

37

**The Partnership
in Southern Eyes:
Reflections on the
Discourse in the
Egyptian Press**

Hanaa Ebeid

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Hanaa Ebeid
Al-Ahram Centre for Political
and Strategic Studies, Cairo.

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Introduction	05
Methodology	
Reading the Press	
I. Economic Aspects of the Partnership	07
Official Propaganda vs. Cost-Benefit Assessments	
1. The Industrial Modernization Programme	
2. The EU Enlargement and the New Neighbourhood Initiative	
3. Sub-Regional Integration within the EMP	
II. Political Aspects of the EMP	10
The Expectation/Disappointment Syndrome	
1. The Arab-Israeli Conflict	
2. The War in Iraq	
III. Cultural and Human Aspects of the EMP	12
Conclusion	14

Introduction

International partnership as a mode of interaction that thrived in the aftermath of the Cold War is a relationship based on mutual trust and a sense of interdependence. Thus, the psychological and cognitive aspects of the partnership tend to be as influential as the contractual aspects, and the institutional modes of operation. In this respect, studies of Eastern and Southern Mediterranean perceptions of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (henceforth the EMP) are especially important, given the theoretical assumptions about ideal partnership and policy imperatives. Theoretically, the concept of partnership refers to a positive-sum interaction generating positive effects for all involved parties, where gains of one actor are not attained at the expense of others.¹ Partnership must be balanced (each actor must have the same rights, duties and vested interests). The neo-liberal vision of interdependence assumes harmony of partners' agendas in a partnership. The EMP constitutes a deviation from the partnership ideal. The European Union (EU) has a reasonably clear agenda based broadly on a definition of its collective interests and sense of "responsibility" towards the southern and eastern Mediterranean region. The vision of the partnership in the south, by contrast, is less clear. The southern partners' attitudes towards the relationship are *ad hoc*, disjointed, and at times contradictory. These attitudes have been coloured by unresolved perceptions and apprehensions, as well as the context in which the partnership has evolved. Hence, the southern perspective of the partnership is arguably still in formation, almost a decade after the Barcelona Process.

This lack of clarity has direct policy implications, particularly in the realm of 'infrapolitics', where discontent, and real or perceived threats can accumulate and exert a 'conditioning influence' on certain policies.² This partly explains the prolonged and complex process of negotiations, which characterized most of the association agreements between the EU and Mediterranean partners, as well as the reluctance of the latter to take the partnership beyond the economic sphere. Fuzzy attitudes towards the EMP are most notable in the case of Egypt. Although EMP enjoys a high level of credibility and generates considerable consensus among the public and decision-makers, detailed objectives, and cost-benefit assessments of joining are sharply contested and little publicized beyond officials and the business class that is directly involved. Although supportive of economic partnership with the EU, the public remains largely ignorant of the debate on the partnership. Thus, any analysis of the "Egyptian" view of the partnership must take into consideration its 'elitist' nature, which finds expression in academic, business, and official circles, and is voiced in the press. The question also arises as to whether these views add up to a homogenous or consistent vision of the partnership.

This paper explores Egyptian views of the EMP by analysing discourse on the partnership in the Egyptian press, particularly the *Al Ahrām* newspaper and two opposition papers that reflect left and liberal views, namely the *Al Ahali* Weekly newspaper published by the *Al Tagammu* leftist party, and the *Al Wafd* Daily published by *Al Wafd* liberal party. The aim is to describe attitudes towards the partnership and different areas of cooperation, and to see whether the partnership is viewed as a comprehensive political, economic and cultural enterprise, and the nature of this perception on each area of cooperation.

This methodology was adopted for various reasons: first, levels of public awareness of the partnership are moderate and largely confined to officials, the media, research centres, universities, political elite, and the business class. Regular and comprehensive opinion polls are very rare and fail to provide adequate benchmarks to analyse the Egyptian view of the partnership and its evolution; second, the partnership is not an issue in electoral programmes. Where there are references, they are about the EU and usually related to the global aspects of EU-Egyptian relations with no specific mention of the partnership; third, civil society associations have not developed a comprehensive or outspoken strategy towards foreign relations in general and the EMP in particular. Thus, the press is the most comprehensive channel of views, if not the most accurate. It is therefore the main key to understanding Egyptian views of the partnership, as it reflects various strands of opinion through news coverage, editorials, and published official and non-official statements. The views of various think tanks, civil society associations, and the academic and business classes usually find their way into the press, either through news coverage, reports, Op-Eds, or paid advertisements. The press acts as a surrogate public opinion forum, which substitutes for the absence of public opinion polls and civil society positions.

Methodology

1. Jon Marks, "High Hopes and Low Motives: The New Euro-Mediterranean Partnership Initiative", in: *Mediterranean Politics*, Vol. 1, No. 1, Summer 1996.

2. Tim Homes and Ian Scoones, *Participatory Environmental Policy Processes: Experiences From North and South*, IDS Working Paper 113, P.7 <http://www.ids.ac.uk/ids/bookshop/wp/wp113.pdf>

Despite government control, the merits of the press as a reflection of public mood dates back to the introduction of European-style printing press in the 19th century. Since then newspapers have been considered the most effective means of reaching the masses, and have played an important role in expressing public sentiment about independence. Because of the strong role of the media in moving toward independence, its 'rightful' role was that of a 'mission' to represent the national spirit and aspirations. *Al Ahrām* is the main reference because it has the widest distribution and because it reflects the widest array of official and non-official views and opinions. Moreover, *Al Ahrām* editorial policy towards international issues is the most extensive. Reference to *Al Ahali* weekly paper and *Al Wafd* daily is made mainly to see whether different political groups exhibit significant variations of opinion from the "mainstream" *Al Ahrām*. The paper focuses on the three years that followed the signature of the Association agreement with the EU in June 2001 – at which time public debate peaked as did press coverage – so as to outline the evolution of views of the partnership and its evolution. Examining the ensuing three years also offers insights into changes of perspectives, particularly after September 11, 2001, the war in Iraq, and the implementation of important phases of the partnership.

Reading the Press

It is noteworthy that the ideological preferences of the Egyptian press largely influence the partnership debate. The press offers more than a mirror image of various views on the partnership: the positions and attitudes of media professionals and opinion leaders also shape the debate. It is therefore worthwhile to analyse the general views of media workers towards economic liberalization and regional integration (at the heart of EMP), and attitudes towards EMP membership, before examining the main trends of press coverage and attitude towards the EMP.

In an opinion poll conducted by *Al Ahrām Centre for Political and Strategic Studies* 2000,³ media professionals emerged as the most cautious and pessimistic group where Egyptian membership of the World Trade Organization (WTO) is concerned, which contrasts with most private business groups and the wider public. At the same time, however, media professionals seemed more receptive towards regional integration forums, particularly the EMP. Asked whether the EMP is the best framework for regional integration, 28% of the media thought it was the best. Business groups favoured the EMP with a larger majority of 38%, but only 12% of the public had a similarly positive outlook. When compared to Arab regionalism, the EMP emerged as the second best alternative in the view of media professionals in terms of its potential positive impact on the national economy. Whereas 42% ranked Arab regionalism foremost among regional integration frameworks, only 13% ranked the EMP first. Moreover, 26% ranked Arab regionalism as second best for economic welfare, compared to 16% for the EMP. The contradiction between the two results becomes clearer with the question of which framework is most feasible and applicable: 28% of media professionals ranked the EMP as the most viable and credible alternative, compared to 25% for Arab regionalism.

Thus, despite a negative attitude among media professionals towards economic liberalization and the WTO, regional economic integration is viewed positively. The EMP appears as the second best alternative after Arab integration, while the credibility of the EMP exceeds that of an ideologically and emotionally preferred Arab regionalism.

These attitudes are reflected in general coverage of EMP matters, which has shown some consistent characteristics; first, there has been a high degree of attention to EU internal affairs, political and economic affairs with the Middle East and Egypt in general, and to the EMP partnership framework in particular, in *Al Ahrām* (there is a much lower degree of attention in opposition papers). The EU ranks second in volume of coverage after the US, but the tone is definitely more positive in the national and opposition press. Second, EMP coverage is mostly news coverage, official statements, Public Relations (PR) campaigns and economic analyses; Op-eds are mostly related to the political role of the EU in the Middle East beyond the partnership framework. In this context, statements by EU officials and their visits get a lot of front page coverage in *Ahrām*, and to a less degree in *Al Wafd*, particularly when common official position are stressed. Third, the degree of attention to the political and economic aspects of the EMP is sharply imbalanced. The partnership is almost exclusively considered an economic enterprise. Whereas coverage of EU political relations to Egypt and the region as a whole hardly refers to the EMP framework, economic coverage is almost

3. Gamal Soltan et al, "The Arab Polls: Egyptian Public Opinion towards Economic Conditions and Regional Integration", *Al Ahrām*, 18/6/2001. The poll did not include questions on non-economic aspects of the EMP.

entirely formulated in terms of the Barcelona Process and its terms of references. Coverage of the cultural aspects of the relationship is very slim and almost exclusively news coverage of projects within the third basket.

Aside from *Al Ahram*, attention to the EU in general and the EMP in particular is minimal. *Al Ahali*, the leftist weekly, tends to view the world from a North/South prism and largely neglects foreign relations (with the exception of the Arab-Israeli conflict), and lacks a clear position or editorial policy regarding the EMP. While consistently criticizing the WTO and its “negative” impact on the Egyptian economy, there is no reference to trade liberalization within the context of the EMP. *Al Wafd*, on the other hand, has an editorial policy that is similar to *Al Ahram*’s, though it plays a lot less attention to coverage and opinion articles on EMP and publishes more vocal criticisms of its economic impact, attracting less PR campaigns by business groups, Egyptian officials and EU Commission delegation representatives. Despite these general trends in the press coverage of the partnership, coverage of each basket or level of EMP cooperation varies considerably, and has witnessed important changes over the past years.

There was a host of reports and studies in the national press (especially *Al Ahram*) exploring the impact of the partnership after its signature in June 2001, on the economy, agricultural exports, and industrial development. Largely consisting of official statements, reports and propaganda, these analyses defined the partnership almost exclusively in terms of its economic benefits for Egypt, especially in the fields of trade enhancement and industrial modernization. The Egyptian prime minister distributed 5000 copies of the partnership agreement among political parties, universities and different press and media forums,⁴ so as to promote public debate about the EMP in contrast with four other free trade and economic partnership agreements that Egypt participates in.⁵ Since then, the economic aspects of the partnership have been the best covered and publicized, mainly through official propaganda from Egyptian and EU Commission officials. In the earlier phase in particular, the discourse focused on the opportunities that the partnership entailed for Egyptian economic welfare. The main proponents of this view, frequently voiced in the press, were top political leaders, some cabinet members, and government officials involved in the negotiation process. Addressing a generally uninformed public, the official discourse used this discourse of incentives to “explain” and publicise the “partnership” as a way to attain economic benefits and increased international status.

The main argument in the official discourse was that the partnership was a “necessary” phase in the overall process of “modernizing Egypt”.⁶ The batch of incentives highlighted in the discourse was almost exclusively economic, with references to an expected increase in European investment, potential sub-contraction under European licensing, the establishment of joint ventures, and increased access to a vast European market.⁷ Aside from the economic argument, there were others based on the strategic and civilization stature of Egypt, which might decline if it were left out of the new integration networks in a global world.⁸ Thus, participation in the partnership was a strategic choice that contributed to Egypt’s – and the Arab world’s – economic and political power, despite perceived short-term economic losses. The opportunity cost of non-participation was portrayed as a loss of stature and the negative impact on the prospects for long-term economic development were also highlighted. The official discourse was keen to refute two underlying fears: the fear of European competition against infant and less competitive Egyptian industries,⁹ and Egyptian Euro-Mediterranean commitments, which might contradict current or future Arab regional integration forums, or place limitations on such forums.¹⁰

Official propaganda was not exclusive to Egyptian officials. The EU Commission delegation in Cairo was also very active in publicizing the economic aspects of the partnership. The activities and views of the delegation were given particular attention, with the visit of Ian Bogg in July 2001 following a PR campaign, regular roundtables with media representatives and press conferences, which are frequent items in *Al Ahram*’s economic pages. It is noteworthy however, that at the time of signing the association agreements, the Egyptian cabinet was far from united about the economic impact of EMP membership. The president, prime minister, and minister of foreign affairs seemed much more optimistic about the benefits of the partnership, compared to the reluctant Ministry of Economic Affairs, which expressed deep apprehensions about the trade imbalance that it felt would deepen when the free trade area came into

I. Economic Aspects of the Partnership

Official Propaganda vs. Cost-Benefit Assessments

4.Wahid Abdel Maguid, (ed.), The Public Debate on the Egyptian Euro-Mediterranean Partnership, Arab Strategic Report 2000, Cairo: *Al Ahram* Center for Political and Strategic Studies, 2001, p. 317.

5.These are: Free Trade Agreement with the United States of America, the COMESA Agreement, the Free Trade Agreement with Turkey, and the Free Trade Agreement with Arab States.

6.Foreign Minister Ahmed Maher on the occasion of signing the partnership agreement, *Al Ahram* editorial as a part of the process of *Al Ahram*, 26, June, 2001, p.1. Raouf Saad, Egyptian Ambassador to the EU, 2 July, 2001.

7.Egyptian Industry gets ready for Competition: Experts confirm “Industrial Modernization is a Must”, *Al Ahram*, 2 July, 2001. El Sayyed Elewa, The European Partnership and Strategic Choice, *Al Ahram*, 27 June, 2001.

8.El Sayyed Elewa, *ibid*, *Al Ahram*, 27 June, 2001.

9.Minister of Industry Moustafa El Refai, *Al Ahram*, 21 June, 2001.

10.Foreign Minister Ahmed Maher, *Ibid*.

effect.¹¹ Moreover, the latter argued that the privileges for Egyptian industrial exports would have minor effects because of their lack of competitiveness. In the case of agricultural exports, most special treatment affected areas in which Egypt does not have a comparative advantage, while increases in the agricultural export quota are permitted only for marginal crops, rather than major commercial ones.¹² The foremost vocal critic of the partnership, however, was the former minister of Industry and Technological Development, Dr. Moustafa El Refai', who declared to the press before signing the agreements that "it was not in Egypt's best interest to join the EMP, and that the partnership would have adverse effects on domestic industries and cause to the shutdown of thousands of industrial facilities, while unemployment would be rife."¹³ Former Minister of Planning Ahmed El Darsh was also among the critics. He issued a report covered by the press that outlined the negative impact of the partnership on Egyptian industries that are uncompetitive. The report moreover undermined the ability of the Industrial Modernization Programme (IMP) – for which the EU has earmarked 290 million Euros – to achieve the grand mission of modernizing Egyptian industry (the report stated that 20 billion euros were necessary).¹⁴ The irony here is that within the Egyptian regime, politicians propagated the partnership on economic basis, whereas economists and industry-related officials were more cautious.

The general non-official public debate has been about costs and benefits among the main stakeholders, economic experts and opinion leaders. This paper focuses on different views transmitted through editorials and the views of economic experts and journalists, on one hand, and statements by domestic business and interest groups, on the other. The most oft stressed benefit by business groups is congruent with some aspects of the official discourse: an expectation of increased Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) from the EU,¹⁵ more joint ventures, and increased exports to European markets. The industrial sector is acknowledged as the most vulnerable. The perceived potential negative repercussions on domestic industries are two fold: a perception of the non-competitive nature of many industrial sectors, which will be subjected to fierce competition with the advent of a free trade zone. The need for modernization is not confined to technical modernization, but also managerial, legislative and procedural. For this reason, the business community calls on the government to ease its bureaucratic hold and to create an atmosphere supportive for industrial competitiveness.¹⁶ Second, it is felt that the most competitive industries in Egypt (food industry) will be subject to indirect European protectionism through quotas, "protectionist measures", "exaggerated entry conditions" and extreme quality control standards.¹⁷

The list of industries expected to flourish within the partnership framework is, moreover, very short and consists of low to medium technology industries (fertilizers, cement, and natural gas), whereas the industries expected to suffer are many and constitute an important constituency of the industrial sector in Egypt (spinning and weaving, chemicals and pharmaceuticals, and engineering industries),¹⁸ in addition to a host of nascent industries such as electronics and communications.¹⁹ For this reason, criticism of the partnership was most intense in what are seen as vulnerable sectors, namely agricultural production and domestic industries (food industries, engineering industries, and textiles). This was clear with the abstention of nine industrial chambers of the Egyptian Industrial Association from the agreement (the textile industries, the cinema industry, leather, wood, food and engineering industries). Only five chambers agreed with the partnership (construction materials, cereals, pharmaceuticals, and metallurgy).²⁰ Despite these differences, there was an underlying consensus that the partnership is either a better alternative to deal with globalisation,²¹ or a preparatory phase towards global integration,²² and that it could serve to stimulate administrative and legal reform to create a business-friendly environment.

In addition to this general debate, three main issues attracted attention after the signing of the Agreement in June 2001: the industrial modernization programme, the economic impact of EU enlargement, and sub-regional frameworks within the EMP.

11.Wahid Abdel Maguid, *ibid*, 330.

12.Wahid Abdel Maguid, *ibid*, 331.

13.Statement of former Minister of Industry in: Hussein Abdel Razek, Egypt, Europe and Israel, *Al Wafd*, 1/7/2001.

14.Hussein Abdel Razek, *ibid*.

15."Egyptian Industry gets ready for Competition ...", *Al Ahrām*, 2 July, 2001.

16.*Ibid*. *Al Ahrām*, 2 July, 2001.

17.*Ibid*. *Al Ahrām*, 2 July, 2001.

18.*Ibid*. *Al Ahrām*, 2 July, 2001.

19.El Sayed Elewa, *European Partnership and Strategic Choice*, *ibid*.

20.Wahid Abdel Maguid, *ibid*, p. 330.

21.Said El Lawendi, "Globalization Alternatives: Europe as a Model", *Al Ahrām*, 19/3/2001.

22.Wahid Abdel Maguid, *ibid*, 329.

23.Statement of the Minister of Industry Ali El Saeidi, "1300 Projects Benefit from the IMP", *Al Ahrām*, 28/5/2004.

24.Dr. Sayed El Baz, "Funding the Textile Industries", *Al Ahrām*, 3/4/2004.

25.*Ibid*. *Al Ahrām*, 2 July, 2001.

26.Statement by Gamal Bayoumy, "Negative Effects of EU Enlargement on Egypt", *Al Ahrām*, 25/5/2004. Tark Fathi, "Enlarged Europe is our First Trading Partner", *Al Ahrām*, 15/8/2003. Statements of Ian Bogg in a press conference in Alexandria on EU enlargement, *Al Ahrām*, 3/5/2004.

27.Ambassador Ahmed Taha Ahmed, "The Arab Common Market and Euro Med Cooperation", *Al Ahrām*, 28/11/2001.

28.Gamal Bayoumy, "Negative Effects of EU Enlargement on Egypt", *ibid*.

29.Statement by Head of the Egyptian-British Chamber of Commerce, *ibid*, *Al Ahrām*, 2/2/2003.

30.*Ibid*.

31.Statement by Egyptian President in Ambassador Ahmed Taha Mohamed, "The Common Arab Market and Euro Med Cooperation", *Al Ahrām*, 26/11/2001.

The industrial modernization programme funded by the EU to the tune of 250 million euros to modernize vulnerable industries expected to suffer the adverse effects of free trade, has been the most visible area of the partnership over the past three years. Initially stalemated due to the reluctance of former Minister of Industry and Technological Development Mostafa El Refai', the launching of the Programme was marked by a strong PR campaign that generated a real or perceived positive spill-over for the programme in particular and the partnership in general. In essence, the programme seeks to minimize the fears of the most vocal critics of the EMP, namely the industrial business groups, especially in areas where free trade is expected to have a negative impact. The IMP created for the first time an official-stakeholder forum that acts collectively to address the issue of industrial development, which lies at the heart of the partnership debate. Since its activation, the programme has received great momentum through two well-publicized national conferences sponsored by the programme and the Ministry of Industry as well as representatives of private industries, which led to the production of a policy paper on industrial modernization in Egypt to the benefit of small and medium industrial enterprises.

Official statements have reiterated the positive impact of the programme, which has so far benefited 1300 industrial facilities through direct finance as well as training and technological modernization.²³ It culminated in the establishment of the Euro-Egyptian business council. However, several critics doubt the merits of the programme, particularly because funding is less than comparable to those the EU has offered other partners for the same purpose (amounting to 2 billion euros).²⁴ Moreover, the programme is seen as being insufficient to achieve the multifaceted task of modernization, which should involve an extensive R&D programme, marketing research and training, in addition to the more structural aspects of bureaucratic and legislative reform.²⁵ These deficiencies are not blamed on the programme in itself but rather on EMP sponsored free trade. The unfinished task of industrial modernization is the most authentic and reiterated criticism of the partnership agreement. Hence, the future legitimacy of the partnership hangs in the balance, depending on the evolution of the programme and whether it is able to maintain the support it has already mobilized, and create sustainable material and economic benefits.

The economic impact of EU enlargement is a less pressing issue in the Egyptian debate. Thus, clear and well-articulated assessments of EU enlargement on the EMP and on the Egyptian economy in particular are almost non-existent. The Egyptian view of the New Neighbourhood Initiative (NNI) launched on the eve of enlargement was largely reactive and eclectic. The coverage voiced predominantly official Egyptian and European views, which were optimistic about the economic prospects of enlargement; opening up a vast European market of 75 million to Egyptian exports.²⁶ The existence of a special relationship with some of the newcomers - Romania and Malta in particular - was highlighted. Some business associations shared the official optimism citing similar reasons. However, there has been increased concern among economic experts since then, with fears that Eastern Europe will be favoured by EU economic assistance and direct investment policies at the expense of Mediterranean partners.²⁷

Moreover, economic experts' reports have highlighted areas of the economy that may suffer because of the enlargement, especially agricultural exports and food industry exports, given the EU agricultural quota. On this view, the new members do not constitute traditional export markets for Egypt, so that the Egyptian agricultural export quota will have to be redistributed among the 25 members, while new members will enjoy full access to the Egyptian market.²⁸ The NNI debate, which has been largely economic, has moved from unrestrained optimism towards a critical view of the negative economic impact on vulnerable sectors, particularly in the light of the quota system. The differentiated approach put forward by the initiative, which entails the potential introduction of political and economic conditionality to the EMP, was largely absent from a debate dominated by highly technical economic issues.

In the press, sub-regional frameworks within the EMP in which Egypt participates play a role in legitimising the EMP. Although not strictly logical, Egyptian and European PR campaigns and official statements seek to sell the idea that there is any conflict between the EMP and Arab integration, arguing that the EMP can pave the way for better Arab regionalism.²⁹ It is argued that Arab integration within the EMP adds to

1. The Industrial Modernization Programme

2. The EU Enlargement and the New Neighbourhood Initiative

3. Sub-Regional Integration within the EMP

the Euro-Mediterranean partnership, facilitates inter-Arab cooperation, and balances Euro-Arab relations, creating a relationship between balanced blocs rather than between a unified bloc on one side and individual Arab countries on the other.³⁰ The Agadir process, therefore, was welcomed as a step towards achieving a common Arab market.³¹ Official discourse on from both sides has compared the process to European integration, which began as an economic enterprise and expanded to political integration.³²

Moreover, from an Egyptian perspective, Agadir offered an institutional boost to the Mediterranean countries in their relations with the EU within the EMP. This which would enhance their bargaining power *vis-à-vis* the EU, which would become more effective than the individual bargaining power of single states. It is noteworthy, however, that despite a long-declared preference for inter-Arab regional integration, rival Arab regional forums that exclude Egypt are very cautiously dealt with. A case in point is the 5+5 framework. Thus, the Tunis summit held in December 2003 received little coverage and critical analysis. The 5+5 framework is portrayed as a rival framework to the 'comprehensive' Barcelona Process, which the EU hopes will encourage Eastern Mediterranean countries to shift their position with regard to the Arab-Israeli conflict, which has acted as a *de facto* limitation on a fully working Barcelona Process. The EU, and France in particular, are perceived to have favoured western Mediterranean region given the absence of political hurdles in this region and lesser sensitivity to the Arab-Israeli problem.³³ In other words, despite the ideological preference for inter-Arab sub-regional frameworks, the Egyptian position is primarily conditioned by its view of its national interest.

II. Political Aspects of the EMP

The partnership as an economic enterprise has arguably had a negative impact on its political profile. Defined exclusively by the EU role in the peace process, other political aspects of the EMP tended to be lost in the debate, and were discussed as part of the role of the EU as an international power, with awareness of the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) and the European defence policy limited to very small highly elitist circles of officials and experts.

The Expectation/ Disappointment Syndrome

Unlike economic issues, political matters were not discussed in the press as to generate public debate, but remained rather the business of highly exclusive academic or professional circles. In this respect, the evolution of the CFSP, EUROFOR, and EU security matters and its political role in the region are all discussed through the prism of an EU global role and trans-Atlantic relations, rather than in relation to the partnership. After September 11, 2001 in particular anti-US factions in the press welcomed advances in European defence policy or CFSP, as this was seen as a way to check US hegemony. One *Al Wafd* editorial, for example, celebrated the creation of EUROFOR with a title "for the first time in European history: the establishment of a common army despite American objections".

The war in Iraq consolidated this trend. European defence policy that serves purely European interests is welcomed as a counterbalance to NATO, which is vulnerable to manipulation by unilateral American interests. Thus, moves to establish a European force independently from NATO was very much welcomed, and indeed exaggerated as an example of a growing rift in trans-Atlantic relations.³⁴

Essentially, the debate on CFSP lacks clarity and sophistication. It is generally considered as part of the EU integration effort (i.e., as an internal EU affair rather than as an area of interest for the partnership). On the one hand, the institution is admired as a symbol of integration, and on the other it is viewed as a way to further Arab interests by diminishing US hegemony. European foreign policy representatives to the Middle East, and Javier Solana in particular, are appreciated. The mere presence of European representatives is considered positive. The activities of and visits by European officials are intensively covered, particularly when opinions that are critical of Israel or the US are voiced, or convergence is expressed on other areas of special interest.

Thus, partnership issues are viewed and assessed through the prism of the global aspects of EU-Arab and American-Arab relations, with no specific mention of Egyptian security imperatives and the impact of European defence policy on them. The evolution of the discourse on the political aspects of the partnership has been most influenced by the international and regional context after the Palestinian Intifada,

32. Chris Patten, "Agadir and the Road to Prosperity", *Al Ahrām*, 25/2/2004.

33. Mohamed El Sayed Selim, "The Significance of the Renaissance of 5+5 Euro Maghrebi Framework", *Al Ahrām*, 6/1/2004.

34. Said El Lawendi, "The Cross-Atlantic Rift Escalates", *Al Ahrām*, 11/5/2003.

35. Emad Gad, "A Call for Contemplating the European Experience of Joint Action", *Al Ahrām*, 20/4/2003. *Al Ahrām* Opinion, "Another Lesson from Europe", *Al Ahrām*, 1/12/2003. Abdel Aziz Hamouda, "The European Union and the Arab Union", *Al Ahrām*, 17/2/2004.

36. Mohamed Salmawi, "The Euro and the Arab Dream of Unity", *Al Ahrām*, 7/11/2001. "The Euro: A Miracle and a Model", *Al Ahrām*, 6/3/2002.

37. Said El Lawendi, "The Euro: A Symbol for European Rebellion Against American Hegemony", *Al Ahrām*, 12/12/2001.

38. Salama Ahmed Salama, "America is Lonely", *Al Ahrām*, 21/2/2002.

39. Emad Gad, "The European Vision of the Axis of Evil Notion", *Al Ahrām*, 23/2/2002.

Taha El Magdoub, "Europe and American Unilateralism", *Al Ahrām*, 5/6/2002. "America and Europe, Allies or Aliens", 3/6/2002.

40. Abdel Azim Hamad, "America Does Not Need Europe Militarily, but Cannot Go It Alone Politically", *Al Ahrām*, 16/3/2002.

41. Abbas El Tarabili, "Homoum Masreya", *Al Wafd*, 19/3/2004.

the *de facto* halt of the peace process, the September 11, 2001 attacks and the war in Iraq. Against this troubled backdrop, the debate on the political aspects of the EMP has evinced two conflicting ideas: the EU as a natural benevolent political ally, and Europe as the home of former colonial power. The view that predominates depends on the political context and Arab-EU convergence of current hot political issues. The EU is seen as a model for *would be* Arab regional integration. Extensive coverage on EU internal developments (i.e., negotiations to politically unify Europe, the establishment of a single currency, and enlargement) implicitly contrasts the growing power of the EU as a counterbalance to US hegemony and holds the EU up as a model for successful regional integration in a part of the world that has suffered from conflict for decades. The contrast between successful European integration and Arab disintegration is implicit in most analyses of the EU. This is quite noticeable when the EU is moving towards greater political or economic integration. Events that signal such progress are usually held up as “lessons” for Arab integration.³⁵ The advent of the single currency, for example, was celebrated – and contrasted with failed Arab integration dreams.³⁶ The existence of two competing currencies, the euro and the dollar, was portrayed as a check on US political and economic unilateralism.³⁷ Growing convergence on the post-September 11, 2001 war on terrorism has deepened the perception of the EU as a political partner. Indeed, EU-US differences were extensively covered, highlighted and at times exaggerated. The trans-Atlantic ‘clash’ was seen to include differences over the Kyoto Protocol, the Arab-Israeli conflict, and the war in Iraq, and even economic areas of difference such as the debate on genetically modified food. The image in press was indeed of an Atlantic relationship in crisis.

Even some of the most vocal critics of the EU highlighted the differences in positions between the United States and Europe and praised the latter.³⁸ European criticism of President Bush’s speech on the “axis of evil” was underscored through extensive coverage of European official statements, in opinion pieces and political analyses.³⁹ The political – if not military – impact of the EU on US power was highlighted.⁴⁰

Despite later British involvement in the war, only some liberal and left-wing opposition paper opinion pieces actually argued that there was a clash of civilizations, lumping the EU together with the US into one aggressive camp and citing neo-colonialism and new crusades.⁴¹ Mainstream editorials in all three papers, however, highlighted *moderate* positions during the war on terror and rejected the idea of civilizational polarization. Despite the negative impact of Berlusconi’s comments about the superiority of western civilization, a positive attitude towards the EU prevailed. There was also a less pronounced tendency to tone down the extent of the trans-Atlantic rift, through an attempt to put American-European differences into perspective.⁴² There tends to be a roller-coaster effect where EU reporting is concerned. There are professions of “faith” in the EU as a savior from US hegemony, which quickly turns into harsh criticism when the EU policies and attitudes fail to meet expectations. There is therefore a cyclical expectations/disappointment syndrome, particularly where the Arab-Israeli conflict and the war in Iraq are concerned, which play a key role in shaping the context in which the partnership debate evolves even though they have no direct bearing on it.

There is considerable consensus in the Egyptian press attitude towards the European role as a balanced broker in the Arab-Israeli peace settlement. European condemnations of Israeli atrocities are extensively covered and highlighted. The European stance towards Palestinian President Arafat – the EU rejection of his expulsion and the siege – was greatly welcomed. Identification with the EU was such that Israel has even been cited as the main obstacle in the way of the EU attaining global status.⁴³ A public opinion poll showing that 59% of Europeans perceive Israel as the main threat to world peace was extensively highlighted and welcomed, despite its dubious effect on the capacity of the EU to gain leverage over Israel, with Israeli charges of anti-Semitism coming into play.⁴⁴

This positive image of the EU has weighed positively on the partnership when there are active peace negotiations. The coming to power of Sharon and the end of the peace process have generated what can be called “collective disappointment” in the Arab world,⁴⁵ which had a negative impact on the image of the political aspects of the partnership. Thus, increased expectations of the EU as a natural ally are usually followed by increased disappointment when the EU fails to meet the expectations. Negative characterizations of the EU appear in opinion editorials (i.e., “Europe’s impotence”,⁴⁶ “Europe Lacks the Courage”,⁴⁷ “Where is the European Role?”⁴⁸, “Arafat Surrenders

1. The Arab-Israeli Conflict

42. Mostafa El Feki, “Friends at Odds”, *Al Ahrām*, 11/2/2003.

43. Emad Gad, Anti Semitism: “European Attempts to Counter Blackmail”, *Al Ahrām*, 18/6/2002. Abdel A’ati Mohamed, “For Europe to Confront Israel”, *Al Ahrām*, 25/2/2003. Mohamed El Samak, “Israel Between the US and Europe”, *Al Ahrām*, 19/2/2003.

44. Salam Ahmed Salama, “Israel in European Eyes”, *Al Ahrām*, 5/11/2003. Hani Assal, “The European Union and the Poll Paradox”, *Al Ahrām*, 7/11/2003. “Europe Defies the Holocaust Guilt”, *Al Ahrām*, 22/11/2003. Salam Ahmed Salama, “Anti Semitism”, *Al Ahrām*, 23/11/2003.

and Europe Fails,”⁴⁹ “The Myth of the European Role”),⁵⁰ all of which lament Europe’s inability to deliver in the region “at a moment of American hegemony.”⁵¹

Paradoxically, despite growing consensus on the fair – if insufficient – role of the EU in the region, the press will not tolerate EU positions or policies that go against perceived Arab rights or positions. This was most notable in a number of cases. The EU list of terrorist organizations was first welcomed as “ameliorating the pressure of the American list,”⁵² but was subsequently harshly criticized when *Hamas* was included. This produced an outburst of anger with the “unexpected” move by the EU and led to a plethora of op-eds condemning the EU position, which was seen to compromise Palestinian rights and bow to American pressure⁵³ and even to support Israeli state terrorism by robbing the Palestinian of the right to defend themselves.⁵⁴ Such incidents usually give rise to anti-Western voices in press. Europe’s role is questioned and its colonial history remembered. This view, which is less often voiced, sees the EU as being “unwilling to take clear stances against Israel, and sufficing with verbal condemnations of the Israeli prime minister.”⁵⁵ Scepticism is at its highest level after the EU fails to take expected punitive action against Israel (i.e., after threatened EU sanctions against Israel for destroying Palestinian infrastructures established with EU funds failed to materialize) and when there is marked Israeli indifference to European mediation (particularly when Mr. Solana was denied access to Arafat in early April 2002 during the Ramallah siege).⁵⁶

2. The War in Iraq

Iraq provided an important occasion to confirm the Euro-Arab alliance. The war played an important role in highlighting Arab-European convergence and in consolidating trust in the European role in the region. Before the war, EU-US differences were the focus of press briefs and opinion articles, particularly French and German opposition to the Anglo-American alliance. US-European differences were usually viewed as evidence of a deep and structural rift. Opinion polls in EU countries opposing US foreign policy were the focus of news briefs and opinion articles.⁵⁷ Opinion polls showing European public opposition to American policies were also highlighted. French-German anti-war positions led some of the most vocal critics of the EU to praise the European position of the war,⁵⁸ and its role in opposing US military intervention schemes and “imperial aspirations.”⁵⁹ The image of the EU was seen to be respectful of Arab rights and positions and of the UN and international legality, particularly when US respect for both was at its lowest point. Thus, French and German opposition to the war in Iraq was not only perceived as being in line with Egyptian perceived interests but was also one that represented a triumph for international law and legitimacy.⁶⁰

In addition to mainstream applause for the European role in the war in Iraq, there were other currents – albeit less pronounced – in the opposition press in which historical references to European colonialism were made, the establishment of the state of Israel, the Sykes-Pico agreements that established the states of Syria, Jordan, Lebanon and Palestine and paved the way for the British mandate in Palestine.⁶¹ There were also negative views of the EU inability to stop the war in Iraq. The EU was blamed for its “lame role” and its failure to act as a reliable great power, or to be “free” of American hegemony.⁶² Thus, a reading of the press shows that the Iraq war was seen mainly as a test of European “aspirations” to escape American hegemony.⁶³ There were great hopes and expectations attached to Europe’s capacity to reverse US war intentions,⁶⁴ and then disappointment when this failed to happen.

III. Cultural and Human Aspects of the EMP

The cultural and human aspects of the EMP are the least covered. Coverage consists almost exclusively of PR advertisements of projects funded under the third basket, or courteous acknowledgements by Egyptian officials of EU-funded projects. Discussion of the third basket as a forum for cultural and human partnership is almost absent. The century-old debate on Egypt’s Mediterranean identity seldom if ever finds its way into the press. Moreover, discussions of the value system of each side and areas of congruence vs. difference only receive scant news coverage when the EU promotes initiatives for civilizational and religious dialogue. Discussion of EU human rights and democratisation policies in the Mediterranean are not given any press attention. Further, some of the most prominent third basket issues for other southern Mediterranean countries are not a point of interest in Egypt (e.g. EU migration policies is a case in point. It should be remembered that there are an estimated 300-400 thousand Egyptian in mostly professional areas, which means that EU labour and

migration policies are not as relevant as they are for other countries). Scant press coverage of the third basket issues is partly a result of the hyper-importance of the economic aspects of the partnership, and of lack of information and awareness and the perceived lesser importance of the human and cultural aspects of the EMP. It may also reflect partly the official stance, which is to avoid open disagreement with the EU over democracy-related issues, since the latter has worked with pre-set government rules and pacing. The EU Commission delegation has often stated that the Egyptian government does not impede the work of the MEDA Democracy Programme, unlike other Southern partners. Thus, there was almost no coverage of the Commission Communication, "Reinvigorating EU actions on Human Rights and Democratization with Mediterranean Partners," which was published on 21 May 2003, and no analysis of the differentiated approach of the Wider Europe Neighbourhood document, which also touched on democracy, pluralism, and respect for human rights, civil liberties and the rule of law.⁶⁵ Unspoken fears of cultural hegemony are latent in the partnership discourse, however. The detailed *Al Ahrām* coverage of the official Egyptian response to the European Union regarding sexual freedom⁶⁶ was indicative of considerable public support for the official stance, which was seen as protecting the value system from foreign intrusion.

Matters of cultural sensitivity such as changing the education system, the Islamic inheritance system, abolishing the death penalty and allowing homosexual freedom are all underrepresented hot points. The worry is not that there are irreconcilable value differences *per se*, but the top down, patronizing approach of the EU where the third basket is concerned,⁶⁷ especially given the absence of a counter-narrative by the beneficiaries of the MEDA Democracy Programme, namely Egyptian civil society. This situation was shaken up, however, following the German Foreign Minister's declaration on political reform in the Middle East at the 40th Munich Conference on Security, and the European role in the American Greater Middle East Initiative. The ensuing debate exemplifies how unexpressed fears and misunderstanding can distort the partnership because of fear, mistrust, or lack of understanding. The aftermath of that reform initiative has witnessed the rise of anti-western sentiments in the press, which put the EU and US in the same patronizing camp. The initiative was portrayed as another attempt to manipulate the Arab world through false calls for reform, and historical references were made to the colonial era and even to the Crusades. Commenting on the German's foreign Minister's initiative, Salah Eddin Hafez, a prominent columnist mocked the "auction of democratic reform initiatives."⁶⁸ More radical accounts saw the initiative as part of new *guardianship*, a return to the colonial era.⁶⁹ The identification of the EU as a partner reached a nadir with accusations of EU member states of working to maximize their individual interests through the Greater Middle East Initiative and against the interests of the region.⁷⁰

Substance aside, the way through which the initiative was launched without prior consultation with the Mediterranean partners brought to the fore all underlying fears that the EMP would turn into a patron or hegemon, leading some of the main proponents of the EU role in the region to criticize its role and characterize it as a "grand delusion".⁷¹ Another argument put forward in the press, however, highlighted the differences between the US and European approaches to Arab reform, and outlined areas of congruence between the Egyptian and European positions. Another lamented the inability of the EU to enforce its different reform views, namely those that emphasise the relationship between the unresolved Palestinian tragedy and terrorism.⁷² Although similar to the situation with the political aspects of EMP, the third basket is even more of a victim of misinformation and underlying mistrust. Further, after being left out in the cold for a long time, the third basket began to gain visibility as a result of an extremely controversial initiative, and the press and public are generally unreceptive towards what is seen as foreign intervention in domestic affairs.

45. Mohamed Sabrin, "Not a Myth: The future of EU Role and the Peace Settlement", interview with Miguel Moratinos, *Al Ahrām*, 31/7/2001.
46. Salama Ahmed Salama, "Europe's Impotence", *Al Ahrām*, 9/4/2002.
47. Salama Ahmed Salama, "Europe Does not have the Courage", *Al Ahrām*, 19/6/2001.
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51. Nabil Fahmy, "The Moment of Truth", *Al Ahrām*, 18/2/2003.
52. Nicola Nasif, Al Nahar, quoted in *Al Ahrām*, 4/1/2004.
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54. Amr El Shobaky, "European Support for Israeli Terrorism", *Al Ahrām*, 16/9/2003.
55. Salama Ahmed Salama, "Illusionary Alternatives", *Al Ahrām*, 13/1/2002. "The Myth of European Impotence", *Al Ahrām*, 19/4/2002.
56. Ibrahim Nafie, "Facts", *Al Ahrām*, 10/4/2004.
57. Hazem Abdel Rahman, "Europe Opposes Bush", *Al Ahrām*, 22 August, 2001. Hazem Abdel Rahman, "Germany and France Against America", *Al Ahrām*, 19/2/2003.
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65. *Wider - Europe-Neighbourhood: A New Framework for Relations with our Eastern and Southern Neighbours*, European Commission, Brussels, 11/3/2003, p. 7.
66. *Al Ahrām*, 1/12/2001.
67. Sameh Abdallah and Magdi El Hosseini, "Europe and US, the beginning of a New Phase", *Al Ahrām*, 4/2/2001.
68. Salah Eddin Hafez, "Democratic Reform in the Euro Mediterranean Auction", *Al Ahrām*, 18/2/2004.
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71. Said El Lawendi, "Europe: The Grand Delusion", *Al Ahrām*, 25/2/2004.
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Conclusions

The view of the partnership on the southern shores of the Mediterranean, and Egypt in particular, is imbalanced. The economic basket is the most visible, overshadowing the political and cultural baskets. Attitudes towards each area of cooperation are disjointed and sometimes contradictory. There is only a proper 'Egyptian view' where the economic basket is concerned. Political and cultural issues are discussed with little or no reference to the partnership. A reading of the press therefore shows there are mixed signals about the partnership: it is credible in economic terms, and ideologically preferred in political terms. This is one of the main ironies of the partnership. It is seen as an economic enterprise, but enjoys stronger political consensus. Economic developments have been praised and criticized, although there has been a growing consensus as to their merits. It is unclear whether this favourable view is a result of the ousting of two major critics of the EMP from office (the Minister of Industry and Technological Development, and the Minister of Economic Planning), or whether it is a function of the success of the IMP. More importantly, it is unclear whether this positive trend is irreversible. Responses to the New Neighbourhood Initiative and its perceived negative economic impact, as well as the view that trade liberalization will negatively affect vulnerable economic sectors, means that a positive consensus depends on various factors: (1) the success of the IMP in increasing industrial competitiveness and creating an important constituency to consolidate the credibility of the EMP; (2) the ability of the EU to maintain its image as the exemplary facilitator of Arab development and integration, and shrug off the image of the Leviathan that is gaining ground as a result of enlargement and related pending issues. Unless these conditions are met, the primary source of legitimacy of the partnership could be eroded.

EMP political and cultural aspects are less clear and implicitly identified with the role of the EU in contributing to a peaceful settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict and with the EU as a political ally against perceived American and/or Israeli hostility. The dramatic post-September 11, 2001 changes in the region, however, forcefully brought the political and cultural aspects of the partnership to the fore, but given the lack of preparation, the debate has been shaped by a narrow view of the partnership as an economic enterprise. Other political and human aspects have been treated as an extension of existing relations and not as a part of the Barcelona Process. Although this has not had any clear repercussions on the partnership (discourse on the EU has remained largely positive), it reveals the importance of increasing the visibility of political and cultural issues and initiating a transparent dialogue on those matters. It also shows that viewing the partnership in economic terms – an official Egyptian and European preference – has narrowed the constituency of the EMP and rendered it more vulnerable to adverse changes of context, which could hinder the spontaneous spill over from economic integration to political and cultural relations.

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