade its political and economic relations with Israel. Slovenia's Foreign Minister Dimitrij Rupel, whose country was then holding the rotating EU presidency, and who chaired the EU–Israel Association Council meeting, the body overseeing the relationship, stated that the EU and Israel are 'elevating' their relations to a new level of 'more intense, more fruitful, more influential cooperation'. Israel has now been granted the highest level of relations available to a non-member state.⁴⁴ Thus, EU–Israeli relations continue to improve despite increasing facts on the ground which damage peace talks with the Palestinians, such as, new housing units built in Israeli settlements on occupied Palestinian land.⁴⁵

Liberal democratic theory reminds us of the moral significance of the aspirations of human beings for 'life, liberty and property'. The Palestinians' democratic right to live in an independent country remains absent from the EU's 'democratization' efforts – apart from some repetitive statements about the EU's aim at a Palestinian state in the context of the MEPP.⁴⁶

However, the occupation itself is hardly ever described (at least officially) as a violation of democratic and human rights, despite Israeli schemes to create facts on the ground as mentioned above (the 'partition wall', settlements, checkpoints, curfews, de-linkage of the economies of Israel and Palestine, separate road systems set up by Israel) and to prevent the emergence of a Palestinian state.⁴⁷ These Israeli measures, in turn, are profoundly in contradiction to the EMP

principles which aim to foster links at a political, social, economic, and cultural level between Mediterranean signatories to the Barcelona declaration. Thus, if, since the end of the cold war, the EU has sought to inscribe a normative value to its liberal democracy agenda globally as a 'good thing', it needs to abide more convincingly to the very same international norms that it seeks to export elsewhere in the world.

It is, therefore, a further contradiction to have policies like the EMP, which omit direct reference to the MEPP (although EMP fora do facilitate regional dialogue and bring all the partners together)⁴⁸ and through which the EU is supposed to encourage political reform in the region.⁴⁹

This article contends that meaningful political reform in MENA requires a political resolution of the Middle East conflict. As Brown points out, Palestinian activists have, from an early date, insisted that their state be born reformed, avoiding authoritarian features common to Arab regimes in the Middle East.⁵⁰ Thus, if Palestinians are freed from occupation, if they establish their own sovereign state, and if democratization ensues in Palestine, there would likely be more pressure for neighbouring countries to reform politically.⁵¹ Privately, Council officials endorse this analysis:

Those with responsibility for the Middle East and North Africa (including myself) need to put forward a more persuasive argument in favour of focusing on the root issues of democratization including peacemaking. We have missed many windows of opportunity to negotiate a comprehensive peace in the Middle East. If such negotiations are successful, the outcome would have a profound effect on the whole region. Authoritarian regimes in the Arab-Mediterranean parts would no longer be able to use the excuse of the conflict with Israel to delay political and economic reforms in their respective countries ... But, there are some EU member states which fear the destabilizing impact that pressure for political reform would generate in such traditional and repressive societies. Pushing hard for political change might work against vital EU member states' interests ... Therefore the EU cannot exert significant pressure for domestic change in these Mediterranean countries.⁵²

This brings us to yet another paradox in the EU's democratization agenda for the Mediterranean.

There appears to be an inherent tendency in EU efforts to universalize from the particular circumstances of Western Europe and the ensuing logic is that what worked for Europe will surely work for the MENA region, as it did for the Central and Eastern European countries.⁵³ Thus the EU envisions something that would do to the Mediterranean what Monnet and Schuman did to Europe in the 1950s: a bold initiative that transforms a war-torn zone into a peaceful, democratic, secure and stable space.

The underlying assumption in EU democracy promotion in the MENA, namely that a set of experiences peculiar to Western and Central and Eastern Europe is universal, needs further examination. The experience of Western Europe after the Second World War and of the Central and Eastern European

countries after communism contrasts with the experiences of Mediterranean countries, colonized by European powers. Post-war, the logic of economic development, linked to peaceful relations and liberal democracy and stability, worked to some extent for western Europe. In addition, it was logical that liberal democracy would follow communism in much of Central and East of Europe. For the MENA, we need to inquire into the nature of regional states, as well as the political legacy from former colonial powers. This appears in many cases to hinder democratic aspirations of those living in the region. Europe's perspective of democracy draws from (European), liberal philosophy and therefore a specific set of cultural and historical dynamics.

Conclusion

The supposedly normative, long-running EU push for democracy in the MENA is at best a very slow work in progress, at worst a regression. Its slow advance is in part due to inherent paradoxes and contradictions in the making of a policy with no clear, defined vision. The stubborn position of some of the core EU member states remains that they have other prioritized interests – security and economic – such that cooperation with authoritarian regimes on antiterrorism enforcement actions and ensuring secure access to oil prevail. Moreover, EU member states remain wary of unpredictable and possibly rapid, political change driven by non-state actors in the region because EU member states are risk averse.⁵⁴ Political transformation anywhere, but particularly in the MENA, is a high-risk strategy for external actors. Norway, a non-EU European state, was among the first few external actors to seek engagement with the Hamas leader (and prime minister until the events in Gaza of June 2007) Ismail Haniyeh. Raymond Johansen, Norway's deputy foreign minister, called on other governments to follow suit. Most European countries refuse officially to claim that they are engaging with the political leadership of Hamas.⁵⁵ In such a limited vision of democratic politics, important forms of social exclusion are overlooked and the careful analysis and engagement with the conditions of possibility of democracy are placed to one side.⁵⁶ Politics is about grasping such possibilities and the international community needs to acknowledge the lost opportunity which was momentarily open for positive steps towards democratic transformation in the Palestinian territories (the formation of a Palestinian unity government was no mean diplomatic achievement. Palestinian unity could have offered a potent source of international legitimacy).⁵⁷

This article has thus attempted to highlight some of these paradoxes and contradictions in EU efforts at democracy promotion in the Mediterranean. In doing so, it focused on the agents that the EU deals with (namely government elites and co-opted non-governmental organizations), the structures and instruments at its disposal (economic incentives, aid funding and (lack of) political conditionality) as well as the process the EU follows along the path to stability rather than democracy in the MENA (sequential rather than gradual). This analysis opens up the space for further research on the security/stability-economic

development/prosperity-democracy-peace nexus which may help analysts and policy-makers better understand the European relational narrative: about how the EU aims to promote pluralism in its southern neighbourhood and how these policies are perceived in the region – inter alia against the background of European colonialism in the Middle East and North Africa in parts of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Moreover, because overall EU policies include significant work, interests, and blockages at the member state level, coherence in EU democracy promotion efforts in the Middle East is made more complicated. Europeans thus opt to look at the ‘problem’ in the MENA region as a set of technical issues and tend to go for political positions that skew the intended outcome towards Western interests and that will pursue a course of least resistance from the EU’s member states. This norm is a legacy of European experience of the Western nation state.⁵⁸

If contemporary Southern expressions are understood as social struggles, then we may need to probe further the moral universalism of international projects of democratization in the Mediterranean/Middle East and North African region. Such an insight is of major relevance within the disciplinary confines in which this article is located, and also amongst a wider European/Middle Eastern Studies audience.

In recent years, there has been a hegemonic discourse of the liberal democratic order. Even Islamist movements have started to position themselves in a way which does not contradict this order of things. As Youngs suggests: ‘Even in Saudi Arabia some detect[ed] the emergence of more reformist Salafi currents. Such trends [are being] interpreted as part of Islamists’ “return to modernism”.’⁵⁹

Democratic accountability in the MENA region can only be assured as long as the general public is included and those that represent the people respond to their rights. As Alastair Cooke, former special Middle East adviser to the European Union’s Foreign Policy Chief, Javier Solana, and adviser to the International Quartet, noted about his ‘town hall meetings’ (in the Palestinian Occupied Territories) initiative:

It was like holding a sort of *shura* – people would come and make their points . . . Usually there was little we could do to resolve the issues, but it was important to be there and to listen to the problems, actual problems and realities faced on the ground.⁶⁰

For the EU, this requires political drive and a well thought-out and long-term approach to enhancing democratic accountability. By focusing primarily on external democracy promotion, the impression is created that democracy is a political concept external to the Mediterranean region. However, given the significant number of actors advocating democracy from within the Arab world (albeit for diverse reasons), such a focus may be perceived as ignoring such internal dynamics, thereby invoking a false image of an unbridgeable cultural rift

between the European and the MENA sides in which democracy is framed as a Western concept. As Sadiki notes:

The litmus test is the extent to which difference is tolerated, singularity and fixity of power opposed, and a fluid space of contingency, allowing for the renewal and opening up new possibilities of being, doing and thinking, is permitted.⁶¹

Thus, we need further conceptual reflection on the linkage and contradictions between domestic and external democracy promotion policies (actors, mechanisms, etc.). From the EU's side, this calls for more careful observation and monitoring procedures of its activities which pertain to address political reform in the MENA, a tougher line, through conditionality, on authoritarian regimes and a careful analysis of the integrity of the civil society actors it engages with. If the EU is to measure up to its image as a 'force for good', its agents need to address the constant pressure they feel to side-step 'difficult' issues in the interest of achieving a political 'success'.⁶²

A broadened view of EU democracy promotion in the Mediterranean must address the core processes of political contestation and open up to many forms of activities triggered within civil society, especially by regional younger generations. The contemporary reality of Mediterranean societies is one where a devolution of the public sphere is gradually developing and in which political debates are being expressed in novel ways – particularly through spontaneous processes of communication including weblogs or 'blogging' and other internet facilities such as Facebook.⁶³ These subsystems within MENA political systems require a more coherent, consistent, and communicative focus by the EU as they play a crucial role in enhancing any democratic openings by providing ongoing sources of resistance to the always-contestable, coercive power of the regimes in the region. The meaning of democracy will remain a contested field, but what we observe in the MENA regional space today leads us at least to start by locating the essence of 'the political' in human agency. This is what the empirical articles in this special issue highlight, in particular, by focusing on the agency of Islamist movements in the MENA and their role in the transformation processes across this region. Thus, the focus here is inverted and contributors look from the inside-out, rather than from the outside-in: that is, rather than merely looking from the outside at how democracy promotion policy shapes 'reform' in authoritarian regimes or how regimes and opposition are induced toward a liberal democratic model, we look at the agents of change themselves *within* MENA, particularly at how they induce external actors to view and react to their situation as a viable exception to their preferred practices.

Notes

1. Schimmelfenning and Sedelmeier, *The Europeanization of Central and Eastern Europe*; Vachudova, *Europe Undivided*.
2. Baracani, 'From the EMP to the ENP'; Emerson et al., *Democratisation in the European Neighbourhood*; Gillespie and Youngs, *European Union and Democracy*

Promotion; Kelley, 'New Wine in Old Wineskins'; Stetter, 'Democratization without Democracy?'; Tocci, 'Does the EU Promote Democracy in Palestine?'; Youngs, *European Union and the Promotion of Democracy*.

3. The term 'Mediterranean region' traditionally signifies the countries around the Mediterranean Sea, including southern Europe (Malta, Cyprus, and at least parts of Turkey), the Arab states of North Africa (or the Maghreb, that is Algeria, Libya, Morocco, Tunisia, and Mauritania, the latter referred to as a marginal state) and the Levant (or Mashrek, or Middle Eastern countries of Egypt, Israel, the Occupied Palestinian Territories, Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria). However, standard terminology – for example, of European Union policy – tends to separate what it refers to as the 'Mediterranean' countries from the rest of the Middle East, mainly the Arabian peninsula and the Gulf. More recently, however, the EU has acknowledged that it cannot have an approach to the Mediterranean littoral countries in isolation from their strategic links with the Middle East. Yet, it remains unclear how broadly the 'Mediterranean' and 'Middle East' regions can be defined, depending on context and often policy area. Although I find such debates about terminology fascinating in terms of discursive constructions, for the purposes of this article I take the Mediterranean region to refer to the Middle East and North African (MENA) countries. For further definitional discussions on the Mediterranean see Pace, *The Politics of Regional Identity*.
4. Ibrahim, *Egypt, Islam and Democracy*.
5. Commission of the European Communities, *Report on the Implementation*.
6. Pool, 'The Links Between Economic and Political Liberalization'.
7. Diamond, Linz, and Lipset, *Democracy in Developing Countries*; Grugel, *Democracy without Borders*; Pridham, *Encouraging Democracy*; Pridham, *Designing Democracy*; Rueschemeyer, Stephens and Stephens, *Capitalist Development and Democracy*; Schmitz, *Transnational Mobilization and Domestic Regime Change*.
8. See for example Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope*.
9. Smith, *Democracy and International Relations*.
10. Quoted in Moss, 'Europe, the Mediterranean and the Middle East'.
11. Yacoubian, *Algeria's Struggle for Democracy*.
12. While the army began its crackdown on Islamic groups, scholars, journalists, and commentators were debating whether the foreseeable victory of FIS justified the army's annulment of the elections and its subsequent coup. See Malmvig, *State Sovereignty and Intervention*.
13. Euro-Mediterranean Conference, *Barcelona Declaration*.
14. Van Houtum and Pijpers, 'The European Community as a Gated Community'.
15. National Endowment for Democracy, 'Backsliding on Reforms in the Middle East'. According to Freedom House scores, the overall level of freedom in the Middle East has declined since the 1970s. See *Freedom in the World 2008*. Specific country reports may be found at: <http://www.freedomhouse.org/template.cfm?page=363&year=2008>. For a detailed account of how the limits to political opening in the MENA have become so apparent see Youngs, *Europe and the Middle East*, 12–18.
16. On a further detailed examination of the 'normative dimensions' of this EU policy towards MENA, see the article by Brieg Tomos Powel in this issue. See also Manners, 'Normative Power Europe' and 'Normative Power Europe reconsidered'; Lucarelli and Manners, *Values and Principles*; Meyer and Vogt, *A Responsible Europe?* amongst others. In Manners' elucidation of the EU's normative power, he spells out how the EU seeks to shape conceptions of the 'normal' which are linked to constitutionalized values and which are bound by international institutions. On this see Diez and Pace, 'Normative Power Europe and Conflict Transformation'.
17. Ferrero-Waldner, 'The Middle East in the EU's External Relations'. Emphasis added.

18. Author's interviews with, among others, Larabi Jaidi (President of the Abderrahim Bouabid Foundation) in Rabat, Morocco, 2004; Andreas Radtke (Council of the European Union), in Brussels, January 2005; Mahdi F. Abdul Hadi (Head of PASSIA), Khalil Shikaki (PSR, Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research), George Giacaman (Palestinian Institute for the Study of Democracy), and Nasr El-Din Sha'r in the West Bank; Basem Naim (Ministry of Health) and Ahmed Yousef (Office of the Prime Minister) in Gaza, September 2007; and Bahgat Korany (American University, Cairo), Daa Rashwan, Amr El Shobky, and Mohamed Kadry Said (Al Ahram Center) in Cairo, March 2008. See also International Crisis Group, *Reforming Egypt and Egypt's Muslim Brothers* as well as *Ruling Palestine I: Gaza Under Hamas*.
19. Youngs, *Europe and the Middle East*.
20. Agence France Presse, *EU Lawmakers*. On the specific case of Egypt, see the articles by Sarah Wolff and Thomas Demmelhuber in this issue.
21. European Parliament, *Resolution of 17 January*. See also Amnesty International, 'EU-Egypt Association Council Meeting'.
22. Fourth Meeting of the EU-Egypt Association Council.
23. Johansson-Nougés, 'Civil Society in Euro-Mediterranean Relations', 4, 8.
24. Menon, *Europe*.
25. EUobserver, 'EU Trio Takes London By Surprise'.
26. Author's interview, European Commission delegation, Rabat, Morocco 2002 and author's confidential telephone interview with a European Commission official, DG Development, 19 March 2007. See also University of Liverpool, Report on 'The EU and Civil Society'.
27. These include the British government's Arab reform strategy, Denmark's Wider Middle East Initiative for democratic reform programmes, Sweden's governance allocation into its Middle East and North Africa programme, Spain's new strategy for democracy assistance projects, France's enhanced democracy assistance scheme, and reform work by German political party foundations in the Arab world.
28. Commission of the European Communities, *Strengthening the EU's Relations with the Arab World*.
29. See also European Communities, *The European Union: Furthering Human Rights*.
30. See, for example, Huntington, *The Third Wave*; Pridham and Vanhanen, *Democratization in Eastern Europe*; Pridham, *Designing Democracy*; Pridham and Gallagher, *Experimenting with Democracy*; Pridham, *The Dynamics of Democratisation*; Remmer, 'New Theoretical Perspectives on Democratization'; Schmitter, 'The Influence of the International Context upon the Choice of National Institutions and Policies in Neo-Democracies'; and Whitehead, *The International Dimensions of Democratization*.
31. Interviews with officials from the Commission, Council and European Parliament, held by the author in Brussels, January 2004, February 2005, and April 2008. See, for example, Boix and Stokes, 'Endogenous Democratization'; Lipset, Kyoung-Ryung, and Torres, 'A Comparative Analysis'; Przeworski and Limongi, 'Modernization: Theories and Facts'.
32. Interviews with officials from the Commission, Council, and European Parliament, held by the author in Brussels, January 2004, February 2005, and April 2008.
33. Hamas had also received much international condemnation for using suicide attacks to pursue its resistance strategy. In the eyes of the EU, Hamas challenges the notion of a democratic political party.
34. Kubosova, 'EU Moves to Resume Talks With Palestinians'.
35. Brittain, 'Obituary. Tanya Reinhart', 40.
36. Interviews held by the author in the West Bank and Gaza, September 2007 and in Cairo, March 2008.

37. Youngs, 'The European Union and Palestine'.
38. Pace, 'The Construction of EU Normative Power'.
39. Although Hamas was not vilified for being Islamist but for being a 'terrorist organization' – due to the movement's use of 'suicide bombings' and rockets fired into northern Israel – which would not accept the right of Israel to exist. When asked specifically about this latter point, Hamas officials came back with the question: which borders of Israel would the international community like us to recognize? Interviews held by the author in Gaza and Nablus, September 2007.
40. Brown, *Requiem For Palestinian Reform*.
41. Author's interview, Ramallah, 4 September 2007.
42. I thank Clive Jones for our discussion on this issue. See McCarthy, 'Israel and Hamas Agree Ceasefire'.
43. Interviews conducted by the author in the West Bank and Gaza, September 2007.
44. Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 'The European Union Upgrades Its Relations With Israel'.
45. Pace, 'Notions of Europe'.
46. See http://ec.europa.eu/comm/external_relations/mepp/index.htm
47. Bennis, 'Democratising the Unborn State', 172.
48. Euro-Mediterranean Conference, *Barcelona Declaration*.
49. Ibid.
50. Brown, 'Requiem for Palestinian Reform'.
51. Interviews held by the author in the West Bank and Gaza, September 2007 and in Cairo, March 2008.
52. Author's interviews, Council of the European Union, Brussels, February 2005 and April 2008.
53. Author's telephone interview with a European Commission official, DG Development (Brussels: AIDCO F.5, Relations with civil society and non state actors), 19 March 2007.
54. Author's interview, Council of the European Union, Brussels, January 2004.
55. While many Western officials are against official talks with Hamas, it is a fact that EU and Western diplomats have been privately talking with representatives from the movement. Author's confidential interviews in Gaza and Nablus, September 2007. At time of writing, there appears to be a political realization that Hamas must be included in any Middle East peace talks. Richard Viets, a former US diplomat and politician, has stated that Washington has to deal with Hamas. He claimed that the siege on Gaza has been unsuccessful and has actually served in strengthening Hamas. The former British cabinet minister, Peter Hain, has called on Britain to open talks with Hamas. France has also admitted having contacts with Hamas. See 'Ex-Diplomat Says US Should Engage with Hamas', <http://www.middle-east-online.com/english/?id=26603>; Hain, 'We Must Talk to the Enemy', and Erlanger, 'France Admits Contacts with Hamas'. Such announcements may be pointing towards more pragmatic, diplomatic tactics from all sides.
56. Hutchings, 'Modelling Democracy', 50.
57. Leader, 'Palestine. Talking to Hamas', 36.
58. Cooke, 'Bottom-up Peace-building in the Occupied Territories'.
59. Youngs, *Europe and the Middle East*, 16. See also International Crisis Group, *Islamism in North Africa I*.
60. Cooke, 'Bottom-up Peace-building in the Occupied Territories'.
61. Sadiki, *The Search for Arab Democracy*, 72.
62. Author's interview, Council of the European Union, January 2004.
63. Benhabib, *Democracy and Difference*, 74. For more on such new sites of political contestation in Egypt see the contribution by Thomas Demmelhuber in this issue.

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