



# Stability vs. Democracy in the post Arab-Spring: What choice for the EU?

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 **EU-LISTCO**

Europe's External Action and the Dual Challenges  
of Limited Statehood and Contested Orders

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## ABSTRACT

Confronted in its southern neighborhood with the choice between continued promotion of democratic transitions and the need for stability in the post Arab-Spring environment, the EU is tilting to the latter. Past EU efforts reflected the conviction that peace, stability, and prosperity were the outcomes of democracy. But threats of regional conflict, civil wars, waves of immigrants, and rise in terror is forcing a rethinking. While searching for stability is understandable, supporting a return of authoritarianism is counterproductive. Indeed, a return to tyranny in the Arab world has already created significant public discontent that has led to a second wave of Arab uprisings. The EU should seek to strengthen societal resilience by supporting democratic reforms, for example, by supporting local Arab civil society initiatives. Such support should be guided by local priorities, those that address the economic and well as the political, educational, and health needs of the Arab public.

**KEYWORDS:** Arab Barometer, Arab Spring, Arab Democracy Index, Arab world, Civil society, Democracy promotion, Euro-Mediterranean Partnership, European Union, MENA region, Migration, Southern neighborhood

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The banner reads: "Investing in Stability." It is the first-ever EU-Arab summit held in Sharm El-Sheik in Egypt in February 2019. Stability, it turned out, meant the management of migration, fighting terror, and fostering economic cooperation. And yes, the issue of human rights was mentioned, here and there, reluctantly. Nothing concrete was agreed upon; nonetheless, the German Chancellor Angela Merkel described Arab-European cooperation as vital for the fate of the EU. Donald Tusk, the president of the European Council, was blunter: "one can't choose one's neighbours; living in conflict with one's neighbours is not an option; Europe must get along with the Arab countries south and east of the Mediterranean". Of course, there is also a global politics angle; as Tusk put it: "We [Arab countries and Europe] need to cooperate and not leave it to global powers far from our region,"<sup>1</sup>

It seems clear that for the European Union (EU), promoting democracy is in competition with other, stronger interests. If Europe wants Arab countries to hold back a potential flood of refugees, to pick just one of those stronger interests, it cannot be too critical of Arab regimes, regardless of how oppressive they are. It is tempting to turn a blind eye to the return to authoritarianism in the Arab region. The EU seems to want to pursue friendly relations with authoritarian regimes and downplay its interest in promoting democracy for the sake of power politics interests. In prioritizing security and other interests over democracy promotion, the EU's unspoken assumption is that the process of democratization is *itself* a potential source of instability. About two decades earlier, soon after 9/11, the assumption was that the lack of democracy is the root cause of extremism. Now, what is cause and what is effect is in doubt. What would have looked like conflating cause and effect is now seen as sound and prudent policy.

Let us face it: Western interest in Arab democracy has never been driven by ideals. If in conflict with stability, the latter has always won. Upsetting the *status quo* brings risks and costs. Over the past several decades, Western interest in political reform in the MENA region has been driven by *realpolitik* interests: combat extreme violence and terror, reduce or manage demand for illegal migration, increase trade and investment opportunities, and ensure uninterrupted flow of oil and gas. When political stability was sufficient to deliver these goals, Europe and the United States (US) tolerated, sometimes even embraced, the prevailing *status quo* of oppression and authoritarianism. When stability was seen as failing to deliver, for example, after 9/11, interest in the promotion of democracy grew in Washington and Brussels.

## ARAB RESPONSE TO WESTERN PROMOTION OF DEMOCRACY

We also need to face another truth, this time from the region itself: very few have faith in Western commitment to Arab democracy, come what may. Most Arabs are indeed reluctant to embrace an EU-driven effort at democracy promotion. Why? Because they question the motivation of outside actors, believe that outside-driven reforms will most likely have a hidden agenda and will fail to address the priorities of the public in the region. The hidden agenda theory gained credence after 9/11, when promotion of democracy turned into regime change in Iraq; also in January 2006 when Western countries refused to recognize the outcome of Palestinian elections after Hamas' electoral victory; and during the Arab Spring when, after an initial support, Western interests sharply shifted to a focus on stemming the influx of refugees and to combating terror.

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1. "First joint EU-Arab summit, an opportunity to protect against China and Russia," *AFP*, 24/02/2019: <https://www.france24.com/en/20190224-first-eu-arab-summit-egypt-opportunity-cooperation>

One can marshal evidence that shows that outside-driven reforms are insufficient to trigger a real transition to democracy. Five rounds of the Arab Democracy Index (ADI), carried out between 2008 and 2015, show that outside-driven reforms, before and after the Arab Spring, seem to succeed in influencing the legal, or formal, context of governance, but not the practices of Arab governments. The latest wave shows a decline in the status of democratization driven by declining scores of indicators measuring regime “practices,” e.g., torture or closing down media outlets, but not in the scores of the indicators that measure the “means” of transitions, i.e., the legal and constitutional framework, most driven by outside actors.<sup>2</sup> ArabTrans surveys, conducted in 2014 in six Arab MENA countries, found that the EU is not believed to have a positive influence on democratic transitions and that the Arab publics believed that the EU was more interested in stabilizing its borders and protecting its own security.<sup>3</sup>

The EU and the US, a majority of Arabs believe, will support democracy in Arab countries, if at all, only as long as it produces friendly governments and stable economic and security conditions; i.e., an outcome-based or conditioned democracy. But democratic processes and transitions are messy and unpredictable. For example, as we have learned during the past decade (and indeed earlier), wholly fair and free elections might produce ground shattering results, unexpectedly and dramatically redesigning the political landscape. On March 2, 2006, the House International Relations Committee Hearing on U.S. Policy Toward the Palestinians, which argued successfully for terminating U.S. assistance to the newly elected PA government, was opened with the Chairman Henry Hyde (R-Illinois) congratulating the Palestinian people for conducting “what were arguably the freest and fairest democratic elections in the Arab world.”<sup>4</sup> The US and the EU liked the process but hated the outcome and ended up throwing the baby out with the bathwater and discrediting Western democracy promotion for a long time to come.

But the EU is not alone in promoting an outcome-based democracy. Survey research shows that a share of Arab public opinion tends to judge their own countries’ transitions to democracy based on a similar cost-benefit calculus. Arab Barometer’s (AB) findings show that most Arabs embrace outcome-based transitions: if a transition fails to deliver, as the post Arab-Spring years have shown, many voices among the Arab publics, in most Arab countries, rush to the conclusion that democracy is not, perhaps, appropriate for their countries. This belief in the inappropriateness of democracy is firmest among those most disadvantaged by the process of transition, those who lose power, but also those who feel less secure or more impoverished.<sup>5</sup>

The fifth wave of the AB shows continued significant public support in the MENA region for the concept of democracy. But demand for democracy is influenced by concerns about other badly felt conditions. For some, demand for democracy might, in fact, be in conflict with demand for economic opportunity, security, enforcement of law and order, and perceived equality. Given the many prevailing challenges, Arabs today seem to place democracy at the bottom. According to the latest wave of the AB, democracy appeared as one of the top 10 Arab priorities, but only at the bottom; indeed, only 2% of the Arab public considered it a top priority.<sup>6</sup> It could not compete with economic conditions,

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2. *Arab Democracy Index 5*, June 2017: <http://pcpsr.org/sites/default/files/ADI5%20-%20Report%20Summary%20-%20English.pdf>
  3. Andrea Teti and Pamela Abbott, “Perceptions of the EU in MENA Public Opinion,” *Arab Transformations*, Policy Brief 2, April 2017
  4. *United States Policy Toward the Palestinians in the Aftermath of Parliamentary Elections*, Hearing Before the Committee on International Relations, House of Representative, one hundred ninth Congress, Second Session, March 2, 2006: [http://commdocs.house.gov/committees/intrel/hfa26332.000/hfa26332\\_0.htm](http://commdocs.house.gov/committees/intrel/hfa26332.000/hfa26332_0.htm)
  5. Findings and country reports of the Wave V of the Arab Barometer can be accessed here: <https://www.arabbarometer.org/waves/arab-barometer-wave-v/>
  6. Wave V of AB. Similarly, the Zogby 2018 polls in six MENA countries showed that democracy came as priority 8,9, or 10 out of 10 priorities offered to respondents. See, *Middle East Public Opinion*, 2018, Zogby Research Services, LLC, see: <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/52750dd3e4b08c252c723404/t/5c0fcb2e758d461f72dc37ca/1544538926539/2018+SBY+FINAL+WEB.pdf>

corruption, service delivery, safety and security, foreign intervention and terrorism. "Economic conditions" was selected by 38% of the Arab public and it came on top of all others in 10 out of 12 countries surveyed by the fifth wave of the AB. The two exceptions were Iraq, in which corruption came on top, selected by 33%, and Libya, in which safety and stability came on top, with 36% selecting it.

These findings are echoed in the current wave of Arab uprisings, in Algeria, Sudan, Iraq, and Lebanon. The current uprisings demonstrate the change in the hierarchy of priorities of the Arab publics. The primary focus is on improving the quality of daily living conditions. More than two thirds in these and almost all other countries describe governance in their countries as bad or very bad, the worst evaluation in more than a decade of the AB. But perhaps the most telling expression of dissatisfaction can be found in the perception of government corruption, standing at 84% for the entire region. Perception of corruption is also one of the most significant indicators of discontent, as people blame their society's economic and political ills on it. Almost all 12 governments in the last wave of the AB are seen as corrupt by at least three-quarters of their peoples.

The focus of the Arab public on the need to improve daily living conditions does not mean that they are not interested in improving governance or that they reject democracy. Arabs do not think that democracy is inherently bad. Instead, they have adopted an outcome-based approach to democracy, one that delivers not only legitimacy and the rule of law, but also prosperous socio-economic conditions. This mindset led many more people in countries like Egypt, Tunisia, Jordan, and Lebanon to wonder if their countrymen were ready for democracy or if democracy was appropriate for their countries. For example, while 68% of Egyptians thought in late 2011 that democracy is appropriate to their country, this percentage dropped dramatically to 40% in early 2013.

Three explanations are supported by AB findings: declining perceptions of safety and security, worsening economic conditions, and a growing perception of inequality due to rising sectarianism and corruption. Tunisia, the most successful example of transition to democracy since 2011, is just one example. It is a success, not because of EU or US promotion of democracy; there has been almost nothing of that anyway. Yet, among all 12 Arab publics the Tunisian public has been the most dissatisfied with government performance. Why? Because governmental focus was placed on political reforms rather than improving economic conditions. This led to a problem. The fifth round of the AB shows that the Tunisians are the unhappiest about economic conditions and among the most pessimistic about the future of their economic conditions. Despite being the most positive about their own freedom of expression, Tunisians are among the least trusting of their own government.

## WHAT SHOULD THE EU DO?

There are tangible stakes for the EU in the spread of democracy. The Barcelona Process and the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership, created in 1995, that aimed at fostering political pluralism remain valid today. It brings greater peace and prosperity as it provides peaceful means of resolving conflict and unleashes the potential for innovation and initiative. Stability flows from pluralistic domestic politics, one built on the rule of law and peaceful competition. But instead of imposing democracy or pressuring repressive regimes to reform, the EU should instead simply avoid strengthening authoritarianism. It should not provide moral or material support that can entrench repressive regimes. The same should apply to member states with the EU making it its business that its member states observe the principle of "Do No Harm." If support for authoritarianism is unavoidable, as evident in the

Arab-EU summit in February 2019, the EU countries should balance that support by strongly echoing and supporting domestic civil societies' calls for reform rather than maintain neutrality.

If support to local civil society initiative is adopted as the means to strengthen societal resilience, it should be guided, at least in part, by local civil society priorities and it should include those grass-roots organizations in the peripheries. This makes it difficult for repressive regimes to frame the local initiatives as outside-driven. Although the EU is the most trusted Western actor,<sup>7</sup> engaging and supporting civil society in the MENA region can be made more effective if done in cooperation with international actors and with the European civil society. But it should be clear from the outset that this approach is slow and will not bring about a democratic transition until local conditions mature and local demand for democracy reaches a critical mass.

In a pre-transition environment, any attempt to condition economic support on political reform, no matter how noble and well-intentioned, will be perceived as interference in domestic politics. Given the historical legacy of European-Arab relations, such interference will probably be seen as part of a conspiracy against the Arabs, aiming at forcing their rulers to make compromises that benefit only those who seek to impose the conditionality and ensure their country's continued dependence on foreigners. Instead, the EU should take the long view: focus should be on the next generation. This means investment in local civil societies' initiatives in education and combating corruption, supporting local programmes that promote transparency, critical thinking, tolerance, the value of diversity, and the need for inclusion. One should keep in mind that the problem is not just with governments but also with publics that are either apathetic or impatient.

Ultimately, the most important role for the EU should not be to trigger a transition to democracy but to help consolidate one once it begins to show signs of success. Here again, Tunisia should immediately come to mind. In its current phase, the EU should seek to reward progress in consolidating democracy, linking its support to progress in delivering deeper and more enduring political reforms while keeping in mind that for Tunisians promotion of democracy means EU support in job creation, health and education.

Finally, in all cases, no genuine democratic transition should be punished, as it was the case with Hamas' electoral victory in 2006. After all, what we have learned from that experience is that punishing successful transitions can have catastrophic consequences.

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7. The Zogby polls show that the EU and China earn the highest favourability ratings of the seven countries offered to respondents. The EU is viewed favourably by majorities in eight of the 10 countries surveyed *Middle East Public Opinion*, 2018, Zogby Research Services, LLC

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