

A NEW POLITICAL LANDSCAPE IN THE MENA COUNTRIES: HOW TO FINE-TUNE OUR MODES OF ENGAGEMENT?

Report from the EUISS expert meeting
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Background

The transformation process occurring in several countries across the MENA region means that it will be necessary for the EU and US to redefine relationships with actors across the whole range of the political spectrum, including with Islamist political parties. The objective of this seminar was to bring together a group of European and American experts and policymakers to compare notes and discuss ways of strengthening the EU-US dialogue on addressing the new dynamics in the MENA region.

Among the participants were: **John Esposito** (Georgetown University), **Peter Mandaville** (until March 2012 a member of the Policy Planning Staff at the US Department of State), **Daniel Levy** (Director of the MENA Programme at the European Council on Foreign Relations), **Oliver McTernan** (Director of Thinking Forward and one of the drivers of the Nyon Process), **Michele Dunne** (Director, Rafik Hariri Center for the Middle East at the Atlantic Council), **Alvaro de Vasconcelos**, **Patryk Pawlak** and **Rouzbeh Parsi** (EUISS). The meeting was organised in close cooperation with EEAS colleagues **Merete Bilde** and **Bernard Philippe**.

Summary

This seminar, organised by the EU Institute for Security Studies, built on a brainstorming session on political Islam organised by the Executive Secretary-General, Pierre Vimont, at the European External Action Service. Three major conclusions that emerged from the discussion can be summarised as follows:

- **Islamist groups are legitimate political actors and engaging them is essential for the success of the transition processes in the MENA countries.** While enhancing mutual understanding and maintaining regular contacts with those ‘unfamiliar voices’ should remain one of the key objectives, we should maintain regular contacts with liberal forces and work for a wider consensus across a broader political spectrum. We also need to move towards more strategic interaction with all actors in the region.
- **Our engagement needs to take place at several levels, both in terms of policies and actors.** Pragmatism is needed and therefore the discussion should be organised around specific aspects of the democratic process, i.e. a multiparty system, participation of women in the political process, coalition-building, freedom of religion, etc. We should aim to shape initiatives that will incentivise the development of a sound democratic system but at the same time clearly draw red lines.
- **The role of external factors was discussed primarily in the context of economic and trade cooperation.** Conditionality as a policy was criticised and contrasted with the approach of Gulf countries which expand their political leverage by providing financial means without any strings attached. However, their lack of a soft power narrative weakens their potential as models of transition. There is a clear need to find a space that the EU and the US could cohabit with the Gulf countries.

Mapping a new political landscape

- **Islamist groups are legitimate political actors and engaging them is essential for the success of the transition processes in the MENA countries.** While enhancing mutual understanding and maintaining regular contacts with those ‘unfamiliar voices’ should remain one of the key objectives, we cannot sideline liberal forces and need to work for a broader consensus across a broader political spectrum.
- **It is important to note that: (i) while religion remains important, the majority of people across much of the Muslim world want democracy and freedom; (ii) the revolutions were not driven by religion but by political and socio-economic factors.** How can we therefore explain the fact that Islamists performed so strongly in the elections? Two explanations were put forward: first, because these were well-organised and non-corrupt groups even under the authoritarian regimes; and second, because weak civil societies in those countries did not offer any real alternative.
- One of the recurring themes was **the possibility of Islamist groups remaining in power over the long term.** The understanding is that this will be mostly determined not by their appeal to religion but rather by their ability to deliver on economic and social concerns like jobs, education, etc. They are aware that the innate competition in a multiparty system will make it more difficult for them to govern. It is important to treat Islamist parties like any other political parties.
- **We need to clearly differentiate between different camps and carefully investigate their objectives.** This concerns not only ‘leftovers’ from the old authoritarian regimes in state structures or divergences between secularists and Islamists but also internal tensions within camps which may pose a threat to stability and security and to a truly representative constitutional process (e.g. the difference between ‘liberal secularists’ and ‘illiberal secularists’, with the latter group waiting for democratically elected governments to fail). Consequently building a responsible opposition should be a feature of the institution building in those countries.

Defining the modes of engagement with actors across the political spectrum

- The question is no longer whether we should talk to Islamists but how to structure our relationship with them in a more strategic way to make it sustainable over the coming years. One proposal that clearly stood out was that this **engagement should take place without any preconditions.** At the same time we need to make it clear that **engagement is not endorsement.** One of the participants stressed that we need to get ‘beyond getting-to-know-you with the Islamists, and start to thrash out the hard policy choices’.
- **There is a clear need to go beyond government-to-government relations.** Even at the level of interstate relations we should keep in mind a clear distinction between legislative, executive and judicial and law enforcement bodies. The engagement with each of them needs to be defined bearing in mind the specificities of the domestic context in which they operate.
- **One of the major trends is a redistribution of power away from the executive branch towards the legislative branch.** Decision-making processes will become more diversified with public opinion playing an increasing role on a number of issues, including foreign policy. Unlike in the past, there will be fewer opportunities for cutting deals behind closed doors.
- **We should be more pragmatic and talk about tools, not concepts.** The discussion should be organised around specific aspects of the democratic process, i.e. a multiparty system, participation of women in the political process, coalition-building, freedom of religion, etc. Some argued that soft-peddalling on democracy would mean *de facto* going back to the doctrine of democratic exceptionalism in the region.

- **There was some disagreement about the right way to frame the discussion about human rights in the region.** One suggestion was to address the issues as they come up rather than have an *a priori* established set of rules for engagement. We need to accept that certain normative paradigms with which we work are not acceptable to our partners and overstating them might undermine the dialogue.
- Our primary goal should be to have an objective analysis and better understanding of the situation on the ground. Our motives should be transparent and principled. In that sense **confidence-building measures are essential.** But the problems with such a principled approach at the political level were also noted. Whereas pragmatism and politics play a role in our varied engagement across the region (MENA vs. Gulf countries), **we need to do a better job in explaining our inconsistency.**
- Speaking of concrete initiatives, it became clear that **institution building** in the process of democratisation is a major challenge. Countries in the region understand the nature of democracy but the means to translate it into concrete structures and mechanisms is often lacking. We should also support initiatives that **enhance internal dialogue and engagement across the whole political landscape.**
- The EU offer to the region should not only reflect its interests but also address the challenges of countries in transition: **jobs and foreign investment.** Particular care needs to be taken not to build up too high expectations. The political and economic costs that might complicate the implementation of Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreements (DCFTAs) were mentioned in this context.

Understanding how external factors play a role in domestic politics

- **It is essential to avoid defining engagement and future relations through the prism of Israel.** There is a suspicion in many Arab countries that the EU's engagement is motivated by the need to normalise the position of Israel in the region, as was the case when the authoritarian regimes were in power.
- **We need to learn to distinguish between the populist anti-Israel rhetoric of Islamist groups and actual policies.** The point was made that the new Arab democracies will be less accommodating to Western positions regarding the Palestinian issue. Some participants suggested that Islamist parties may want to wait for current debates to run their course in the hope that they will not need to take any position and avoid potential confrontations.
- **The role of external factors was discussed also in the context of economic and trade cooperation.** Conditionality as a policy was criticised and contrasted with the approach of Gulf countries which expand their political leverage by providing financial means without any strings attached. The point was made, however, that Gulf countries tend to make 'non-intelligent' investments (e.g. building roads, infrastructure) while what is needed are investments that contribute to a sustainable job market (e.g. building factories, offering training). As one participant observed, the value of investments in the short term should not be underestimated: this is 'first aid' to keep the patient alive until the 'surgery' comes.
- The Gulf countries lack a soft power narrative and consequently do not offer a model of transition. What the MENA countries need is more pluralism and this is the opportunity that the EU and the US should capitalise on. **There is a clear need to find a space that the EU and the US could cohabit with the Gulf countries.**

EU-US relations in MENA

- The fact that the EU and the US meet regularly to exchange information (e.g. contacts between special coordinators for the region, the Deauville Partnership) and compare their assessment of developments in the region was interpreted as a very positive sign.
- The US approach is not to have an ‘Islamist policy’ *per se* but rather to treat Islamist groups as one of the elements in the new political landscape. Because of the country-to-country differences no blanket policy can be applied. The US government has regular contacts with numerous actors in the region but according to one of the participants it is time now to ‘**move from a policy allowing engagement to an actual engagement strategy**’.
- **We still need to clarify a number of issues** which will help us understand this new political landscape better and which should guide our policy of engagement. These are: **the position of new actors towards full and universal rights** (e.g. religious minorities, women); the rise of the Salafi groups and their preferences (i.e. where could conventional political pressure be used and where not?); in the realm of foreign policy, **the attitudes towards Israel and other cross-regional issues**. The answers to numerous questions and the assessment of the real intentions of specific actors will become clearer as we get directly engaged on specific issues.
- The ‘reality check’ shows the limits of EU-US cooperation, especially with regard to economic and social dignity which was one of the crucial drivers in the Arab revolutions. The big ‘reward’ is still missing since we cannot offer EU membership to these countries. The ideas of ‘everything but institutions’ and of an arrangement modelled on the European Economic Area were mentioned as possibilities that require further investigation. The need for engagement with regional structures was underlined.
- Some new opportunities were mentioned as well. In the context of EU-US cooperation one of the US speakers mentioned a new financing instrument in FY2013 – the Middle East North Africa Incentive Fund – but it needs to be first approved in Congress. It amounts to USD 770 million and aims to incentivise long-term economic, political and trade reforms which are the key pillars of stability.

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