

## **Transatlantic Cooperation on Middle East Reform: A European Misjudgement?**

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June 2004 witnessed a concentration of summit activity on the issue of Middle East reform. At the G8 meeting in Sea Island a Broader Middle East and North Africa Initiative (BMEI) was agreed, while further discussions at the subsequent EU-US summit in Ireland deliberated the detailed form that transatlantic cooperation might take within this new framework. A prominent feature of recent diplomatic activity has been Europe's hesitant response to US calls for transatlantic coordination in the promotion of political change in the Middle East.

Shortly after the attacks of 9/11 the Bush administration formulated a new Middle East Partnership Initiative, which was followed by a proposed Greater Middle East Initiative, of which the finally agreed BMEI is a scaled down offspring. In the development of its own democracy and human rights policies, the EU has increasingly found itself obliged to respond to the US's new activity and stated intentions. The extent of possible transatlantic cooperation on democracy promotion in the Middle East has risen to the top of the international agenda. European governments tentatively backed the BMEI at Sea Island, but the perception is that profound differences remain between Europe and the US in the Middle East. It is widely judged that the well-established issues of transatlantic divergence – Iraq, Iran, Syria, the Arab-Israeli conflict – have crystallized into conceptually different approaches to the broad agenda of democratic reform in the Middle East. The International Crisis Group recognized that the BMEI 'may at least apply some balm on a transatlantic relationship rubbed raw by difference over Iraq', but concluded pessimistically that 'friction is almost as likely as balm...over the next few years'.<sup>2</sup>

This paper questions some of the positions adopted by the EU towards transatlantic coordination in the Middle East. It develops three arguments. First, that differences between US and European approaches to democracy promotion are not as clear-cut as invariably assumed. Second, that the EU has been mistaken in the grounds on which it has chosen to confront US initiatives. And third, that the potential benefits of stronger transatlantic cooperation on Middle East reform outweigh the likely drawbacks. Running through the paper is a central, critical theme: many aspects of the Bush administration's Middle East policies have elicited justified European opprobrium; but, Europe risks letting a general environment of transatlantic tension lead it into potentially serious misjudgement on the design of Middle East reform strategy.

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<sup>1</sup> The author is grateful to Mona Yacobian for comments on an initial draft.

<sup>2</sup> International Crisis Group (2004) *The Broader Middle East and North Africa Initiative: Imperilled at Birth*, Briefing, June: pp. 1 and 12

## European Reactions to US Reform Initiatives

Europeans have reacted with notable scepticism to the succession of new US initiatives. A commonly expressed fear is that well-designed, under-stated EU reform efforts will suffer from being associated with more intensive US activity.<sup>3</sup> European criticism has taken two forms. On the one hand, the US is admonished for being more drawn to reactive, symptoms-rather-than-causes approaches to security; on the other hand, it is (often simultaneously) berated for backing democracy in too heavy-handed and instrumental a fashion. And there is much European commonality in this view. Efforts to renew UK-French-German collaboration suggest that the depth of division over Iraq may have been salutary enough to jolt European states into more common endeavour on Middle East reform – this in part serving the UK's desire to counterbalance its involvement in Iraq with the recovery of a broader sense of European distinctiveness.

The Greater Middle East Initiative met with a cool, and in some cases openly hostile, response from European governments. A range of European objections surfaced against this Initiative's proposal for greater transatlantic cooperation on Middle East reform. One concern has been with the US trying to use the EU's well-established presence in the region for its own ends, to wrest control from European initiatives. Another has been with the US 'pinching our ideas', undermining Europe's distinctiveness – the search for which often appears to have become an end in itself for some in the EU. Still another reaction has been the fear that partnership with the US would constrain European options, while – based on experience in the Palestinian Occupied Territories – doing little to share the financial burden.

The most specific European complaint was that the Greater Middle East Initiative was not drawn up in consultation with either governments or civil society in the Middle East. In order to sign up to a common initiative at June's G8 summit, Europeans – sometimes in conjunction with Arab governments – insisted on far-reaching revisions: a change of name to the Broader Middle East and North Africa Initiative; a narrower geographical focus, excluding Pakistan and Afghanistan; a strengthened link between reform potential and progress on the Arab-Israeli conflict; reference to 'modernisation' instead of 'democratisation'; and the absolute centrality of consultation with Arab governments and of references to the fact that 'change cannot be imposed'. This last concern was reflected through the BMEI's centre-piece Forum for the Future, a ministerial forum designed to discuss reforms in partnership with government representatives from the Middle East. The focus of the whole Initiative turned from engaging civil society forces towards ensuring Arab governments' participation – or at least forbearance<sup>4</sup>; in the end, five Middle Eastern heads of government did attend the G8 meeting. The US was keen for political aid programmes to be managed under a common fund, to reduce duplication and attain greater critical mass, but Europeans agreed only to information sharing within a new democracy assistance dialogue (co-sponsored by Turkey, Yemen and Italy. Europeans argued against the creation of new structures, agreeing to consultations but not formal cooperation on the concrete implementation of democracy strategy.

In short, a widespread view is that Europeans have contributed to reining back the US from a heavy-handed imposition of democracy through the original Greater Middle East Initiative. In

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<sup>3</sup> See for example, Perthes V. (2004) 'America's Greater Middle East and Europe: Key Issues for Dialogue', *Middle East Policy* 11/3: 85-97

<sup>4</sup> ICG, *ibid*: p. 13

this broader sense, European policies have in recent months evolved in large measure as a counter-reaction to US policy. Driven by a desire to avoid being written out the Middle Eastern script as the Bush administration ratcheted up its reform commitments in the region, some European donors have been galvanized into strengthened democracy policies. But far from promising greater transatlantic cooperation, such efforts have been designed further to distance European policies from those of the US. Recent European initiatives have been imbued with notable features that are as much about off-setting as supporting American efforts. Indeed, a kind of reverse osmosis is increasingly evident. An increasing association of 'democratic imperialism' with the ascendancy of US neo-conservatives has increased European determination to stake out what can be presented as a different approach to Middle East reform. Most European governments have, for example, remained decidedly cool towards the Community of Democracies, seeing this as an 'overly Americanized' initiative – an ambivalence that has persisted in many cases even as Arab activists have increasingly pushed for reform strategies to be pursued through this framework. And in Iran, a judgment that the Bush administration has increasingly conflated pressure on WMD with advocacy of regime change has played a primary role in European governments' *delinking* of these two areas.

Many European policy-makers have clearly used the Middle East reform agenda as an arena for staking out broader positions towards US pre-eminence. This has been seen through the frequent warnings issued by Europeans to the US that democracy cannot be 'imposed by force'. The 'partnership' approach is explicitly justified and advocated as the EU's 'comparative advantage' over the US.<sup>5</sup> European donors acknowledge that they have been galvanized in large part by their judgment that more concentrated EU effort is required to neutralize MEPI's likely counterproductive effects. One advisor admits to how his minister was mobilised into new action by the 'embarrassment' that the US had pulled 'so far ahead' on democracy policy since 9/11. Across the Middle East, the factors both driving and inhibiting European democracy policies often reflect a perceived need either to assuage or counter the US, more than deliberation over the strategic effects of political change itself.

It is widely judged that US perspectives fail to share a European recognition that reform policies properly require a long term and holistic approach. The distinctive European approach in the Middle East is asserted to be one based on gradual and comprehensive processes of reform that link political change to broader issues of social justice, local participation and the modernization of governance structures. In a widely quoted recent speech, Commissioner Chris Patten felt it important to warn US policy-makers that 'developing democracy is not like making instant coffee'.<sup>6</sup>

European policy-makers have professed concern at the US's tendency to overplay the link between 9/11 and democracy promotion in the Middle East. Geographical proximity – it is commonly suggested – has imbued European strategies with a more sensitive, more complete and more long-term take on security and reform in the Middle East, that is adjudged by Europeans to eschew the 'pick and choose' short-termism of US diplomacy. The US's proposed exclusion of certain states – Iran, Syria and initially, Libya – from new economic and political projects self-evidently takes policy in the opposite direction from recent European initiatives towards these states. Indeed, Europeans distinguish their self-consciously regional approach from the – at least, erstwhile – US preference for approaching reform through preferential bilateral relations. Congressional proposals for a \$1 billion a year Trust for Democracy have been criticised by Europeans, sceptical of such overtly political approaches.

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<sup>5</sup> Commission of the European Communities, *European Security Strategy – Options for an EU Strategy towards the Middle East*, March 2004, p.1

<sup>6</sup> 'Islam and the West: At the Crossroads', speech at the Oxford Centre for Islamic Studies, 24 May 2004

## Over-stating the EU-US Divide?

Many of these European concerns are not without foundation. Significant differences between US policies and European strategies clearly persist. At the very least, the BMEI 'papered over differences' on the more concrete aspects of reform policies.<sup>7</sup> But, there has also been serious misperception, and an exaggeration of the presumed breach between American and European approaches to political reform in the Middle East. Three factors are pertinent in this regard.

First, the US has in fact come to engage in the same kind of bottom-up and indirect work that many in the EU suggest is indicative of a uniquely European approach. European strictures warning the US not to seek democracy 'through the barrel of a gun' look incongruous aside the gradualism of much US work on the ground in the Middle East. There is something of a straw man quality to many EU pronouncements. Much State Department and USAID rhetoric shares the same language and strikes the same tone as European documents and ministerial speeches. Even the most hawkish of Pentagon neo-cons do not appear to be engaged in serious planning to use force as a general means of spreading democracy.

In many countries the EU and US have in fact funded a strikingly similar range of civil society organizations. The orientation towards service delivery organizations has more in common with US strategy than many in the EU realize or care to acknowledge.<sup>8</sup> While the US does fund much highly instrumental democracy propaganda, well over 50 per cent of the USAID democracy budget now goes to bottom-up civil society projects, and most of the rest to a similar array of good governance, women's rights and 'civic education' projects as makes up European funding profiles. Whatever the grating discourse heard from some senior members of the Bush administration, a detailed look at the kinds of concrete political aid projects funded by the US suffices to render unconvincing the contention that the US 'only does hard power'. US policy was already becoming increasingly gradualist before European governments sought to influence the Greater Middle East Initiative, MEPI itself focusing on governance issues and fairly soft civil society projects. Experts had from early on criticized the Greater Middle East Initiative for progressing little beyond the ineffectual and tentative policies of the 1990s.<sup>9</sup>

Second, it is necessary to question the notion that European approaches are far more focused on the roots of terrorism in preference to US-style hard security proclivities. While routinely admonishing the US for its direct security approaches, the EU has itself also prioritized defensive measures most notably since 9/11. By far the most significant areas of EU policy-making activity since 9/11 have been in the justice and home affairs field, with governments agreeing tough new anti-terrorism legislation; more police and judicial cooperation; increased powers for Europol; a new Common Arrest Warrant; strengthened border controls; a new border police and external borders agency; and new anti-terrorist and readmission clauses to be included in all EU trade and cooperation agreements. Funding for such measures has far outstripped new democracy promotion resources. Significantly, European governments have readily cooperated with the US on extradition and migration matters, in sharp contrast to their reluctance to be associated with US democracy promotion goals. Spain, France and the UK all signed up to the new \$10 million anti-proliferation initiative launched by the Bush administration. Europeans have routinely berated the US for focusing purely on the symptoms of terrorism with a reactive and short-term mentality; but, it would be hard not to inveigh against EU strategies for exhibiting exactly the same bias. It is salutary to observe that while

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<sup>7</sup> Yacoubian M. (2004) *Promoting Middle East Democracy I: The Transatlantic Dimension*, USIP Working Paper, forthcoming: 2

<sup>8</sup> For an overview of US funding, see Hawthorne A. (2004) *Middle East Democracy: Is Civil Society the Answer?*, Carnegie Working Paper no. 44

<sup>9</sup> Carothers T. and Ottaway M. (2003) *The Greater Middle East Initiative: Off to a False Start*, Carnegie Briefing

the Madrid 3/11 bombings appeared initially to have widened some EU-US differences, they may over the medium term bring European and American threat perceptions into line, investing European perceptions with greater defensive immediacy.

A third factor often overlooked is that a range of different perspectives on democracy promotion cut across a simple Europe-US division. There are a range of views and approaches towards democracy promotion in the Middle East but it is not always the Atlantic that divides. While the contours of some distinctively European logic can be detected, on some issues a variety of views has been evident within Europe. Many of the most significant divisions are not so much between Europe and the US, or even between different European nation states, as between different ministries. The approaches pursued by different European development ministries have more in common with each other and with USAID than with other agencies of their respective national administrations. The lines adopted by European foreign ministries often have more in common with State Department discourse than with their own defense departments – although some practitioners do see something of a gap opening as the State Department considers a more ‘forward-leaning’ approach. Some Europeans acknowledge that on the ground within the Middle East, discussions on funding and lobbying strategies often produce unity around a ‘like-minded’ group incorporating select European states, the US, Canada and Norway, far more than at an EU level.

In relation to Turkey, the UK and some other member states have moved closer to the US line of supporting a relatively low democratic threshold for Turkish EU accession. While dealing with Iran has engendered something of a genuine EU-versus-US split, a spectrum of opinion within the EU has been evident on the issue of political change. Moreover, seeking to offset other agencies, the US State Department has itself begun to adopt a more bottom-up gradualist approach in this case, looking at ways of circumventing legislative restrictions to fund civil society organization in Iran. Divergence also exists beneath the often-stated EU concern with developing a distinctive approach towards Syria. The UK has blocked the signing of a new association agreement with Syria, ostensibly over language on non-proliferation, but with other European states suspecting Washington’s influence over London on the broader principle of engagement with Damascus (a charge denied by the UK). US sanctions against Syria were themselves agreed rather reluctantly by president Bush and in relatively limited form. More generally, while some European states have been concerned at their policies being ‘infected’ by association with Washington, the UK has seen merit in joining forces with the US as a way of sending a more forceful political signal to the region. Overall, intra-EU differences indicate that the paucity of coordination across the Atlantic is not qualitatively different from the limited coordination within Europe. Indeed, most European donors have a better knowledge of US policies than the initiatives of their European partners!

Even in the more indirect sense of the kind of political and societal model being conveyed, in many respects there has clearly been little in the way of a common European model to sell to the Middle East. European states’ different legal traditions can often produce confusing results for aid recipients; for example, Anglo-Saxon regulatory codes have often been promoted within economic governance work alongside French-based provisions in administrative and constitutional law projects. The resolute secularism of the French state and disestablishment of the Swedish church exist alongside the Church of England’s privileged position in British political life – this latter a fact that has been frequently used by UK ministers to rebut Muslim concerns over the compatibility of democracy and religion. The French government’s aim of creating a ‘French Islam’ appeared more concerned with curtailing practices in France through the state than with disseminating a model based on the genuine privatisation of religion. The banning of headscarves in French schools has resonated far more in the Middle East than European governments’ claims to represent a democratic model for the region to aspire to, and was openly rejected by other European states. European governments have often sought to use this variety of institutional models as a means of

helping sell to Arab countries the message that democracy can take a range of locally generated forms. Arguably, however, this often slips into tautology aimed unconvincingly at patching up differences: the very lack of a European model, it is sometimes suggested, is Europe's distinctive model!

### **Misdirected Fire?**

In sum, the distinction between US and European strategies has been far more blurred than is often assumed. Crucially, this suggests that the EU's recent criticisms of US approaches have often taken aim at the wrong targets. European positions on transatlantic cooperation have diverted attention from the most pressing challenges for political reform strategies in the Middle East.

European concern with the overly muscular tenor of US plans looks increasingly overstated. Much commentary has scored as a victory the role played by Europeans - and Middle Eastern governments - in diluting US plans. This dilution may indeed have helpfully succeeded in chastening some in the Bush administration, but it is doubtful that it represents much of an advance for democratic possibilities in the Middle East. It may be viewed as puzzling that concern arose over Arab regimes' hostile reaction to the Greater Middle East Initiative proposals. While such opposition from the Middle East engendered much worried comment both in Europe and the Middle East, it was arguably not surprising: it might be thought incongruous if a strategy designed to further democracy were not opposed by those autocratic elites standing to lose from any dispersal of political power in the Middle East. Debate has centred extensively on the concern that 'change cannot be imposed from outside' - this being a constant warning issuing from Arab governments, European ministers and international organizations such as the United Nations. Quite undeniable, of course, but not an assertion that illuminates greatly in debating concrete reform strategies - this frequently repeated refrain posits a sharp dichotomy between internal and external factors, when these are in practice deeply entwined and mutually conditioning.

Moreover, signs of a tough, coercive imposition of democracy have hardly been the most widespread and eminent feature of US policy. Take Iraq out of the equation - along with occasional and so far apparently speculative remarks in relation to Iran and Syria - and it would be more convincing to fault US strategy for its extreme caution than its undue heavy-handedness. Neither the GMEI nor MEPI intimated at the use of punitive policy instruments. The new BMEI remains vague on implementation details, fails to offer new funding and includes no mention of prospective conditionality being exerted against non-reforming regimes. Apart from the Forum on the Future and the democracy assistance dialogue, the BMEI's main concrete programmes are on literacy, vocational training, entrepreneurship, small business development and microfinance. The Economist opined that the Initiative had 'ended up more like a traditional development project in the Arab world than an attempt to use democratization as an instrument in the war on terror'.<sup>10</sup> There has been no commitment, either in the BMEI or more generally, to support moderate Islamists in any politically significant sense. Some critics have even charged the Bush administration with being 'a discreet missionary for the faith', in its indulgence of the more problematic elements of political Islam<sup>11</sup> - precisely the inverse critique of the European opprobrium directed at US policies. The US has remained relatively soft on its autocratic 'allies' in the region: a few days after his apparently historic NED speech committing the US to move away from authoritarian alliances, president Bush received president Bin Ali in the White House with warm conviviality and no mention of democracy! It might be argued that the BMEI is the

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<sup>10</sup> The Economist 4 June 2004, p.23

<sup>11</sup> Pipes D. and Stillman M. (2002) 'The United States Government: Islam's Patron?', *Middle East Quarterly*, Winter: 25-35

inverse of what would be most advisable: a high profile initiative with limited substance, when what is needed in the context of the Middle East is more rigorous and critical low profile activity without the political fanfare.

Indeed, of far greater significance than any defining 'Europe-versus-US' dichotomy have been the shortcomings common to *both* European and US policies. The striking aspect of both European and US strategies is the limited amount of resources so far devoted to Middle East political reform. Most of the proposed increases in US political aid budgets have already been slashed by Congress, while the Middle East will still receive under 10 per cent of the European Initiative on Democracy and Human Rights after the budget for this increased to 132 million euros in 2004. Both US and European resources have been targeted at relatively apolitical civil society organizations, while failing to promote genuine local ownership over the design of reform related work. Both actors have been poor at rewarding relatively reformist moves in the region; both have eschewed systematic engagement with key strands of political Islam; and both continue to suffer from poorly coordinated decision-making in the area of democracy policy.<sup>12</sup>

And this leads onto a second area of questionably aimed European fire, namely the link made between democratic reform prospects, on the one hand, and the Arab-Israeli and Iraq conflicts, on the other hand. However valid and important the contention that these areas of policy cannot be conceived in isolation from one another, it is one that risks becoming too predominant in European positions. It is on US policies towards the Arab-Israeli conflict and Iraq that most high profile critical attention in Europe has centred. The focus in European debate has overwhelmingly been on asserting how these areas of policy undermine US credibility and thus caution against Europe associating itself with new US reform initiatives. This focus has trumped – and in fact, distorted – assessment of reform strategies themselves. The tenor of much comment has been that reinvigorated initiatives on the peace process need to be linked more tightly and systematically to US-led political reform efforts through the G8.

The Arab-Israeli conflict's complicating impact on reform potential is indeed both well-established and of undeniable significance. But it is helpful only to a point for Europe to continue in effect to assert to the US: 'We will not join with you on Arab reform until you change your policy towards the Arab-Israeli conflict'. The EU should press the US towards a more balanced and committed effort on the Middle East peace process in a way that does genuinely unlock the potential for democratic reforms in Arab countries. But, there is a danger of the EU using the US's plea for transatlantic cooperation on democracy primarily as a negotiating lever to extract changes related to the peace process. Placing such primary emphasis on these links is a strategy that risks neglecting those reform opportunities that may exist in the short term. Arab activists gathered in Doha on 3-4 June 2004 themselves addressed this issue, asserting in their declaration that, 'hiding behind the necessity of resolving the Palestinian question before implementing reform is obstructive and unacceptable'.<sup>13</sup>

This has indeed become an increasingly recognized lesson from the EU's own experience within the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership. The EU has criticized the US for focusing on select bilateral relations in the region – while also generalizing too much about reform prospects at the regional level – and for a reluctance to acknowledge the link to the Middle East peace process. But it has itself begun to de-regionalize aspects of the EMP as a means of circumventing the Arab-Israeli conflict. Conscious of its own experience, the EU should not adopt postures that effectively hold cooperation on the Arab reform agenda hostage to the arrival of a less short-sighted US policy towards the Arab-Israeli conflict.

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<sup>12</sup> For details on European initiatives, see Youngs R. (2004) *Europe's Uncertain Pursuit of Middle East Reform*, Carnegie Working Paper no. 45

<sup>13</sup> Quoted in Arab Reform Bulletin, June 2002, [www.ceip.org](http://www.ceip.org)

## **Better Alone or Together?**

Europeans risk becoming so fixated with disassociating the EU from the US that they are blinded to the advantages of transatlantic coordination. Arguably, the paucity of transatlantic cooperation has been by far a greater shortcoming to democracy promotion efforts than any disadvantage suffered by Europeans being equated with the US. The European focus has been firmly on US policies infecting and sullyng EU initiatives. Such a fear is not unreasonable in the prevailing climate. It may, however, underplay the potentially positive side of the equation, namely that harnessing US political will to the EU's bottom-up approach might actually increase the latter's effectiveness.

The fact that new US activity has galvanised some in the EU into ratcheting-up their own efforts indicates the strength of determination to defend a separate European identity and profile. This may for now be the most telling effect of recent US initiatives: somewhat paradoxically, by calling for transatlantic cooperation the US may push some Europeans into doing more aimed at rendering such US-led partnership less necessary.

At the very least, tighter transatlantic cooperation would make it more difficult for Middle Eastern regimes to play the EU and US off against each other. This has on occasions worked to the detriment of both the EU and US: when the EU started to raise reform issues with the Egyptian government in the mid-1990s, Mubarak's regime could confidently rebuff these efforts by pointing to continued unconditional US support; conversely, when the US moved to push the Algerian regime towards reform the latter was able to cite continued French backing. One transatlantic group of experts has advocated a 'common transatlantic benchmark' for offering solidarity to democracy activists, that could be brought about through the US and EU pressing regimes to sit down with a range of opposition and civil society organisations to design national reform projects.<sup>14</sup> Certainly, given the extreme lack of coherence between different donors' projects, the US proposal to pool and commonly plan political aid initiatives was not without merit.

For all the EU's defensiveness over being emasculated by intensified US agency, American policy-makers have frequently acknowledged that the US 'carries more baggage' in the Middle East and consequently has greater need of a more multilateral effort. This gives the EU leverage to negotiate forms of cooperation that boost its own aims and approaches to reform. As within the EU itself, cooperation need not completely suppress areas of particular national expertise; it can be readily acknowledged that some things may be better done by the Europeans, others by the US. A common transatlantic reform agenda should be able to combine the benefits of a united front with space for diversity in European and US priorities on the ground.

If a change in attitude is required from Europe, however, this must be assisted by a concomitant shift in US positions. Many in the US of course still see the European Union as chronically divided, unable to assume effective leadership and unwilling to undertake tough concrete action. But, such dismissals fail to appreciate the source of European strengths. Diversity, multi-faceted layers of initiatives, and subtle balance contribute towards a distinctive form of European power. The same features held up in Washington as symptomatic of European prevarication and wimpishness in fact lend the EU a form of embedded influence particularly relevant to the aim of fundamentally remoulding the politics

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<sup>14</sup> *'Democracy and Human Development in the Broader Middle East: A Transatlantic Strategy for Partnership'*, Istanbul paper no. 1, German Marshall Fund and the Turkish Economic and Social Studies Foundation: p. 5



of the Middle East. The EU possesses genuine presence and purchase, which the US should recognise and embrace, not belittle and challenge.

While the US's new emphasis on promoting democracy across the Middle East is welcome, and correctly identifies the source of terrorism and instability, this is an area where the EU could most productively play lead role. EU initiatives in the Middle East still require more resources and the backing of firmer political will, but they have laid the foundations from which effective and context-sensitive support for political liberalisation can be built. Rather than trying to assume lead role of lead protagonist, the US might be wiser to content itself with a more secondary role. It is self-evidently the case that in the Middle East the US lacks the kind of legitimacy that enabled it to play a role in developing democracy in Eastern Europe and parts of East Asia. The US's most effective contribution to outside support for Middle East reform would be to back European initiatives, working behind the scenes to encourage a gradual strengthening and broadening of ongoing EU programmes.

If this would be good both for Europe and the US, it is a prospect rendered less likely by the current tenor of US approaches. Europeans were right to fear that the GMEI appeared to draw European in to a US-owned process, no the reverse. Indeed, relying more on European leadership would reverse the whole shift in US policy in recent years and appear to many in Washington as almost counter-intuitive after the divisions engendered by Iraq. Despite some intensified EU efforts, there is still a danger of an inverse logic prevailing: the harder the US presses and the louder it protests at European weakness, the more reluctant the EU becomes to adopt more muscular political approaches that are now derided in Europe as 'the American approach'.

Aspects of current US strategies certainly risk cutting across European work. The US's move towards a series of bilateral free trade areas, for example, has already complicated European schedules to create a regional free trade zone and to harness such regionalism as a key part of its democracy promotion policy. Bilateral US trade negotiations with Bahrain have angered Europeans by undercutting GCC unity just when EU-GCC free trade area talks look set to make progress. (Indeed, the structuring of EU policy around a 'Mediterranean' framework has no counterpart in the American diplomatic mindset and continues to add further unhelpful differentiation).<sup>15</sup> The US must be wiser in appreciating how Europeans tend to counteract shifts in American policy and in recognizing the damage heavy-handed, instrumental new strategies could do to the purchase already being developed through EU initiatives. This might in turn encourage Europeans to move beyond their current obsession with being 'different' and 'other' to the United States, and to themselves harness in more positive fashion the US's new commitment to supporting political change in the Middle East.

Clearly some fast-solidifying attitudes on both sides of the Atlantic would have to shift to permit such a Faustian bargain of mutual compromise. Getting right the balance between cooperation and variation in the Middle East is of potentially unparalleled importance. The skirmishing witnessed so far has engendered questions of profound magnitude. Is the Middle East set to become the theatre of a major family feud within the transatlantic community, the trigger for a seismic parting of the ways for that family's increasingly fractious members? Or are we witnessing the squabbling of siblings still united by the strong bonds and ultimately shared visions that are precisely what permit differences to be expressed so forcefully? In this latter, less apocalyptic scenario much could depend on the convergence and effectiveness of European and American approaches to democracy promotion.

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<sup>15</sup> Lesser I. (2004) *The United States and Euro-Mediterranean Relations: Evolving Attitudes and Strategies*, Euromesco Brief No. 10, July: 10

