

**EUROPEAN POLICIES FOR MIDDLE EAST
REFORM:
A TEN POINT ACTION PLAN**

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ABOUT THE CIVILITY PROGRAMME

The events of the past two years have catapulted the Middle East into the centre stage of international politics and forced Western governments to focus their attentions on what is widely perceived as a threat of conflict emanating from the region. The wars in Afghanistan and Iraq directed this attention to the *symptoms* of this threat such as 'Islamic terrorism', dictatorships and the dangers posed by the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. However, comparatively little attention has been paid to the *causes* of this threat and the remedial actions available to Western governments.

By informing Western strategies of the indigenous movements towards political reform and civil society development and the best policies with which to aid their growth, one can create a practical, demand-led programme that will finally realise the economic, political and cultural potential of the region. Such an approach is positioned to dispel the myth of a civilisational conflict long-maintained by some in the West and echoed by extreme voices in the Middle East.

A small number of colloquia and research programmes have been formed over the past few years to enquire further into these issues of development in the Middle East. Some have focused upon the democratic deficit and the lack of the rule of law in countries throughout the region while others have concentrated on the specific power struggles at the heart of Middle Eastern political elites. But there has been little pooling of resources amongst academics and policy-makers on both issues of political reform and civil society in the Middle East and no concerted effort to formulate a long-term strategy for addressing the social dimension of the current political problems. In short, the case for Middle East reform has been made, but the question of *how* to realise such an aim now requires far more systematic attention.

The Civility Programme, launched at the Foreign Policy Centre, is positioned to occupy this gap in the current debate on the Middle East. It seeks to measure the existence of civil society and develop realistic policy proposals through engagement with policymakers, journalists, academics, business leaders and representatives of civil

society in the region. By doing so Civility aims to encourage the foreign policies of Western nations towards active and long-term support for the development of Middle Eastern civil society.

Civility is chaired by Rouzbeh Pirouz, co-chaired by Marcus Gerhardt and its director is Mark Leonard. Professor Benjamin Barber (author of *Jihad versus McWorld* and former advisor to President Clinton), Fareed Zakaria (Editor of *Newsweek International*), Dr. Rosemary Hollis (Head of the Middle East Programme at the Royal Institute of International Affairs) and Reinhard Hesse (advisor to the German Chancellor) make up the Civility Advisory Board. For more information please visit www.civility.org.uk

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The Foreign Policy Centre is an independent think-tank launched by Prime Minister Tony Blair (Patron) and former Foreign Secretary Robin Cook (President) to revitalise debates on global issues. The Centre has developed a distinctive research agenda that explores the strategic solutions needed to tackle issues which cut across borders – focusing on the legitimacy as well as the effectiveness of policy.

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Introduction

In the aftermath of the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks a link has commonly been made between the Middle East's lack of democracy and the heightened security concerns of Western states. The roots of extremism and instability are increasingly recognised as residing in the paucity of open political process, especially in the Middle East.

The relationship between security-stability and forms of political system is in fact complex. Many levels of conceptual debate remain in flux: the nature and ultimate aspirations of political Islam; the link between political change and a state's external postures; the way that different aspects of the international system impinge upon democratic reforms. Notwithstanding such complexity – and without wishing to minimise its significance – this paper proceeds from the premise that a sound case for encouraging political liberalisation in the Middle East has been made. That case has been widely asserted – and is outlined in Civility's framework policy agenda.¹ But, in practice Western policies aimed at promoting Middle East reform have so far remained relatively weak and limited in scope. It is the question of how to operationalise the reform agenda that now requires attention.

Western states urgently need a clearer conceptualisation of how to approach Middle East reform. One expert notes that there has not been the necessary fundamental and qualitative rethink of how the West can assist in building pluralistic politics in the region.² This is not to imply that Western policies can determine outcomes in any primary or direct sense. Indeed, it must be recognised that they will not be a major determinant of the region's political trajectory. But, at the margins they can certainly be made more effective and must at least desist from actively prejudicing reform potential.

¹ The Civility Policy Agenda: Western Strategies for Middle East Reform (Foreign Policy Centre, London, 2004)

² Carothers T. (2003) *Is Gradualism Possible?* (Washington, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Working Paper no. 39): 14

This paper focuses on the role of the European Union (its member states individually and collectively, as well as the Brussels institutions), and offers 10 proposals that could inject greater clarity, dynamism and coherence into EU democracy promotion efforts in the Middle East. The paper proposes that in developing its Middle East strategy the EU consider:-

1. A Middle East democracy assistance pool
2. A broader range of democracy assistance
3. Programme-specific conditionality
4. Capacity-building engagement with Islamists
5. A political assessment of economic cooperation
6. Politicising economic-governance aid
7. A political culture initiative within the Euro-Mediterranean Foundation
8. Coordination with justice and home affairs policies
9. An EU-US Middle East reform forum
10. A European-Middle East Contract for Democracy.

Civil society dynamics in the Middle East are complex, with liberal and more illiberal tendencies both evident. Considerable untapped democratic potential exists; but, civil society may still be some way from being ready to play in the Middle East the kind of democratic role it has played in other parts of world. It cannot be assumed that democracy is inevitable in the Middle East, a matter of simply 'pulling the same levers' that occasioned change in Eastern Europe. On the other hand, the pessimism must be rejected that holds democracy to be alien to the Middle East, and unlikely ever to prosper there in a way that enhances stability, prosperity and moderation.

The proposals suggested in this paper encapsulate a policy that is gradualist, but not over-optimistic in the likelihood of a self-sustaining 'snowball' momentum of change taking root. It has been amply demonstrated that individual pockets of progress in civil society are highly susceptible to remaining isolated and failing to spill-over into broader political reform. At the same time, gradualism should not slide into support for highly partial processes of change. One US analyst-practitioner has suggested that 'supporting an authoritarian

leader who is a modernizer and is willing to gradually loosen the reins – that essentially should be our policy'.³ Other eminent experts have advocated efforts to improve respect for basic rights as a means of actually helping to head off the uncertainties of full democratisation in the Middle East.⁴ Such assertions fail to comprehend the essential nature of autocratic rule and the precarious status of liberal rights that are not underpinned by genuinely open politics. The aim should not be to promote highly instrumental, stage-managed formal change; policy needs a reformist edge in both civil society and the political domain. It is this balance between bottom-up and top-down dynamics that the proposals made here seek to strike.

In recent years the EU has established promising foundations upon which more effective support for Middle East political reform could be built. In the Maghreb and Mashrek, the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP) already incorporates a formal commitment to democratic reform, and includes a range of instruments whose further development could give real dynamism to the reform agenda. With European institution-building efforts having been particularly intense in the Palestinian Occupied Territories, the EU could be well placed to contribute to a genuine democratisation of the Palestinian Authority. While human rights issues have been incorporated in a more cautious fashion in relations with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), the prospective deepening of trade provisions has begun to provide for greater purchase on governance issues in this region. In the EU's relations with Iran, a new human rights dialogue and on-going trade negotiations together offer a base from which support for reformers could be strengthened. After the fragmenting of European unity over Iraq, the imminent transfer of power from the Coalition Provisional Authority might also open up some potential for the EU to contribute to Iraq's institutional reconstruction. Indeed, if the recriminations of the last twelve months were to subside, there might be many aspects of democracy-building in Iraq over which the EU

³ Richard Haas, until 2003 director of the Department of State's Policy Planning Staff, quoted in Nicholas Lemann "Order of Battle: What the War Against Iraq – and Its Aftermath – Might Look Like" *The New Yorker*, November 18, 2002

⁴ Indyck M. (2002) Back to the Bazaar, *Foreign Affairs* 81/2

could gain more credible and less conflictive purchase than the US. Finally, a new strategy paper on 'Strengthening the EU's Partnership with the Arab World', presented by Javier Solana and Chris Patten in December 2003, reaffirms the commitment to encouraging democratic reform in the Middle East and invites further debate on how to make European policies in this field more effective.⁵

The proposals that follow seek to build on these various foundations, suggesting ways in which greater clarity, consistency and commitment might maximise the potential of the policy frameworks that the EU has in many cases already begun to develop.

⁵ Council of the European Union-Commission of the European Communities, *'Strengthening the EU's Partnership with the Arab World'*, December 2003

1. Middle East Democracy Assistance Pool

As a first area of improvement, European aid projects in the field of human rights and democracy need revitalising. Thus far European political aid in the Middle East has remained of limited scale; has covered only a narrow range of issues; and has been implemented in an unduly timid fashion. An upgrading and coordination of aid efforts is required to give substance to reform commitments. Many are still sceptical that this positive route of funding pro-democracy activity can have any real potential. It clearly cannot create a democratisation process in itself. But democracy funding could be used more usefully and effectively than hitherto.

While the US has committed significant new democracy funding to the Middle East since 9/11, meaningful increases in European political aid have not been forthcoming. The European Initiative for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR) has restricted to only four the number of Middle Eastern states included in its list of target countries – Tunisia, Algeria, West Bank and the Gaza Strip, and Turkey. European civil society assistance has actually decreased in many important Arab countries and remains negligible in Iran and the GCC states.

The UK's focus on the poorest developing countries has drawn aid away from the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. Outside the Palestinian Territories and Iraq, by 2003 only Yemen was in receipt of any significant UK governance funding – and this was justified on the grounds of Yemen being the only state in the region to fall within the category of low income developing country. The Middle East has also been of low profile in the distribution of funds from the FCO's Human Rights Fund. A similar under-representation is evident in other donors' aid distribution, with France as perhaps the most notable exception.

European donors could commit themselves to **allocating a minimum of 10 per cent of their aid to MENA states for political reform projects**. These resources could then be managed through a joint **Middle East Political Reform Pool**. This Pool would facilitate coordination between the various funding initiatives established at

the national level, such as Germany's Task Force for Dialogue with the Islamic World, the increase in French governance work in the Middle Eastern states of the *zone du solidarité prioritaire* and the UK's Global Opportunities Fund for Engaging with the Islamic World. There is at present virtually no coordination between these various initiatives. This risks duplication, confuses the message that the EU as a whole conveys to its Middle Eastern partners and excludes opportunities for sharing knowledge and experiences between different donors.

Agreeing a headline figure for democracy assistance and a jointly-managed fund would not only increase available funds and facilitate coordination, but also send a clear message to both governments and reformists in the Middle East. At present, European funding has been so fragmented and low profile that its existence often barely registers in the region. This is not a marginal concern, if it is true that political aid is valuable not only – or even primarily – for any direct impact it might have but rather psychologically for the outside support it signifies.

The Pool would not need to undermine national bilateral initiatives. Different donors have developed different strengths in the field of political aid. While Nordic states have established a strong orientation towards gender rights and the UK to issues of economic governance, French political aid has remained more top-down, focusing on elite training, tripartite social dialogue, constitutional support, police reform and the concept of negotiated change through 'national consultative committees'. Such a division of labour would continue and respective areas of expertise drawn on rather than suppressed. The aim would be to increase the visibility of overall EU efforts and to coordinate these within a more comprehensive and better-planned general strategy.

The Pool could also help to elaborate indicators for assessing the impact of democracy funding. The effects of democracy assistance have been notoriously difficult to ascertain. Up to now, judgements have revolved around donors' own need to demonstrate tangible, quantitative short-term results. More qualitative assessment indicators should be developed, oriented to the longer term and

revolving around concepts such as participation, access to policy-making and actors' effective autonomy from the executive.

One particularly important test will be if the EU could begin political aid work in Iran on the back of its recently established Human Rights Dialogue. Indeed, an ability to work in this concrete way might provide a tangible sign that engagement with Iran can create some forward movement in political change. The Pool would also provide a region-wide framework that would facilitate the process of introducing institutional reform projects in Iraq. Here, the EU could draw on its experiences of security sector reform, disarmament and demobilisation work in other post-conflict states.

This common Pool should seek also to strengthen links with the politically relevant aspects of mainstream development assistance. 'Democracy assistance' has been understood in restrictive terms, and has failed to draw on the potential of projects run under far larger standard development aid budgets. For example, a number of large judicial reform projects have been introduced in Middle Eastern states in the last two years, but it remains unclear how the strengthening of judicial capacity in these cases relates to broader political reform. The need for complementarity has been recognised, with increased consultations between departments running the EU's MEDA budget and the EIDHR unit in Europe Aid. Links are still weak, however, particularly in a number of member states. The inception of systematic coordination between mainstream Overseas Development Assistance (ODA) and democracy assistance objectives could significantly strengthen the impact of overall EU efforts.

2. A Broader Range of Democracy Assistance

The overall amount of democracy funding has not been the only shortcoming. Qualitative as well as quantitative weaknesses have been evident. European projects have tended to gravitate towards the softer end of the political aid spectrum. A key focus has been to fund structured dialogues between the state and NGOs on social development. Democracy budgets have also been heavily used to

support local level social and environmental associations. Only a relatively narrow group of civil society organisations have so far been deemed worthy of support in the Middle East. Contrary to its declared objective, European support has in practice failed systemically to focus in on promoting the dynamics of civility at the level of local communities, where so much potential exists for the basic values of democratic accountability to be encouraged. A regional approach has often been favoured, for example, promoting cooperation between Arab NGOs from different states or developing region-wide best practice in independent journalism.

A better balance must be struck between top-down and bottom-up approaches. Many analysts have cautioned that change in the Middle East is unlikely to emerge solely from bottom-up civil society dynamics, but must necessarily involve more top-down approaches. One seminal work analysed the prospects for change in the Middle East emerging through elite-led pacted compromise in the absence of already organised and committed democratic activists.⁶ A key challenge is to understand how the political-institutional sphere can be approached so as most fruitfully to enhance and dovetail with the civil society dimension. The importance of the political domain has been underplayed. While making passing reference to possible work on elections, the EU's new policy guidelines on democracy and human rights policy in the Middle East still focus overwhelmingly on the 'technical level of dialogue below the political level'⁷ – appearing to ignore the need also to develop policies at the political-institutional level. Observers of US policy also highlight the need for greater concentration on governments, where leverage can be more effectively used.⁸

⁶ Salamé, G. (1995) *Democracy without Democrats: The Renewal of Muslim Politics* (London: I.B. Tauris)

⁷ Commission of the European Communities (2003a) Communication from the Commission to the Council and the European Parliament, 'Reinvigorating EU Actions on Human Rights and Democratisation with Mediterranean Partners: Strategic Guidelines', 21 May, COM(2003) 294 final: 11

⁸ Amy Hawthorne 'Can the United States Promote Democracy in the Middle East?', www.ceip.org

Creating the Democracy Assistance Pool would provide a helpful framework for **broadening the scope of European funding**. A menu of areas of concern should be specified, to include issues on which the European engagement has so far been minimal: political party-building; civil-military relations; autonomous parliamentary capabilities. This would address criticisms from the region that the EU is interested only in backing a small community of well-known, Western-style, secular, elite human-rights groups. One very specific challenge on which the EU might be well placed to contribute is the need to fashion institutions of effective political representation for the Sunni minority in Iraq – at present a significant lacuna in US policy.

Effective work in these areas will not be easy. The foundations from which party structures could be strengthened are shallow, and the position of militaries is in most Middle Eastern states entrenched. So far, Western donors have judged the prospect of working in such political domains to be too difficult and destabilising. Unduly top-down approaches certainly need to be avoided. But, donors have erred in focusing so overwhelmingly on supporting a narrow range of NGOs. The aim should be to work gradually through the political-institutional sphere on issues that connect with on-going EU work in civil society. Efforts to build civil society organisation around local service provision need to be accompanied by support for more effective and independent parliamentary consideration of such issues, as a means of securing citizens' access to state-level policy-making. Support for grass roots economic development projects should be an entry point into improving control over militaries' extensive economic activities. Existing initiatives, such as the Euro-Mediterranean Parliamentary Assembly, must be linked into the broader range of EU efforts, rather than evolving as rather isolated and ineffective forums.

Such efforts in the political arena must be accompanied by a reinforcement of grass roots programmes. Genuinely grass roots organisational capacity needs to be generated and new actors should be brought into policy initiatives. More democracy-related expertise should be invested in European missions within Middle Eastern states to take forward this new strategy. A new micro project facility has been agreed within the EIDHR to enable the funding of

smaller grass roots NGOs in the region. This has, however, been subject to delays and is extremely small scale. A more meaningful focus on small projects is needed to correct the increased orientation of funding towards larger NGOs operating as junior partners in networks managed by European civil society organisations.

3. Programme-specific Conditionality

Without completely unravelling the EU's accumulating partnerships with Middle Eastern states, consideration should be given to whether it is appropriate to begin using some form of political conditionality. It is well known that highly politicised forms of conditionality can easily be counter-productive. Calls for caution in the use of punitive policy instruments would seem to be particularly apposite in the Middle East. However, there is a case for ensuring a tighter correlation between very specific political reforms and the potential benefits that partnership with the European Union bestows. The EU has availed itself of formal means that facilitate the use of conditionality, these should be used in a systematic, but modest and low profile fashion. The question is, exactly what degree and kind of conditionality should Western governments exert?

Sanctions have not been imposed against Middle Eastern states on democratic grounds. The democracy clauses of the Euro-Mediterranean association agreements have not been invoked. Democratic backsliding has rarely elicited concrete punitive responses from European donors. Where sanctions have been imposed – Iraq, Libya – democratic strictures have been a secondary concern, not the reason for coercive measures. Additionally, European aid flows are not significantly oriented towards the relatively reformist Arab states. Even where the existence of democratic conditions are alluded to by the EU they have invariably been accompanied by references to 'partnership', the advocacy of 'positive not punitive' approaches, and the need 'not to prescribe' political systems. Since September 11 2001 rather more effort has been invested in agreeing new anti-terrorist cooperation clauses with Arab states than in making effective the democracy clauses that already exist.

In its evolving relations with Iran, the EU has used the leverage of trade negotiations to hold the Iranian government to a number of political improvements. These have included agreement to a new formal and structured EU-Iran human rights dialogue; Iran's opening up to UN human rights inspections; the declaring of a moratorium on stoning; and the release of a number of dissidents. It is acknowledged, however, that as tensions over the WMD issue have intensified, the focus on human rights has diminished somewhat.

Indeed, far from there having been a systematic use of political conditionality, in some cases almost the opposite has occurred. Following the bomb attacks in Morocco in May 2003, senior officials from some European states explicitly backed a hard line response from the Moroccan authorities. A significant parcel of EU aid to Egypt was reportedly released earlier than scheduled to mitigate the effects of the Iraq conflict. As tensions between the US and Syria increased, the EU became more eager to conclude its long-outstanding association agreement with Damascus. With a logic of not wanting Syria to 'fall behind' other Mediterranean partners, the EU has now assented to this agreement without having extracted any positive movement from the Syrian government. Since the deal on the Lockerbie suspects was reached with Libya, European states – both individually and collectively – appear also to have gone out of their way to court Q'adafi. The recent WMD deal reached with Q'adafi risks being to the further detriment of pressure for political liberalisation in Libya.

Some recent initiatives have apparently revived the possible use of political conditionality. The new Commission guidelines for democracy and human rights promotion approved in the summer of 2003 commit the EU to elaborating national plans for human rights with southern Mediterranean states, in consultation with local civil societies.⁹ Agreement to such a national plan will qualify the government in question for a 'political premium', with 5 per cent of MEDA funds informally set aside for such an incentive to political

⁹ Commission of the European Communities (2003a): *Reinvigorating EU Actions*, *op. cit.*

reform. Additional sets of political benchmarks are also to be built into the Wider Europe initiative.¹⁰

An increasing range of political benchmarks has been introduced into EU cooperation with the Palestinian Authority. After the commencing of the Al-Aqsa intifada in September 2000, the EU channelled 10 million euro a month to support the PA budget, and used this to ratchet up conditionality on greater judicial independence, increased financial reporting provisions, a freeze on hiring to the PA and the transfer of funds to a single IMF-monitored account. While this has constituted the most significant instance of political conditionality, pressure has been exerted on relatively technical auditing devices rather than directed at the underlying power structures of the PA. Moreover, the Palestinian case throws into sharper relief the absence of any similar, detailed tying of aid to institutional reforms elsewhere in the Middle East.

Political conditionality does not need to be used in a dramatic fashion, completely breaking off relations if immediate and far reaching political change is not implemented. But, the EMP must surely now be firmly enough embedded for the EU to start incrementally ratcheting-up the degree of pressure it seeks to exert without the whole partnership unravelling. Thus far, the EU has been over optimistic in thinking its economic, social and civil society approaches can be left to gestate into a smooth glidepath to political transformation. Positive and punitive approaches should be seen not as two mutually exclusive options. The lesson of Euro-Mediterranean relations during the last eight years is that robust pressure is often necessary to unblock the obstacles through which autocratic regimes have prevented the logic of positive engagement from taking hold.

Conditions should be developed that are linked in a very specific way to particular programmes. The EU does not need

¹⁰ Commission of the European Communities (2003b): Communication from the Commission to the Council and the European Parliament, 'Wider Europe—Neighbourhood: A New Framework for Relations with our Eastern and Southern Neighbours', 11 March, COM(2003) 104 final.

simply to seek to make 'democracy' aid conditional on overtly or wholesale 'democratic' reform. Conditionality should be applied in a more nuanced and surreptitious fashion, but does require determined and consistent implementation.

The specific aim should be to secure a change in institutional processes to allow for greater autonomy and access in the area of work covered by each individual EU aid project. Funds for infrastructure projects, for example, should come with conditions relating to improvements in citizens' ability to monitor and control local administrations' funding and budgetary processes. The large amounts of aid for economic restructuring at present go almost entirely through ministries; requirements could be imposed that in return these ministries allow private sector organisations more autonomy in managing such initiatives. Projects in the sphere of education should be linked to the provision of more open, critical political debate over national curricula. Particularly in the Gulf, defence deals should be linked to the incorporation of human rights elements into security cooperation programmes. Especially in states such as Iraq, an insistence that groups receiving funds be open to cross-ethnic representation might help mitigate the risks of destabilising fragmentation.

More generally, the EU needs to make available far larger rewards linked to political reforms that are attainable and narrowly defined. It must have the political will to spell out more clearly what kinds of reforms are expected in return for aid increases. These should be modest political liberalisation measures that have a reasonable chance of being successfully implemented, rather than dramatic rhetorical stipulations aimed primarily at a European domestic audience and likely to be counter-productive for Middle East reform. But such incrementalism cannot justify unlimited discretion of the kind that has prevented the EU stating clearly what a partnership predicated upon 'democratic norms' must mean in terms of concrete change over the short- to medium-term.

4. Capacity-building Engagement with Islamists

Approaches to the Islamist dimension of Middle Eastern civil societies need revisiting. This is of course the most difficult of issues effecting the Middle East. There is long running debate among Middle East specialists themselves over the nature of trends in political Islam. While Islamophobia threatens to become one of the most destabilising of contemporary ills, many experts have pointed out that the challenge is more complicated than simply proclaiming a need to 'embrace Islam'. Perspectives on Islam have been unduly simplistic and uni-dimensional in both directions. On the one hand, it has constantly been asserted that 'Islam itself is not the problem' and that 'there is no incompatibility between Islam and democracy'. On the other hand, when it comes to practical cooperation on the ground, Islamists have been rather sweepingly excluded as partners for European initiatives. A more probing and effective debate on this issue is called for within the EU.

There has been little systematic engagement with moderate Islamists since September 11. Many 'dialogue between civilisations' initiatives have, of course, been introduced in the last two years. But, these have not generated a notably more politicised approach. By far the largest share of European civil society support still goes to Western style activist NGOs rather than locally specific organisational forms based around the mosque, neighbourhood groups or the professional syndicates. This choice has invariably reflected an in-built instinct on the part of European policy-makers or a series of ad hoc decisions, rather than any express, rationalised European-level common line. In contrast to Western governments' defence of prominent human rights activists, diplomatic backing has rarely been given to Islamists imprisoned by regimes. 'Civilisational dialogue' forums have focused on improving understanding between the Christian and Muslim worlds, far less on the political rights of Muslims in their own states. They invariably neglect to include the strongest sectors of Islamist opposition. The new guidelines for democracy and human rights promotion that were agreed in the summer of 2003 fail even to mention the Islamist issue.

The diversity of views amongst Islamists has become apparent in recent years. Many Islamist parties have adopted pro-democratic positions, including the Egyptian and Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood parties, al-Nahda in Tunisia and the Justice and Development parties in Turkey and Morocco. In Jordan and Morocco, mainstream Islamists have supported very gradual, stability-oriented processes of reform and have sought cohabitation rather than outright confrontation with their respective governments. In contrast, other groups do of course still adhere to violent means and continue to question the compatibility of popular majority rule with Islam's grounding in revealed and immutable truth. Many would argue that there has been little cooperation or compromise between secular liberals and moderate Islamists. Even in states where Islamists have been granted a stake in the national political process - Morocco, Jordan, Yemen, Algeria, Kuwait – debates still tend to be couched in terms of the cleavage between secularism and religiosity. Increasingly, Islamist and nationalist platforms have merged and eclipse any region-wide pro-democracy community. There is still much suspicion in the Middle East that the West seeks to push secular democracy as a means of undermining religious identity.

In fact, arguably the most notable trend has been a withdrawal of Islamists into welfare-oriented organisations at grass roots level and a detachment from national level politics. At this level, much genuine uncertainty exists over the concept of democracy. Reference is frequently made to the desirability of developing a form of democracy specifically suited to Islamic societies, but it remains unclear exactly how this would differ from 'Western' political systems (while still fully meeting democratic criteria).

In short, harnessing the potential of Middle Eastern civil society is both important and subject to difficult challenges. Far more than in recently democratised regions of the world, civil society debates in the Middle East still require fundamental conceptual exploration. But while this is clearly a sensitive and complex area, there is scope for the EU to make more of a contribution to encouraging pro-democratic Islam.

There should be a concerted commitment on the part of European donors to **support grass roots Islamist welfare organisations, where the latter's work might overlap with EU social development programmes.** Such concrete support would be more valuable than any number of 'Islam and democracy' workshops. It would provide a first tentative step towards establishing mutual trust between European donors and Islamists, so that relations could then move onto more political issues. A key challenge would be to design such cooperation in a way that helped demonstrate the link between effective social policy and the need for open politics. A list of cooperative projects should be retained. This would both hold donors to account and serve as an instrument to rebut – more convincingly than would be possible today – charges that Europe was interested only in suppressing Islam.

5. A Political Assessment of Economic Cooperation

One of the areas of European policy where improvement is most necessary is in the linkage between the political reform agenda and the economic dimension of relations with the Middle East. Analysts have increasingly agreed that the relationship between economic and political reform is complex and varies across states. Predictions that the Middle East would move relatively smoothly and automatically from economic liberalisation to political opening are certainly no longer credible and have been all but abandoned. The linkages between the economic and political domains are deep, but path-dependent: harnessing the political potential of underlying economic change requires active and nuanced engagement. Fostering this is essentially about indirect impact, loading the dice in favour of democratic possibilities. It is arguably in this 'outer ring' of influence where Western efforts can most appropriately be targeted.¹¹

The Middle East still lacks prominent and organised private sector support for democratic reform. No other region has reached similar levels of economic development with such modest autonomous

¹¹ Carothers, *Is Gradualism Possible? op. cit.*

political activism on the part of private sector actors. While concerned over corruption and economic mismanagement, private sector organisations in the Middle East have invariably accepted autocratic regimes as a necessary bulwark against Islamists. Rather than challenging nepotism and malgovernance, economic agents have focused more on positioning themselves within the networks of patronage that protect political elites.¹² Indeed, there is here a nexus between economic structures and the variation in Islamic identities: the pious Islam of the professional middle classes has often underpinned authoritarian regimes in opposition to the radical protest-based Islam of the frustrated young urban poor.¹³

There has so far been little effort directly to encourage the emergence of a more politically independent and pro-democratic private sector. It has been presumed that policies aimed at assisting economic modernisation will filter through to improve the prospects for democratisation. So far internal European debates have focused on the pace of market liberalisation, some EU member states advocating a speeding up of already-delayed reform schedules, others increasingly seeing precipitate economic change as a recipe for political instability. In practice, a fine balance must be struck. Enough market reform is needed to disperse economic power as one step towards more decentralised political activity. But there must not be too much harsh market liberalisation of the sort likely to engender the constraints and instability that invariably militate against political liberalisation.

Crucially, however, this debate over the pace of economic change has diverted attention from the need for the EU to use the economic programmes that it has developed to gain greater political purchase. Policies need to be calibrated to the precise and varied political impacts associated with particular domestic economic adjustments. Assumptions about the inevitability of the impact of economic change are simplistic and misplaced guides to policy formulation.

¹² Brumberg D. (2003): *Liberalization versus Democratization: Understanding Arab Political Reforms*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Working Paper no. 37

¹³ G. Keppel (2003) *Bad Moon Rising: A Chronicle of the Middle East Today* (London, Saqi): 17

More purposive purchase is needed to ensure that on-going economic change does in practice contribute towards a diminution of autocratic governance.

The economic-political read-over should be improved through **a yearly Political Impact Evaluation of economic aid programmes**. A detailed picture is required of just what political effect the economic reforms pushed and supported by the EU are having in the Middle East. This needs to move beyond the generalities of speculation over whether or not market reform is moving at a destabilising pace. Rather, it must focus on tracking very precise micro-level changes occurring as a result of specific European measures. Where support is given to a private sector organisation, an assessment is needed of whether this helps the group assume a more independent political role or simply helps to shore up a patronage based alliance with the regime. Where the EU pushes for a particular privatisation, measurement is needed of whether this does in fact create newly autonomous economic actors or simply retains effective power within the same tightly knit network of economic and political elites. Where economic aid programmes provide social safety net funding, assessment is required of whether this facilitates individuals' independent activity or simply enables restructuring plans to be further delayed and dependence on the state to become even more entrenched. Where this yearly evaluation reaches unfavourable conclusions, firm and public explanations should be offered of how similar measures will in the future assist rather than impede political transformation.

6. Politicising Economic-Governance Aid

This regular evaluation exercise would facilitate – and should be accompanied by - a more political use of European funding for economic actors and governance issues.

The largest pools of European funding are oriented towards relatively technocratic cooperation. But European aid channelled to private sector organisations has rarely been provided for purposes that would assist the development of political activity. Rather, it has

been confined to relatively narrow purposes pertinent to economic modernisation. Democracy assistance and economic aid have been deployed in almost complete separation from each other. They have developed as largely unrelated policy-making worlds. In this way, the EU has failed to use in any political way the influential pool of economic support funds at its disposal. This lacuna should be corrected. **A specified proportion of economic aid should be set aside for 'democracy-assisting' funding for private sectors in the Middle East.**

The considerable amount of good governance work funded under democracy budgets has prioritised technical and regulatory harmonisation with European single market rules. This has included a particular focus on the transparency of procurement procedures, the design of new fiscal systems to replace revenues lost through tariff removal and micro-credit projects aimed at strengthening local level decision-making capacities. This is the most significant focus not only of preparations for the Euro-Med free trade area, but also of incipient European efforts in Iran. A possible trade and cooperation agreement has been seen as a stepping-stone towards preparing Iran for WTO membership and the profound changes to economic governance that this would ensure. A similar logic now also guides work under the EU's new agreement with Saudi Arabia. Resources and conditionality in the Palestinian Territories have also primarily targeted issues such as financial transparency, auditing provisions, pensions restructuring, streamlining the public administration and private sector arrears.

While these are all useful areas of work, the relationship between such governance approaches and broader political reform has been under-conceptualised. Good governance and democracy aid have either been assumed to be essentially the same thing or seen as entirely separate objectives that should not be conflated. In reality, they do condition each other, but to be mutually reinforcing must be approached with greater precision. There is at least the risk that many EU governance projects have simply strengthened the policy-making capacity of ruling elites and helped shore-up incumbent regimes. Most judicial reform or public administration reform carried out under a democracy label has in practice focused on enhancing

the capacity of particular institutions and has not touched on the fundamental nature of political process.

The significant amounts of money being invested in governance reform should thus begin to incorporate some more directly political dimensions. More general support should be forthcoming for private sector organisations, through training and technical support in democratic monitoring – the lack of which has often ensured governance improvements have soon been reversed by regimes.

7. The Euro-Mediterranean Foundation: An Initiative on Political Culture

The cultural dimensions of EU-Middle Eastern relations have become more prominent in the wake of the 9/11 attacks. The Dialogue on Cultures and Civilizations, established as part of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership, has become one of the most dynamic strands of EU policy. Several other initiatives have also aimed at improving the depth and range of cultural cooperation between European and Middle Eastern states, including the February 2002 meeting between European and OIC (Organisation of the Islamic Conference) ministers in Istanbul and the *Groupe des Sages* set up by Commission president Romani Prodi, which recently recommended new avenues for enhancing cultural understanding.¹⁴ Most significant and high profile has been the commitment to establish a Euro-Mediterranean Foundation. The precise nature and structure of this Foundation has been subject to drawn out negotiations. But its basic aim has been stipulated as improving the ‘understanding of other models of society’ and respect for ‘cultural specificities’.

While these initiatives are undoubtedly welcome, there is a danger of the cultural approach supplanting democracy promotion efforts. It can with some justification be pointed out that the cultural dimension

¹⁴ Report by the High-Level Advisory Group established at the Initiative of the President of the European Commission, *‘Dialogue between Peoples and Cultures in the Euro-Mediterranean Area’*, December 2003

is itself integral to – and provides the possibility of – disseminating an understanding of particular types of political norms. But, it also exhibits an element of implied scepticism over the politicisation of Euro-Arab relations in so far as this sits uneasily with notions of better mutual respect and tolerance. The Foundation’s mandate urges Europe and the Middle East to cooperate without ‘trying to change the other’. The emphasis on mutual respect for cultural diversity may risk legitimising the lack of respect for what should be seen as universal liberal rights.

There appears to be no obviously political dimension intended for the Foundation; the focus is on intellectual, artistic and cultural exchanges. For several member states, beefing up cultural cooperation has been advocated as a softer and more palatable alternative to muscular democracy promotion. As an element of security policy, many perceive efforts aimed at improving European and Arab images of each other to be more imperative than pressing for political change in the Middle East. Many aspects of this cultural dimension have had a defensive feel, focusing less on the prospects for spreading democracy in the Middle East than on the need for better respect for Islam *within* Europe. While this angle is necessary and important, it should not be seen as an alternative to encouraging political opening in the Middle East. Even where there is no obvious tension with the democracy promotion agenda, the cultural dimension has often siphoned off funds that might otherwise be available for more political objectives. Indeed, European cultural programmes in the Middle East have received many times more assistance than democracy and human rights projects.

So, **a more political dimension should be explicitly built into the cultural sphere**, taking advantage of this avenue of potential indirect influence over the region’s political identities. Under a separate political basket of the Euro-Mediterranean Foundation a report should be prepared on the ways in which ‘political culture’ should contribute towards the democratic objectives of the Barcelona Declaration. The EU must press for genuinely independent Arab experts to be allowed participate, from each country. This initiative should be more tightly focused than the very general and abstract discussions that have taken place on this

question in the EMP Civil Forum. Concrete recommendations should be made, to be formally considered by governments. It is often asserted that citizens in the Middle East lack the type of political culture requisite to underpinning democracy; if aspects of the way in which political behaviour and roles are conceived do indeed need focusing on, these need to be identified and proposals made as to how such challenges should be addressed.

8. Coordination with Justice and Home Affairs Activity

It is of course in the justice and home affairs field that the most notable aspects of strengthened European cooperation have occurred in the wake of 9/11. A host of measures have been introduced aimed at restricting terrorist networks and reinforcing border controls. Teams of anti-terrorist experts have been established, the EU's list of 'terrorist' organisations has been expanded, Europol and Eurojust have been beefed up, and a new common arrest warrant has been agreed. Several member states have strengthened their anti-terrorist legislation. In the UK over 500 arrests have been made since 9/11, the vast majority of North African citizens and resulting in only a handful of charges. New programmes of cooperation with Middle Eastern counter-terrorist forces have been developed. Indeed, an obligation to tighten such cooperation has been enshrined in new anti-terrorist clauses in a number of EU third country agreements – including those with Algeria, Lebanon and the GCC.

In parallel to expanded police powers and cooperation, much effort has been invested in tightening controls at Europe's external borders. At the national level, most member states have introduced tighter immigration controls. A new justice and home affairs pillar has been incorporated into the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership. Through this the EU has pressed southern Mediterranean partners further to clampdown on illegal migration. Diplomatic pressure has been exerted in debates over strengthened 'readmission clauses' within association agreements with Mediterranean partners. A new Return Action Programme has been drawn up and the Commission has established a 250 million euro initiative to fund anti-migration

measures in those third countries that sign readmission agreements. New provisions have been introduced enabling action to be taken against states not cooperating on illegal immigration (although France and Sweden blocked a clause expressly providing for the complete suspension of aid and trade in such circumstances). Provisions have been introduced enabling member states to strengthen border controls where instability in a particular third country threatens to unleash increased migration. Cooperation aimed at stemming migration has additionally been developed within the re-launched West Mediterranean '5 plus 5' Dialogue – incorporating France, Spain, Italy, Portugal, Malta plus Algeria, Libya, Morocco, Tunisia and Mauritania. Some of the EU's largest new aid projects have gone to projects helping southern Mediterranean states strengthen their border controls. Morocco received 40 million euro for such a programme, but was excluded from new EU democracy and human rights funding.

Governments would doubtless argue that long-term efforts politically to reshape the Middle East must be accompanied by such measures targeted at suppressing more immediate risks in the short term. Even if it is acknowledged that containment policies and democracy promotion are equally necessary pillars of the war on terrorism, however, a widely perceived imbalance towards the former increasingly affects the feasibility and effectiveness of policies aimed at encouraging wider respect for and understanding of democratic values. The amounts of aid allocated for civil society and human rights projects have been a tiny fraction of the sums invested in anti-migration controls and security cooperation with non-democratic regimes. According to one survey, Arab civil society activists have perceived new European policies on migration, terrorism and military cooperation as all part of a common shift away from support for democracy and human rights.¹⁵

Better coordination is urgently needed between this JHA activity and democracy promotion strategies. Systematic consultation between these two policy-making domains should be

¹⁵ Euromesco Report (2002) *European Defence: Perceptions versus Realities*, Paper 16, www.euromesco.net

established. These are not unconnected strands of policy, but rather are integrally related in the minds of many Middle Eastern citizens. There is a danger of defensive policies undermining European efforts to establish partnerships with the type of civil society actors who should be natural pro-democracy allies. Europe's role can be debated at the level of detailed policy initiatives, but many would argue that the EU's effectiveness ultimately depends as much on what it *is* as on what it *does*. The restriction of civil rights within Europe is in this sense likely adversely to affect the effectiveness of efforts to expand liberal rights internationally. As a first step to rectifying this, the EU needs the decision-making mechanisms to be able to assess the extent of such a negative read-over and to 'mainstream' the democracy promotion agenda.

9. A European-US Middle East Reform Forum

The evolution of transatlantic relations received exhaustive attention during 2003. Events in the Middle East, and in particular Iraq, have been analysed as much as anything in terms of their impact on US-European relations. Behind the headline divisions over Iraq there is much commonality in the US and EU's stated commitments to democracy promotion in the Middle East. Beyond the continuing debates over the overall nature of transatlantic relations and different strategies for dealing with US pre-eminence, there is need for better coordination of shared goals in this area. Much could be gained even by modest cooperation and the common presentation of shared aims.

Many argue that the EU gains presence and purchase in many parts of the Middle East by virtue of not being the US and by not presenting its policy as part of a 'Western' project. This is often undoubtedly the case. Where differences with the US are overstated, however, genuine opportunities for joining forces may be lost, and the danger arises of Middle Eastern states being able to play the US and European states off against each other – to the benefit of neither the EU nor US. This has happened particularly with Syria, Iran and also with Turkey, where a perception still exists that the US is rather more indulgent of the military's privileged position.

There remain important differences in US and EU approaches to democracy promotion. Many Europeans recoil from conceptualising 'the spread of democracy' strongly in terms of instrumental Western advantage. They tend to advocate political reform as part of a more general process of social and economic modernisation. The notions of explicitly backing pro-Western reformers and of disseminating pro-democracy 'propaganda' are invariably seen in unfavourable light by European democracy promoters. European policy-makers argue a distinction between supporting 'the spread of liberal values' and the US rhetoric of 'regime change'.

However, these differences can easily be overplayed. Recent years have witnessed some convergence between European and US approaches to democracy assistance. European analysis that has concerned itself with warning the US that 'democracy doesn't come from precision missiles'¹⁶ caricatures what have become more multi-dimensional US democracy-building strategies. A rather high-handed presumption exists on the part of many European practitioners that their approaches to institution building are infinitely more sophisticated than those of a US obsessed only with 'hard power'. In truth, both the EU and US can and should learn more from each other. The EU needs to spend more time on considering how cooperation with the US might add to the efficacy of its own work, rather than seeking to stake out positions through the democracy agenda towards the transatlantic relationship in general. Several European states have signed up to the new \$10 million anti-proliferation initiative launched by the Bush administration. It is surely not inconceivable that regular cooperation commence also on the issue of Middle Eastern political reform.

A regular forum for EU-US cooperation specifically on the issue of Middle East reform would help identify possible avenues for cooperation and minimise potential mutual misunderstandings. An obvious area where policies could be coordinated is in the link between economic and political reforms. Requirements for political

¹⁶ Chris Patten 'Democracy doesn't come from precision missiles' *International Herald Tribune* Tuesday, September 16, 2003

liberalisation have been attached to the proposed US-Middle East free trade zone, while a new regional judicial reform initiative has also been linked to this initiative. These look very similar to some of the most important aspects of European strategy and could fruitfully be harnessed to ongoing EU work. Simply by being better informed of each other's programmes would help the EU and US to avoid undercutting and duplication. Common EU-US statements on political events in the region could also make diplomatic pressure more effective and disabuse Middle Eastern governments of the belief – still surprisingly widely expressed – that democracy promotion is a uniquely American concern. A focus on very specific areas of shared work would help depoliticise transatlantic tensions over the more headline-grabbing elements of Middle East policy and ensure that an important field of fruitful cooperation is able to progress.

10. An EU-Middle East Contract for Democracy

Finally, all these changes could be enshrined within a new overarching policy initiative specifically on political reform in the Middle East.

European efforts have been handicapped by a lack of overall coordination and a resulting lower profile than their substance often merits. The overall impact of European policies remains less than the sum of their individual parts. Poor linkages exist between different member states; between different departments within the same member state or within Brussels; and between the different partnerships that frame EU relations with different areas of the Middle East. This complicates 'best practice' learning and the coherent use of different policy instruments. It also militates against a clear definition of both European expectations and what the EU itself commits to undertaking in support of political progress.

Decision-making in the field of human rights and democracy promotion has been extremely dispersed and ad hoc. A plethora of different departments, initiatives, forums and budgets are involved, with little or no overarching guidance. No framework exists around

which relevant initiatives can be elaborated with common purpose. Almost without exception, small pockets of decision-making engaged in some aspect of policy pertinent to Middle East reform lack an even basic awareness of similar or overlapping work being carried out either by another ministry or by another European state. Most influence is exerted either by country specialists or by those responsible for the most detailed aspects of the design and implementation of one particular sectoral issue. Comprehensive deliberation is conspicuous by its absence. The kind of deeply intertwined cross-border, inter-departmental 'policy communities' that typify EU decision-making in many areas have not taken shape in the field of democracy and human rights promotion.

Commitments to reform that have been formulated at the European level have been too general and vague to guide policy in any concrete manner. The Commission's Country Strategy Papers still look like very broad-brush reiterations of basic policy goals, that present some of the Commission's sectoral priorities without – as was their ostensible rationale – moulding member states' diverse policies into more common strategies. Better coordination has gradually emerged between European embassies in Middle Eastern states over detailed funding issues, but has not been matched by coordination in Brussels or national capitals over some of the bigger principled questions involved in reform strategies. The profile of political aid projects funded by the EU has undergone no obvious change since the attacks of 9/11. In terms of the geographical spread and type of programmes funded, the kind of bottom-up governance capacity-building approach adopted by most European donors has in most instances evolved gradually without any apparent dramatic reaction to new security concerns.

At the same time, the division of EU policy into a number of separate initiatives covering different parts of the Middle East has additionally weakened clarity and coherence. There has been ongoing debate over a possible restructuring of the EMP. The focus in these debates has been on facilitating sub-regional initiatives, operated on a smaller scale so as to avoid being adversely effected by the collapse of the Arab-Israeli peace process. Arguably, this concern has come unduly to overshadow the wider issue of Middle Eastern political reform. On-going changes now strengthen the case for some

reconfiguration of EU frameworks covering the region. With relations with the GCC and Iran progressing, and with a likely need eventually to incorporate Iraq into some common policy framework, a switch from a 'Mediterranean' to a 'Middle East' strategy looks increasingly apposite. This could generate a more region-wide and thus effective focus on democracy promotion.

The variety and under-stated nature of European policies can represent a strength. The EU has excelled in seeking to depoliticise issues, drawing on its own path to reconciliation and post-war democratic development. But a price has been paid at the high-politics level. Whatever its other shortcomings, the US's Middle East Partnership Initiative has quite palpably had greater impact upon debates in the Middle East than European policies that in fact possess far more generous resources. It is convincing to argue that the very political instrumentality of the MEPI risks making it counter-productive. It does, arguably, however at least provide a clearly stated reference point for reform efforts and an overarching framework for the piecemeal efforts of different agencies in the US.

There is a need for a more comprehensive EU policy framework, capable of instilling policy-making direction, setting out more clearly what European aims and expectations actually are, and coalescing sub-regional initiatives into an all-encompassing initiative for the wider Middle East.

The EMP has not succeeded in establishing itself in these terms. The EU has also failed to do this in its first Security Strategy. This links European security to the need for 'better governance' in 'failed states'. Better governance, human rights protection and the rule of law are presented in the Security doctrine as tools for addressing African-style civil ethnic conflict. But there is nothing that speaks directly to post-9/11 concerns on the issue of political reform in the Middle East, in conspicuous contrast with the US's new National Security Strategy. The incipient European Security and Defense Policy (ESDP) has also eschewed the opportunity to coalesce different strands of policy under its remit. The introduction of the EU's new WMD non-proliferation strategy – which includes a strong Mediterranean dimension – throws into sharper relief the absence of

any expressly stated goals in the field of Middle Eastern political reform.

The EU could introduce a new self-standing initiative focusing specifically on political reform and covering the wider Middle East. This would address the problem of these political aspects having been obscured by the economic elements of the various existing relationships with Muslim states. It would also inject greater coherence and remove complaints over double standards from those states arguing that political change has gained Western support only in some parts of the Middle East. This initiative should be couched not in terms of a partnership, which would merely replicate the discourse of the EMP and MEPI, but as a 'contract': **an EU-Middle East Contract for Democracy**. The aim would be to set out the EU's reform expectations, add more detail to the so far vague references to democracy, and to lay out more explicitly the conviction that working for democracy means working with and not necessarily against the development of political Islam. This contract would, most crucially, specify what the EU undertakes to offer in support of political liberalisation.

Rather than working on the philosophy of trying to achieve progress *despite* the Arab-Israeli conflict, this new initiative should more explicitly embrace the link between the failure of the peace process and the prospects for Arab reform. It is widely accepted that it is the continuation of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that has most strongly stirred Middle Eastern nationalism and helped militaries justify their continuing hold on the levers of economic and political power. As one expert cautions, if support for political liberalisation is to be effective and beneficial to the West it must be mindful of the context of change and the intertwining of other variables.¹⁷

¹⁷ Windsor J. (2003) 'Promoting Democratization can Combat Terrorism', *The Washington Quarterly* 26/3: 44

Conclusion

Historically, divisions between EU member states have ensured that the Middle East has been a significant Achilles heel to European foreign policy cooperation. Such debilitating divergence of course appears to have been notably deepened by the Iraq conflict. Agreement on many aspects of a reform-oriented agenda does, however, look realistic. The proposals offered above would be attainable; make a tangible contribution to current security preoccupations; ensure continued European relevance in a sphere now subject to increased US activity; and provide a fillip to current efforts to fashion a more resonant European foreign policy identity.

Reform process in the Middle East will be highly complex, and will – if they ignite at all – at very best ebb and flow frustratingly for many years ahead. The policies of outside powers will need to strike a series of delicate balances: between positive support and coercive pressure; between backing for universal rights and the concept of Arab specificity; between region-wide strategies and policy variations tailored to individual countries; between working with the grain of socio-economic change and undertaking more politicised interjections where such change actively prejudices democratisation; between working with the US and maintaining a distinct European philosophy. European states will need to work simultaneously through many policy instruments. Even in the best possible scenarios, results will not be dramatic or headline-grabbing in the short term. But, by elaborating a more comprehensive and systematically-applied strategy, the EU might begin to assist the faint stirrings of Middle East reform and redress perceptions that the West in practice remains concerned only with propping up authoritarian regimes. With the security challenges revealed by 9/11 showing few signs of abating, there is now urgent need to give such practical content to the oft-repeated commitments to Middle East reform.

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