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DEMOCRACY AND THE EMP: EUROPEAN AND ARAB PERSPECTIVES



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Contents

The EU and Democracy

Democracy Debates in the Mediterranean Partners

Developing the Democracy Agenda

Imposing European Values?

References

The issue of democracy has gradually assumed a more prominent place within the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP). European policies aimed at encouraging political liberalisation in Arab states have been developed incrementally; processes of limited political reform have occurred in some southern Mediterranean states; and links between political repression and terrorism have been routinely asserted since September 11, 2001. In this light, it is instructive to examine European and Arab perspectives on democracy, and to explore the consequences of such understandings for the evolution of the political volet of the EMP.

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The EU and Democracy

Crucial to understanding the European focus on democracy is the widely held view that a common ideational orientation has increasingly pervaded EU international policies. Nearly all work on CFSP now points to the identity-driven dynamics evident in Europe's foreign policy profile. The commitment to encourage democratic reforms in third countries is, in this sense, commonly seen as reflecting a deeply embedded understanding of the values that underpin the whole *raison d'être* of the EU. As a body predicated on the furtherance and protection of democratic norms through collective security partnership, the EU is habitually presented as a normative model whose essential identity is entwined with democratic and liberal conceptions of individual human rights. Hence, many analysts see the commitment to democracy and human rights promotion as transcending rationalist calculation and resting on the development of European self-identity. The internal legitimacy of the EU and the external support for democratic development are often presented as deeply and mutually reinforcing, in effect as two sides of the same coin. This logic was generally held to have been pre-eminent in the support of the EU for democratic consolidation in Central and Eastern Europe during the 1990s, and has more recently been evoked to explain European intervention in Kosovo and post-conflict initiatives across the Balkans. The use of ESDP to reinforce the pursuit of democracy and human rights has also been interpreted as an effort to strengthen 'European' legitimacy and identity. Crucially, the significant role played by European NGO networks in generating this normative identity is seen as lending a unique civil society orientation to understandings of democracy building. In light of this, it remains important for southern Mediterranean states more fully to appreciate how the concept of democracy-based cross-border cooperation and partnership is woven deeply into the self-image of the EU. More substantively, the experience of European integration has bred an association between democracy and conflict mitigation. From the perspective of the EU, democracy is often seen as synonymous with moderation and regional cooperation. This more instrumental logic has also informed the stated desire to encourage democratisation in the southern Mediterranean states. In the wake of the September 11, 2001 attacks democracy has been routinely presented as crucial to attacking the roots of terrorism and anti-Western feeling in the Arab world – this element was present beforehand 9/11 but has become more prominent during the last two years. In this sense, democracy in European eyes has urgency as a means of re-establishing the legitimacy and credibility of governance within Arab societies. Nowhere has this been clearer than in the Palestinian Territories, giving impulse to EU support for institutional reform of the Palestinian Authority. Even in Algeria, where European states since the early 1990s have been widely accused of actively discouraging democratisation, EU and national (even French) statements have come more strongly to insist that better quality democratic process must form part of any sustainable solution to the country's conflict – while many would doubt the sincerity of such claims, the shift in discourse does at least reflect a far stronger presentation than hitherto of

democracy as part of the 'conflict resolution tool box' of the EU. European approaches to democracy are still subject to double standards in practice, while simultaneously more insistent on the general strategic pertinence of political reform in developing states.

In the European experience, democratisation was additionally perceived as being integrally interlinked with economic modernisation. Central to EU approaches is the understanding that political change both flows most naturally from underlying economic modernisation and is necessary to sustain market-based development. It is held that the paucity of market reforms in the southern Mediterranean states is inextricably linked to autocratic elites' ability to retain power. Arab governments' caution in moving towards the Euro-Mediterranean free trade area has been seen as testament to this link, in so far as regimes are held to fear spill over from economic to political liberalisation. To the extent that southern Mediterranean governments have so far commonly pursued market reform through greater use of executive fiat, it might be asked how applicable to the Middle East is the EU vision of democracy flowing smoothly and incrementally from processes of economic change.

European policy has in practice sought to enhance 'democratic capacity' and widen support for democratic values in an incremental fashion. This accounts for the increasing prominence of the social-cultural sphere of EMP activity and its – albeit still insufficient – linkage to the democracy promotion agenda. The declared aim has been to use the instruments of soft power and peer pressure to generate a positive desire for political change within Mediterranean societies. In this sense, European approaches have conceived of democracy as a process built from the bottom up, supposedly with relevance to developmental goals.

The democracy clauses in EMP association agreements have not been invoked to trigger a suspension of cooperation with any Mediterranean partners, but have instead been used to ratchet-up low-level pressure on select human rights cases. Democracy assistance has increased, in terms of both the quantity and range of political aid initiatives, but European donors have not particularly favoured civil society actors working directly for democratic reform. Rather, democracy funding has been indirect, with large shares of political aid budgets supporting, for example, employment organisations, education about economic and social rights and projects on migrants' rights. France, the largest single donor, has favoured cultural projects under its human rights budgets, rather than directly political approaches. The provision under the European Initiative for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR) permitting the Commission to fund projects opposed by recipient governments has not in practice been used to any notable effect. No overt coercive conditionality has been applied to ensure that NGOs and other civil society bodies receiving EU funds are given fuller autonomy from the state in the management of their European-backed projects.

While a degree of genuine European commonality has taken shape, some variation in conceptual approach remains between member states. Nordic states strongly favour the bottom-up developmental route to increased

accountability; German and Dutch approaches focus strongly on the role of NGOs working on social and gender rights; the UK is still the state that most strongly prioritises the notion of democracy being almost an adjunct to economic and public administration reform; France, Spain and Italy retain in part a tendency to see democratisation more as a top-down process, most appropriately negotiated through pacts within political elites. Arguably, all these different variants err – whether wilfully or through genuine over-optimism – in the extent to which they envision political change emerging smoothly and without coercion or conflict. EU approaches have commonly conflated democracy and human rights. In practice most policy instruments have been aimed at improvement in traditional human rights issues rather than wholesale democratisation. Equally, greater priority has been attached to securing good governance, cleaner and less arbitrary, rather than fully democratic government. Arguably revealing some incoherence in European aims, specific human rights and good governance reforms are conceived by many policymakers as a means of according greater legitimacy and therefore stability to incumbent regimes – but also presented as components of the sort of democratisation that would bring regime change in its wake.

Increasingly prominent in European governments' statements is the assertion that democracy and Islam are fully compatible. EU ministers appear unequivocally certain and rather sweepingly confident that any rejection of democracy on the part of Islamic groups must necessarily constitute a 'misreading', a 'distortion' of Islam. As authoritarian regimes in the Middle East have themselves increasingly played to Islamic sentiment, their advantage to European strategic interests over any Islamic-enabling democracy may have narrowed.

In terms of concrete policy, however, EU approaches to democracy promotion have revolved heavily around Western style activist NGOs. Local institutional forms have received little support. European policies have in practice left little room for initiatives aimed at encouraging the perennially-debated Arab form of quasi-democracy, predicated on traditional organisations such as the mosque, the neighbourhood or village, the tribe, professional associations and syndicates. European engagement with 'moderate' Islamic groups has been *ad hoc* and tentative, and there has been no concerted EU pressure for Mediterranean governments to cede greater political space for more temperate Islamic groups. Complaints against the detention of Islamic forces have been less forceful than the attention given to cases involving more Western-style civil society figures. Islamic-dominated professional syndicates have not received backing. Dialogue fora set up to explore inter-religious commonalities have invariably excluded any notable Islamic opposition representation. All this reinforces Arab views that the European conception of democracy is rigidly secular and allows for little expression of strongly held religious identities. Even if the tendency to posit democracy and religiosity as mutually exclusive is conceptually questionable, European presentations are seen as often coming close to assuming that democracy is a means of usefully diluting religious fervency.

Democracy Debates in the Mediterranean Partners

Southern Mediterranean regimes exhibit varying mixes of selectively instrumental readings of democracy, on the one hand, with wilfully distorted claims to democratic progress, on the other hand. Mohammed VI has spoken of the need for reform according to 'a Moroccan model' in preference to a standard Western liberal democratic template. In Morocco, government understandings of 'political liberalisation' do not serve to temper in any significant fashion the Palace's control over key areas of policy. *Alternance* is presented as a means of enhancing national 'consensus' rather than of significantly widening the parameters of political competition. This paternalistic conceptualisation of 'democratisation' accounts *inter alia* for the clampdown on journalistic freedoms, the King's tight personal control over anti-corruption reforms and the continued exclusion of sheikh Yassine's Justice and Solidarity movement. In Jordan, political reform has been accompanied by deliberate gerrymandering to prejudice both Islamic opposition and the Palestinian majority; democracy is again conceived as a vehicle for legitimising the regime through direct plebiscitary links between the government and tribal independents; it has, in contrast, precluded support for countervailing institutions and parties. In Lebanon elite conceptions of democracy are intertwined with power sharing proclivities, and the recovery of full national sovereignty from Syrian tutelage is recognised to be a prerequisite to the removal of remaining restrictions on political competition. In both Algeria and the Palestinian Territories, elites have interpreted the 'democratic' dimension of their political reforms as residing in increasingly presidential structures reflecting a broadly perceived public will for effective peace. Bouteflika and Arafat have both sought to appeal directly to their populations and bypass intermediary institutions [Volpi 2000]. The reforms launched by Abu Mazen may momentarily have seemed to represent a fundamental change in the bases of Palestinian Authority statecraft, but his term in office proved brief.

Ruling party hegemony in Egypt, Tunisia and Syria has exhibited more explicit challenge to Western concepts of democracy. Despite the recent circulation in Egypt's ruling National Democratic Party of a discussion paper on democracy, heir-apparent Gamal Mubarak has explicitly rejected the possibility of democratic reforms such as the ending of emergency law or moves towards direct, multi-party elections for the presidency (*Financial Times*, special report on Egypt, 22 October 2003). Bashar Assad meanwhile has recently explicitly asserted that any contemplation of political reform is effectively off the agenda, with priority to be attached to economic restructuring. Formal multi-party electoral competition in Tunisia is seen as having failed in practice to devolve power from the presidency [Murphy 2000: 25; Sadiki 2002a: 505]. In Libya, regime accountability has been seen through the lens of informal, local-level consultative councils, *sui generis* structures heavily circumscribed in their effect. Such cases demonstrate that Arab nationalism is still frequently mobilised as an anti-democratic creed.

In comparative terms, what is still striking is the absence

from southern Mediterranean states of any overwhelming and unambiguous secular agitation for democratic reform; indeed, there is widespread criticism of Western democracy for being too secular. Economic reform does not appear to have entailed a diminution of *rentier*-type dynamics sufficient to foster pressure for democratic control over the exercise of public administration. No other region has reached similar levels of economic development with such a paucity of organised and effective private sector support for democratisation. Secular actors have notoriously either backed or at least tolerated regimes as a bulwark against Islamic groups, the latter well capable of exploiting the despair of poor, often illiterate masses, sceptical of achieving social and economic improvement within existing political systems. At the same time, regimes have skilfully built up crosscutting alliances amongst economic actors, bureaucracies and unions, playing these off against each other and retaining relations of dependency [Brumberg 2003]. Some analysts also highlight the extent to which political parties across the region are constructed around an individual leader or family, show few features of ideological or class-based movements and lack strong social roots [Willis 2002; Brumberg 2003]. Meanwhile, widespread appreciation of and support for civilian democratic control over militaries is still complicated by the justification that the non-resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict still seems to bestow upon the significant powers retained by militaries.

A spread of views continues to exist among Islamic forces. Arguably, the significant factor is that such variety has if anything increased since the inception of EMP and, in particular, after the September 11, 2001 attacks. The Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, the Tunisian Nahda party, the Turkish Justice and Development party (succeeding from the Welfare and then Virtue parties) have all adopted more unambiguously pro-democratic stances. The Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood has been pro-democratic, but primarily in the sense of acquiescing to the broad parameters of what has in fact been a very limited reform process undertaken by the Hashemite monarchy: the organisation's boycott of the 1997 elections was in protest at electoral injustices more than the broad systemic limits to political liberalisation. Recent elections in both Jordan and Morocco have seen Islamic forces fielding limited numbers of candidates specifically to avoid a post-electoral clash with the executive.

Conversely, the Jama'a al-Islamiyya remains resolutely anti-democratic, refusing to accept the notion that non-Muslims can enjoy equal citizenship rights with the faithful. Hamas has in effect excluded itself from peaceable political process. The FIS remains divided between the pro-democratic Abassi Madani and the firmly anti-democratic Ali Belhaj. As president Bouteflika's 1999 amnesty and *civil concordat* failed to provide for the re-incorporation of FIS into the political arena, Belhaj is widely held to have gained ascendancy in these internal debates. With Belhaj and Madani now released, debates over the future direction of Algerian Islamism are more vibrant than for some time. Many Islamic groups continue to see truth as immutable rather than constructed and given meaning through human

historical experience – this sitting uneasily with the basic prerequisites of competitive politics. For many, an important obstacle lies in the antipathy between secular liberals and moderate Islamic forces; despite an incorporation of Islamic groups into parliaments in Morocco, Jordan, Yemen, Algeria and Kuwait, this lack of cooperation has militated against a productive exploration of potential democratic commonalities.

Both sides of the debate have marshalled the Iraqi conflict. Some analysts have noted how Iraq's lack of democracy had made it such a weak and brittle society. Other comments suggest a danger that US policy might lead to 'democracy promotion' being seen as synonymous with heavy-handed, sovereignty-compromising Western intervention. Presently, it is not clear whether regime change in Iraq will on balance spur or hinder democratic reform in southern Mediterranean states. At this crucial juncture, it is certainly the case that any Shia-inspired instability in Iraq will be used by incumbent regimes as further justification for a lack of reform.

Notwithstanding these debates amongst Islamic groups, it is widely acknowledged that beyond general assertions either for or against democracy, little detailed analysis has gone into ascertaining precisely what type of political reform and institutional structures might best serve to combine religious and secular liberal values. Iran's hybrid system is often evoked, but the increasing tensions that evidently beset the Iranian polity have clouded the value of this potential model.

The principle of *shura* is habitually evoked as evidence of Islam's democratic leanings. However, many conceive of the rightful *shura* council as deliberative and broadly representative, informally consulted by political leaders, not a body elected through universal mandate with formal powers akin to those of Western-style parliaments. Proposals that expressly and tightly work the principle of *shura* into a formally liberal democratic institutional context have not been forthcoming in any systematic fashion. Regular assertions that the region warrants an 'Islamic' or 'Arab' form of democracy have yet to be backed up by detailed ideas for precisely what such a modified form of pluralism might look like. Debates have often appeared defensive and reactive, couched in terms of how compatible Islam and democracy may or may not be rather than reflecting a groundswell of public yearning for pluralistic structures *per se*. Confusingly, when Islamic forces purport to question democratic values they are in practice frequently referring to regimes' (invariably disingenuous) categorisation of 'democratic' reforms.

It has been pointed out that a prominent strand of Islam has 'depoliticised', focusing on marrying textual study with grass roots social activity. Such a 'social reformist' trend has been evident in both relatively reformist states such as Morocco and the more politically atrophied Arab states. This has brought with it a degree of disengagement from debates over political structures [Roy 1994]. It has been observed that many self-styled Islamic 'modernisers' have advocated liberalism but been ambivalent over democracy, seeing religious development as requiring better protection for individual rights and freedoms of the sort not necessarily well preserved through majority rule [El-Affendi 2003: 35]. These trends, in short, leave unresolved questions relating

to how democracy might be cultivated around Islamic *fora* rather than through the secular routes taken in other regions. The attitude of southern Mediterranean 'reformers' to the democracy agenda of the EU remains highly qualified. Even in Morocco much European-backed human rights work has been frustrated by the government, and virtually no EU cooperation has been facilitated on more top-down institutional issues, such as the strengthening of parliaments, political parties or civilian control of military forces. Arab civil society activists have not sought European partnership in the same way that Eastern European social actors did in the 1980s. Social contact and mutual understanding remain relatively limited. There persists a widespread conviction in the Arab world that Western states seek to promote democracy specifically as a means of undermining peoples' Islamic identity. A frequent complaint is that Arabs are now expected to accept 'European' democratic norms, without Europeans showing any reciprocal willingness to embrace or even understand Islamic values.

Additionally, lack of progress on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has diminished southern Mediterranean civil society actors' enthusiasm to engage with the EU, or seek European pressure, to assist democratic reform. This is, of course, a well-known and familiar observation, but the extent to which Arab (state and non-state) actors make the link across to (what they perceive as) the timidity of EU policy towards Israeli incursions still renders Palestinian issues a potent influence on southern attitudes towards the democracy agenda of the EU.

Developing the Democracy Agenda

The above discussion illustrates just how considerably perspectives on democracy vary among Europeans and Arabs, though clearly there is greater consensus in the European camp than within the Arab partner bloc regarding the practical application of democratic principles. Developing the democracy agenda of the EMP requires the political will of participants both North and South of the Mediterranean to actually co-operate in this field. In the short term, such activity may have to rely heavily on sub-regional coalitions of the willing, given the reticence of some European and most Arab governments to grasp the nettle of democracy promotion. A major paradox here is that, in terms of political potential, the more liberal among the regimes in the South would appear to be the most promising partners for European democracy promotion, yet in practice individual EU countries tend here to support the *status quo*, rather than democratic reforms, for fear that more competitive electoral processes might lead to the establishment of anti-western regimes. Exemplifying southern European caution recently was the statement of the Spanish intelligence chief Jorge Dezcallar, following the Casablanca bombings in May 2003, to the effect that *any* change in the institutions of Morocco would be a change for the worse (*El Pais*, 20 May 2003).

Support for democratising measures will be difficult to obtain from southern elites if they are conceived of as simply a redistribution of power, which will require adaptation to a more competitive political environment if they themselves are to survive. It may be worth reminding them, none the

less, that in recent decades reformists associated with the Franco and Salazar-Caetano regimes have adapted successfully to the Iberian processes of democratisation. Apart from elite conversion, the democratising agenda of the EMP could benefit from linkage with other objectives commanding more general and enthusiastic support in the South—such as the desire to put an end to civil conflict and to achieve economic modernisation. Democracy is not always established by democrats, and might conceivably be adopted in some Arab countries as an ‘instrument of civil peace’ [Sadiki 2002b: 124; Salamé 1995: 3]. Equally, measures to expand and develop higher education may be undertaken in the name of economic modernization but also, when accompanied by generational change [Tessler 2000], may eventually fuel pressure for democratic change within Arab countries. But we are concerned here with ways in which democracy promotion activities could be undertaken on a Euro-Arab basis within the framework of the EMP.

A fundamental aim of such activity should be the expansion of political participation to broader sections of society and public opinion. Most countries of the Partnership have at least a limited degree of political pluralism and some degree of electoral competition involving parties. Even if the political similarities between EU and Mediterranean Partner countries are somewhat superficial, they provide a starting point for discussion about the future political evolution of the Mediterranean area. Of course, the task of making regimes more politically inclusive is not necessarily going to involve an evolutionary (as opposed to revolutionary) process in all cases, yet it is the former that is sanctioned by the value system of the Barcelona Process and which should be cultivated by its actors. What is essential here is not only to build more bridges linking *existing* political actors—for example, through the proposed Euro-Mediterranean Parliamentary Assembly—but to establish networks of dialogue and co-operation that involve *new* actors as well. By incorporating non-governmental actors such as political reform campaigners, political scientists, political commentators and party activists into such networks, and funding them on an ongoing basis, one could promote a much broader political debate about ways and means of bringing into being more legitimate regimes in the Mediterranean area, a goal well worthy of political investment by the EMP. While the main focus should be on southern Mediterranean countries, where the sharpest challenges to the legitimacy of regimes are to be found, some activity in the political sphere could and should be organised also with a broader Euro-Med focus, bringing onto the same agenda topics such as the representation of minority Mediterranean communities residing in EU countries, or the role of non-governmental parties in the Barcelona Process.

What is suggested here is something rather different to the proposal made in the recent Commission communication on ‘Reinvigorating EU Actions on Human Rights and Democratisation with Mediterranean Partners’, which called for the creation of a ‘technical level of dialogue below the political level’ to develop a common agenda with clear targets in relation to the freedoms of expression, association etc. [Commission of the European Communities 2003a:

11]. To recognize the existence of *political* debate at sub-state level and to promote it as part of building the EMP would in itself be an exercise in extending the parameters of Euro-Med dialogue and provide a point of reference for national efforts to move towards more inclusive political systems. As well as involving representatives of established political parties, such dialogue should be open to diverse secular and Islamic sectors alike, in recognition that there is substantial readiness to abide by consensual rules of the game in both sectors, and that it is often exclusion from political life that breeds violence rather than *vice versa* [Stadler 1998: 38]. It would provide an opportunity to bestow respectability upon opposition parties in the Arab countries, which for a mixture of historical and partisan reasons in the past have tended to be maligned by rulers as ‘anti-national’ forces.

Meanwhile, the EU should continue to develop its traditional ‘bottom-up work to enhance the capacity of pro-democracy NGOs in the Arab countries and should avoid the confusion of democracy promotion with human rights promotion that has occurred in recent years through the conflation of European policy objectives pursued under the European Initiative for Democracy and Human Rights. While true that progress achieved in the field of human rights (or for that matter, the rule of law, press freedom and transparency) may well be beneficial to democratic development, it is important that EU democracy promotion activity focuses at least as much, if not more, on countries showing some commitment to political reform rather than on those experiencing the worst human rights transgressions.

Imposing European Values?

The EU stands accused both by political conservatives and by radical Islamic groups in the Arab world of seeking to impose European values. Besides the lop-sided nature of the EMP itself, such sentiments may find further sustenance in the new ‘wider Europe’ strategy of the Union. The European Commission’s recent communication on this subject adopts a ‘benchmarked approach’ to EU policy towards its neighbours and implies ‘the partners taking on considerably deeper and broader obligations, specifically when it comes to aligning with Community legislation’ [Commission of the European Communities 2003b: 15]. The document refers to political as well as economic benchmarks as forming the basis of future Action Plans, although ‘democracy’ as such only gets a passing mention, there is rather more reference to human rights and far more central still is the question of access to EU internal market. In view of the widespread condemnation of the war on Iraq and specific Arab concerns about the means by which the USA aspires to deliver ‘regime change’ to the Middle East, it is important for Europe to hold on to its distinctive ‘partnership’ approach to the Mediterranean, flawed though this undoubtedly is in current practice. It is entirely normal for a large multinational entity to seek to project influence, but it will only succeed in the context of its ‘near abroad’ if it pays due attention to the particularities of each neighbour and neighbouring region (in fact the Commission document does speak of

'differentiation') and if there is adequate consultation before the EU adopts new action plans and neighbourhood agreements. In the case of the Arab EMP neighbours, the EU has secured agreement to engage in democracy promotion on a co-operative basis through the Barcelona Declaration of 1995. A common commitment to democracy is also implicit in the association agreements signed since Barcelona. While true that hardly any Arab countries prioritised democracy promotion at the time of the Barcelona Conference, the governments of several of them now seem to accept it, at least as a *quid pro quo* for broader co-operation with the EU. These countries are now faced with an enlarged, potentially more powerful Europe, a fact that is bound to have repercussions in Euro-Mediterranean relationships as they become viewed by European policy-makers at least partly through the 'wider Europe' perspective. With the prospect of greater economic integration and human mobility within the EU as incentives, a new impetus could be given to political reform efforts in at least some of the Mediterranean partner countries.

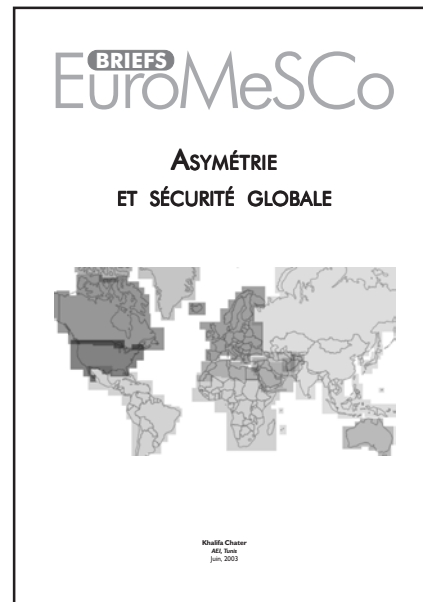
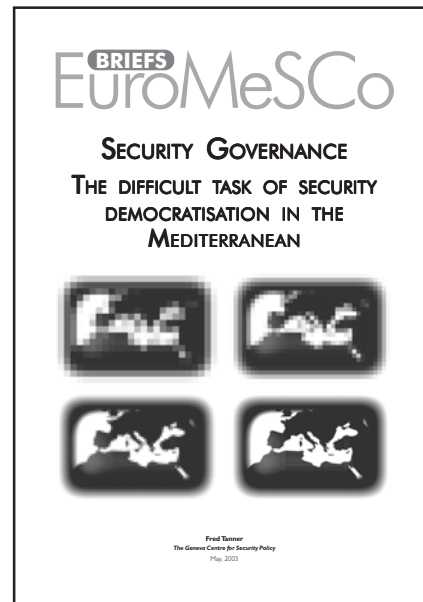
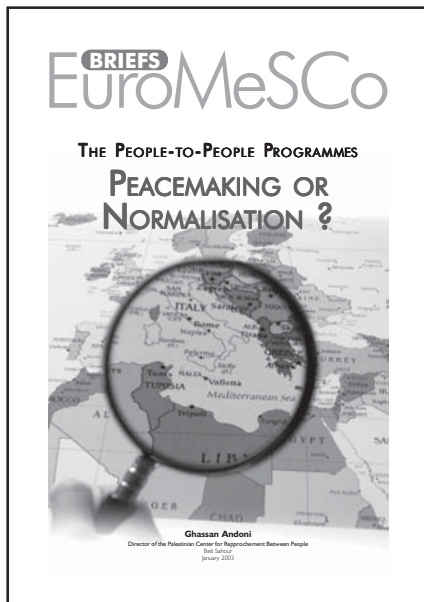
Democracy promotion implies encouragement and/or pressure rather than imposition. Pressure by democrats within the EMP context should be focused on broadening political participation through the extension of debate about democracy and democratisation to new sectors, rather than being a question of lobbying for a distinctively European model of democracy (e.g. the typically parliamentary-based system of government as opposed to the presidential executive model found in the USA). Such an approach will continue to provoke doubt or suspicion in some EMP countries, European and Arab, particularly at government level, but it does provide a basis on which some partners could give fresh impetus to the democracy promotion agenda without prejudging the outcome, by exploring different ways in which democracy could best be adapted to local and national circumstances. If such a debate fed into reform processes, the end result would by no means be political uniformity across the Mediterranean but could in time see an end to the kind of sharp contrasts between regimes that so often give rise to political misunderstanding and thwart co-operation.

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