

**Strengthening Authoritarian Rule through
Democracy Promotion? Examining the Paradox
of the US and EU Security Strategies.
The case of Bin Ali's Tunisia.**

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Introduction

Much has been written over the course of the last few years on the ‘parting of ways’ of the United States and the European countries on the themes of global security, war on terror and rogue states.¹ A number of commentators have argued that the transatlantic relationship, which had gone through highs and lows since the end of the Cold War, is now undergoing a very significant rift, particularly when it comes to dealing with the Middle East.

According to such commentators, the unilateralism of American foreign policy during the Bush administration simply accelerated what is inevitable: the attempt of the European Union, once it found its own internal coherence on matters of foreign and security policy, to balance the unipolar activism of the United States. Asmus for instance argues that the Atlantic Alliance has collapsed² and Neuhold seems to agree that the rift is very significant.³ Policy-makers themselves, on both sides of the Atlantic, have been busy working on repairing such a rift. Other scholars prefer a more nuanced analysis and argue that the alliance is not broken, but simply strained and that such strains have often occurred in the past as well. However, this rift seems to be viewed as qualitatively different. In the past, we did not really have a coherent European position on matters of international politics and security, while today, through CFSP, this is no longer the case. While intra-European differences exist, the

¹ See for instance Arthur Paecht (ed.), *Les Relations Transatlantiques* (Paris: Presse IRIS, 2003) or, more recently, Tuomas Forsberg and Graeme P. Herde, *Divided West. European security and the Transatlantic Relationship* (London: Blackwell, 2006).

² Ronald Asmus, ‘Rebuilding the Atlantic Alliance’, *Foreign Affairs*, 82 (2003), pp. 20-31.

³ Hans Peter Neuhold, ‘Transatlantic Turbulences’: Rift or Ripples?’, *European Foreign Affairs Review*, 8 (2003), pp. 458-468.

EU as a whole is a much more coherent actor. Despite disagreements about the depth of the Atlantic crisis, there is a consensus on the origins of it.

The crisis is said to stem from profound constitutive differences that exist on the two continents that lead the EU to prefer soft diplomacy, constructive engagement and multilateralism, while the US prefers to stamp its authority on world affairs more forcefully and unilaterally. The recent conflict in Iraq has been understood and examined along those lines. In fact, so the argument goes, if there is an area of the world where the transatlantic relationship has broken down it is the Middle East/North Africa, with the US adopting a very forceful pro-democracy promotion attitude, coupled with a strong support for Israel and for military intervention if necessary, while the European Union, both rhetorically and through some concrete measures, adopts a more pro-Palestinian stance and softer approach to democracy promotion, which is built on economic integration and civil society nurturing. The seemingly radically different world-views that both actors subscribe to can be inferred quite clearly from the security strategies that both actors recently put forth. How international actors 'promote democracy abroad' is very significant because, contrary to what was previously held by the literature on democratization, the international dimension matters in determining the development of domestic politics in authoritarian regimes.⁴

The main objective of this paper is to discuss the security strategies and policies of both the US and the EU in the context of a North Africa country often

⁴ See for instance Jeffrey Haynes, 'Comparative Politics and Globalisation', *European Political Science*, 2 (2003), pp. 17-26; Hakan Yilmaz, 'External-Internal Linkages in Democratization: Developing an Open Model of Democratic Change', *Democratization*, 9 (2002), pp. 67-84 and Francesco Cavatorta, 'The International Context of Morocco's Stalled Democratization', *Democratization*, 12 (2005), pp. 548-566.

ignored by the literature on the Middle East, but that is a key actor in the region and a potential paradigm of how relations between the US, the EU and Arab states could develop in the future. In this respect, we challenge the conventional wisdom surrounding the assumption that a rift in the transatlantic relationship exists. Our contention is that despite minor tactical differences over methods, timing and 'reach', the United States and the European Union have virtually the same objectives in the region, operate under the same ideological assumptions, are bound by the same constraints and fall victim of similar contradictions. The level of economic, cultural and military integration between the US and the EU is such that rifts are no more than very short and superficial temporary crises. The global dominance that the two actors achieved over the last few decades through mutual cooperation is therefore unlikely to be undermined by conflict and competition. In order to test such a proposition the case of Tunisia is examined in some detail.

US democracy promotion in the Middle East

US democracy promotion after September 11 2001⁵

One of the most unanticipated aspects of the presidency of George W. Bush has been its association with the discourse of democracy promotion in the Middle East. Bush's accession to the office in 2000 was met with the expectation of a more isolationist and realist foreign policy than that conducted by his predecessor. The stated concerns of then National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice lay with the traditional foci of US foreign policy, namely Russia and China, and there was some expectation that the new administration would adopt a much more low-key approach to the problems of the Middle East than that of Bill Clinton. The attacks of September 11, 2001 changed all of this. One of the critical effects of those events was to direct American attention to the causes of the attacks and one of the conclusions that emerged from this reflection was that the absence of democracy in the Middle East/North Africa was now a primary concern of the United States. In the words of one commentator, it became necessary to 'drain the swamp' that incubated Islamist radicals such as Osama bin Laden.⁶ In the period immediately after September 11, the Bush administration turned to its autocratic allies in the Middle East⁷. But, over the

⁵ For a study of US democracy promotion prior to 2001, see Michael Cox, G. John Ikenberry and Takashi Inoguchi (eds), *American Democracy Promotion: Impulses, Strategies, and Impacts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000)

⁶ Steven Cook, 'The Right Way to Promote Arab Reform', *Foreign Affairs*, 84 (2005), pp. 91-102. See also Dennis Ross, 'The Middle East Predicament', *Foreign Affairs*, 84 (2005), pp. 61-74.

⁷ Thomas Carothers observes acerbically that this initial policy turn did not sacrifice any US commitment to democracy since for decades the US had already suppressed such concerns in the region, valuing autocratic stability for the sake of various strategic and economic interests. Thomas Carothers, 'Promoting Democracy and Fighting Terror', *Foreign Affairs*, 82 (2003), pp. 84-104.

course of time, a chorus of voices within and around the administration began to question the value of reliance on America's 'friendly tyrants'.⁸ Carothers notes that the core idea of the new approach was to undercut the roots of Islamic extremism by 'getting serious' about democracy in the Arab world, not just in a slow, gradual way, but with 'fervour and force'.⁹

Since this time, there have been a number of key U.S. initiatives and declarations in support of democracy and the protection of human rights. In December 2002, the US Secretary of State, Colin Powell, launched the Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI) to address the need for political reform in the region. The MEPI placed the United States, he asserted, 'firmly on the side of change, of reform, and of a modern future for the Middle East'.¹⁰

Almost a year later, in a keynote address to the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) in Washington, President Bush spoke at large on the subject of democracy in the Middle East. The Middle East, where 'democracy had not yet taken root', tested US commitment to democracy. In response to this, Bush announced a new policy – 'a forward strategy for freedom in the Middle East'.¹¹ In doing so, he

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Colin Powell, 'The US-Middle East Partnership Initiative: Building Hope for the Years Ahead', The Heritage Foundation, December 12, 2002. See www.heritage.org/research/middleeast/hl772.cfm. Accessed on April 10th, 2005.

¹¹ Bush, George W., 'Freedom in Iraq and Middle East', Remarks at the 20th Anniversary of the National Endowment for Democracy, U.S. Chamber of Commerce, Washington, DC., November 6, 2003. See www.state.gov/p/nea/rls/rm/26019.htm. Accessed on April 10th, 2005. Also in 2003, Richard Haass, then at the Department of State, noted that countries with 'closed political systems' could breed the kinds of 'extremists and terrorists who target the US for supporting the regimes under which they live. 'Towards Greater Democracy in the Muslim World', *The Washington Quarterly*, 26

established a clear linkage between the security of the US and the promotion of ‘freedom’ in the region:

‘Sixty years of Western nations excusing and accommodating the lack of freedom in the Middle East did nothing to make us safe – because in the long run, stability cannot be purchased at the expense of liberty’.

This was followed by the Broader Middle East and North Africa Initiative (BMENA) which was launched at the G-8 Summit Meeting of industrialized nations plus Russia, at Sea Island, Georgia in June 2004. The initiative was seen as a further attempt to give substance to the President’s ‘ringing call for a democratic transformation of the Middle East’¹² on the basis of the universal values of human dignity, freedom, democracy, rule of law, economic opportunity, and social justice.

The new US thinking on democracy and political reform in the Middle East has been represented as constituting a paradigm shift both by its architects and by many commentators. John Lewis Gaddis argued that it should be clear by now that President Bush was serious about his claim that ‘the world will not be safe from terrorists until the Middle East is safe for democracy’.¹³ Such a claim was neither ‘rhetorical nor a cloak for hidden motives.’¹⁴ Others, including Daniel Neep, suggested

(2003), pp. 137-148. However, others reject the argument that democracy prevents terrorism, e.g., Dmitri K. Simes, ‘America’s Imperial Dilemma’, *Foreign Affairs*, , 82 (2003), pp. 9-102 ; F. Gregory Gause, ‘Can Democracy Stop Terrorism’, *Foreign Affairs*, 84 (2005), pp. 62-76.

¹² Marina Ottaway and Thomas Carothers, ‘The Greater Middle East Initiative: Off to a False Start’. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Policy Brief no. 29, March 2004, pp. 1-8.

¹³John Lewis Gaddis, ‘Grand Strategy in the Second Term’, *Foreign Affairs*, 84 (2005), pp. 2-15.

¹⁴ Ibid.

that the policy represented a ‘new direction’ in US thinking. In the past, commitment to freedom was usually instrumental in nature and adopted ‘to provide an ideological basis for America’s sometimes grubby Realpolitik’.¹⁵ The new thinking, according to Neep, emerged from a combination of factors: a rethinking of the view that the Middle East was inherently resistant to democratic impulses together with a new focus on the apparent emergence of indigenous civil society groups in the region. The possibility of democracy in the Middle East neatly fed into the post- September 11 analysis that democratic reform would provide an escape valve for some of the mounting political pressures in the region before they reached critical mass, as well as defusing some anti-American sentiment by removing the grounds for criticism of US foreign policy as hypocritical.

The aftermath of the US led invasion of Iraq in 2003 has seen a renewal of US commitment to political reform in the Middle East. In his second inaugural address of January 2005, President Bush reiterated the policy of the US

‘to seek and support the growth of democratic movements and institutions in every nation and culture, with the ultimate goal of ending tyranny in our world’.¹⁶

Several months later, his Secretary of State, Condoleeza Rice repeated the commitment in a speech at the American University of Cairo.¹⁷

¹⁵ Daniel Neep, ‘Dilemmas of Democratization in the Middle East: The ‘Forward Strategy of Freedom’’, *Middle East Policy*, 11 (2004), pp. 73-84.

¹⁶ ‘President Bush Sworn-In To Second Term’, Available at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/inaugural/>. Accessed on October 25th 2006

¹⁷ In her speech, Rice echoed the tones of Bush’s 2003 speech at the NED: ‘For 60 years, my country, the United States, pursued stability at the expense of democracy in this region here in the Middle East -

However, while the increasingly threadbare nature of initial US justifications for the invasion, (weapons of mass destruction, the Iraq-Al-Qaeda ‘link’), rendered the language of democracy promotion an attractive fall-back for the administration, the renewal of that commitment stemmed from an analysis of the September 11 attacks.¹⁸

The US and its critics

There is then considerable consensus that the events of September 11 2001 have led to new thinking on political reform in the Middle East and ‘an entirely new set of political and policy dynamics’.¹⁹ However, not everybody shares such benign view of the new initiatives and a range of criticisms has been directed at them. Neep’s study of the workings of the MEPI has characterised it as ‘incoherent’ in approach; supportive of ‘regime-led economic development.’²⁰ Secondly, despite the stated intention of the framers of the MEPI, the vast majority of grants (over 70%) were directed towards programs that either directly benefited Arab government agencies or provided training and seminars for government officials. Only 18% of funds went to Arab or Arab non-governmental organizations (NGOs). The authors of the study suggest that, as a result, the MEPI is effectively choosing to support the existing Arab

- and we achieved neither’ ‘Remarks at the American University in Cairo’, <http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2005/48328.htm>. Accessed on October 25th 2006.

¹⁸ See Jeffrey Kopstein, ‘The Transatlantic Divide Over Democracy Promotion’, *The Washington Quarterly*, 29 (2006), pp. 85-98.

¹⁹ ‘Statement by Kenneth Wollack, President, National Democratic Institute for International Affairs, Before the Committee on International Relations Subcommittee on Middle East and Central Asia, U.S. House of Representatives’, May 4, 2005. Available at www.internationalrelations.house.gov/archives/109/wol050405.pdf. Accessed on October 25th 2006.

²⁰ Neep, ‘Dilemmas of Democratization’.

regimes' chosen strategy of 'controlled liberalization.' However, the greatest obstacle to effective promotion of democratic reform identified in the report is the 'continued lack of high-level policy support from senior officials across the Administration.'²¹

The Broader Middle East and North Africa initiative, although less clearly focused than the MEPI, has also come in for stringent criticism. The 'initiative' like the MEPI, was trumpeted as giving substance to the Bush administration's call for a democratic transformation of the Middle East. While the MEPI related specifically to US activities in the region, the BMENA sought to bring together the US, Europe and the 'broader' Middle East, including Afghanistan, Iran, Israel, Pakistan and Turkey, as well as the Arab world. But, like the MEPI, the BMENA initiative is deeply flawed, so much so that it has been characterized as 'hollow at the core'.²²

The key difficulty with the initiative is that security issues have been kept off the table. The background document of the Sea Island Summit, at which the BMENA was launched, acknowledges that the resolution of the 'Israel-Palestine conflict' is an important element of progress in the region. But, 'regional conflicts must not be an obstacle for reforms'.²³ However, as Ottaway and Carothers note, the decision to keep

²¹ Ibid. The authors cite, for instance, the failure of President Bush to raise the question of political reform with President Mubarak of Egypt during their March 2003 meeting at Bush's Crawford ranch, despite landmark references to reform and democracy in the two leaders' prepared statement to the press. Instead, Bush 'fixated' upon Israel's proposal to withdraw from the Gaza Strip.

²² See Ottaway and Carothers, 'The Greater Middle East Initiative.'

²³ Partnership for Progress and a Common Future with the Region of the Broader Middle East and North Africa, Sea Island, Georgia, June 9, 2004. See www.g8usa.gov/d_060904c.htm. Accessed on April 10th, 2005. Note also Bush's remarks on Palestine to the National Endowment for Democracy, when he identified 'Palestinian leaders who block and undermine democratic reform' as the 'main obstacles to peace', and managed to make no reference either to Israel or to the occupation of Palestinian territories in this context, 'Freedom in Iraq and Middle East', Remarks at the 20th

the Arab-Israeli issue out of the initiative does not make it go away and the attempt to launch a major political initiative about Middle Eastern political transformation, without discussing the ‘peace process’ is fundamentally flawed.²⁴

However, the incoherence of the MEPI and BMENA are no more than symptomatic of much deeper and more significant contradictions in US policy on democracy promotion which are not, and perhaps cannot be, addressed in official pronouncements. Some of these contradictions are expressed in the implicit belief that the US can somehow engage as a neutral actor in relation to political change in the region.²⁵

This is related to the official refusal to recognize the extent to which American policies are themselves part of the problem in the Middle East. But refusal to recognize the relevance of US policies in relation to the Israel-Palestine question, the war on Iraq, and the ‘war on terror’ has the consequence that US policy-makers fail, or refuse, to see the extent to which the credibility of the US as an agent of democracy promotion in the Middle East is called into question, both within the region and without.

Yet, as Neep observes, the US has lost all ‘moral standing in the eyes of most Arabs following its uncritical support for Israeli repression of the Palestinians, its

Anniversary of the National Endowment for Democracy, U.S. Chamber of Commerce, Washington, DC., November 6, 2003. See www.state.gov/p/nea/rls/rm/26019.htm. Accessed on April 11th, 2005.

²⁴ See Ottaway and Carothers, ‘The Greater Middle East Initiative.’

²⁵ Commentators such as Dennis Ross express this view clearly. Ross expresses his support for the Bush administrations policy of democracy promotion ‘to counteract the popular anger that Islamists exploit’ without any acknowledgment that much of that anger is directed at what many see as the results of US policies in the first place. See Ross, ‘The Middle East Predicament.’

invasion of Iraq, and the abuse of prisoners at Abu Ghraib'.²⁶ However, the greatest difficulty US policy on democracy promotion faces in the post-September 11 2001 era stems from the logic of the 'war on terrorism'. The National Security Strategy of the United States from the outset identifies the need to 'strengthen alliances to defeat global terrorism'.²⁷ However, herein lies the problem. Most commentators are agreed that the most obvious beneficiaries of political liberalization in the Middle East would be Islamist, and to a lesser extent, nationalist opposition forces. For example, Cause argues that further democratization in the Middle East would

'most likely generate Islamist governments less inclined to cooperate with the United States on important policy goals...'²⁸

However, these are precisely the forces that would oppose not only the US war on terrorism but also many other aspects of US foreign policy in the region, not least the American position on Palestine. This means that there is a gaping contradiction at the heart of US democracy promotion in the Middle East. Successful promotion of democratic political reform clearly will benefit the enemies of the war on terror and the war on terror is a non-negotiable element of the foreign policy of this US

²⁶ Neep, 'Dilemmas of Democratization'. See also Steven Everts, 'The ultimate test case: can Europe and America forge a joint strategy in the wider Middle East?' *International Affairs*, 80 (2004), pp 665-686. Everts argues that 'the United States has a massive image problem in the Middle East'.

²⁷ The National Security Strategy of the United States of America, p.1, The White House, September 2002. See www.whitehouse.gov/nsc/nss.htm. Accessed on April 10th, 2005.

²⁸ Gause, 'Can Democracy Stop Terrorism'. In addition, Robert Jervis has made the same point in expressing doubt that 'democratic regimes will always further American interests'. 'Why the Bush Doctrine Cannot Be Sustained', *Political Science Quarterly*, 120 (2005), p.370.

administration. The necessary tension between maintaining the ‘global coalition’ against terrorism and the democracy imperative was recognized early by some. In a reflection on the implications of the events of September 11, 2001 for the future direction of US foreign policy, Stephen Walt argued that

‘because the United States needs help from a number of states and groups with poor human rights records... the war on terrorism will require it to downgrade its concern for human rights temporarily’.²⁹

One of the results of this is what has been characterized as the ‘instrumentalization’ of democracy in US foreign policy. Rather than being interested in democratic reform for its own sake, the US propounds democracy in the hope and expectation that it will deliver outcomes which the US desires. Dennis Ross, former Special Middle East Coordinator under Bill Clinton, advocates the promotion of democratization in the Middle East because ‘only the proponents of moderate Islam can discredit the radical Islamists’³⁰. This inevitably raises the suspicion that democracy will be acceptable only if it delivers the right kind of Islamists to power.³¹ The US reaction to the victory of Hamas in the Palestinian elections makes this point only too obviously.

²⁹ Stephen Walt, ‘Beyond bin Laden: Reshaping US Foreign Policy’, *International Security*, 26 (2001), pp. 56-78.

³⁰ Ross, ‘The Middle East Predicament.’

³¹ Thomas Carothers has also warned against the dangers of ‘instrumentalisation of pro-democracy policies – wrapping security goals in the language of democracy promotion and then confusing democracy promotion with the search for particular outcomes that enhance those security goals.’ See Thomas Carothers, ‘Promoting Democracy.’

Democracy promotion and the EU

In the light of this analysis, some commentators have turned to the role played by the European Union (EU) in this area and have contrasted it favourably with the United States. Writing in 2001, Mohamedi and Sadowski offered a favourable view of the capacity of the EU to ‘temper and re-channel US power globally.’³² They argued that the policies of the EU in relation to the Mediterranean region constituted ‘a point of departure’ towards the end of more viable political and economic systems in the Middle East, which was more acceptable to Middle Eastern regimes than American approaches. In a similar vein, Gillespie and Youngs have suggested that, from the 1990s onwards, the EU sought to develop policy initiatives in the area of democratization ‘capable of challenging Washington’s pre-eminence in this field’.³³

Origins

Most commentators trace the beginnings of a coherent effort to define a common EU policy on democratization to the post-Cold War period of the early 1990s and the articulation of a ‘European’ foreign policy in the form of the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP). The principles of the CFSP became part of the European Union Treaty, the Treaty of Maastricht, which was ratified in 1993, and was carried unchanged into the Amsterdam Treaty of 1997.³⁴ In this post-Cold War setting

³² Fareed Mohamedi and Yahya Sadowski, ‘The Decline (But Not Fall) of US Hegemony in the Middle East’, *Middle East Report*, 2001, p.20.

³³ Richard Gillespie and Richard Youngs, ‘Themes in European Democracy Promotion’ in Gillespie and Youngs (eds), *The European Union and Democracy Promotion: the Case of North Africa* (London: Frank Cass, 2002), p. 5. See also the

³⁴ Gorm Rye Olsen, ‘Promotion of Democracy as a Foreign Policy Instrument of ‘Europe’: Limits to International Idealism’, *Democratization*, 7 (2000), p.143.

a number of new themes became prominent, among them the values of democracy and human rights. European politicians began to assert a link between economic development and political freedom and democracy. In November 1991, the then 12 member states adopted a resolution which established democracy and respect for human rights as conditions for receiving European development aid.³⁵ From 1991 onwards, a Development Council resolution committed the EU to placing democracy promotion and human rights at the heart of its foreign policy.³⁶ The Maastricht Treaty of 1993 stressed the development and consolidation of democracy and the rule of law and adherence to human rights and fundamental freedoms as important aims of EU development policy.

The single most significant development in terms of EU democracy promotion in the Middle East and North Africa came in 1995 with the inauguration in Barcelona of the European-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP). The then 15 member states of the EU together with 12 Mediterranean Partner Countries (MPCs) committed themselves, through the Barcelona Declaration, to the task of transforming the Mediterranean into a region of ‘peace, stability and prosperity’.³⁷ To this end, the EMP adopted a model that combines establishing bilateral association agreements between the EU and individual MPCs with various forms of cooperation on political, economic and cultural levels.

³⁵ Ibid, p.145.

³⁶ Gillespie and Youngs, ‘Themes in European Democracy Promotion’, p.6.

³⁷ Annette Junemann, ‘Security-Building in the Mediterranean After September 11’ in Junemann, Annette (ed), *Euro-Mediterranean Relations After September 11: International, Regional and Domestic Dimensions* (London: Frank Cass, 2004), p. 5.

‘The EMP’s special value, however, emanates from its normative dimension, based on the values of democracy and human rights’.³⁸

Critical Perspectives

But, as with American policies on democracy promotion, the rhetoric of the EU in this area is belied by practice and the EMP also has been the object of very significant criticisms. Its development into the European Neighbourhood Policy seems equally unable to deliver on its promises. In the first place, a number of writers have observed on the lack of coherence that characterizes European interventions in this area. Despite attempts since the 1990s to forge a common European foreign and security policy, the reality is that ‘Europe is still far from being a unitary actor’.³⁹ Policy-making in these areas remains, for the most part, the preserve of the national governments of EU member states, which opens the way for separate actions by individual members parallel to common policies. The complex decision-making structures and processes of the EU further complicate efforts to achieve coherence and consistency in foreign policy matters. Gorm Rye Olsen points out that, at various levels, the Council, the Commission and to some extent the Council of the EU each have a remit in the area of foreign policy.⁴⁰

On a deeper level, EU policy in this area is confronted by a dilemma similar to that faced by the United States in the form of the tension between the objectives of

³⁸ Ibid, p.5.

³⁹ Rye Olsen, ‘Promotion of Democracy’, p.146.

⁴⁰ Ibid, p. 147. See also Ricardo Gomez, ‘The EU’s Mediterranean policy: Common foreign policy by the back door?’ in John Peterson and Helene Sjursen (eds), *A Common Foreign Policy for Europe?* (London: Routledge, 1998), p.133. Gomez points out the significant differences in approach of the French and Spanish Presidencies in the run up to the Barcelona Conference in 1995.

promoting democracy and ensuring security. If there is a conflict between the promotion of democracy and security, the EU will give the highest priority to security. The clearest example of this came at a time when common EU policies in this area were just beginning to be formulated. The military coup in Algeria in 1992, which ended the process of democratization there, came just two months after the EU set respect for democracy and human rights as conditions for the receipt of aid. Despite this, EU member states remained silent as to the rights and wrongs of the military intervention. Moreover, at the behest of France, the EU actually increased its aid to Algeria.⁴¹

Gillespie and Whitehead have observed that EU policy towards the Mediterranean is primarily driven by security objectives, which tends to lead to accommodation of authoritarian regimes rather than efforts to undermine them.

‘Thus far, European policy-makers have acted as if, whenever the spectre of radical Islam could be invoked, that justified back-peddalling on political reform’.⁴²

A critical difficulty for the EU is that it has limited resources at its disposal to compel compliance with its requirements in relation to political reform. In Southern and Eastern Europe the inducement of eventual membership of the EU could be held

⁴¹ Total aid from the EU and bilateral donors to Algeria doubled between 1990 and 1994, see Rye Olsen, ‘Promotion of Democracy’, p. 156.

⁴² Richard Gillespie and Lawrence Whitehead, ‘European Democracy Promotion in North Africa: Limits and Prospects’ in Richard Gillespie and Richard Youngs (eds.), *The European Union and Democracy Promotion: the Case of North Africa* (London: Frank Cass, 2002), p.198.

out. However, when Morocco applied for EU membership in 1987, the response was that this was impossible on geographical grounds.

‘It seems that ‘Europe’ could extend eastwards to the former Soviet Union and beyond, and south-west to the Turkish frontier with Iraq, but it cannot incorporate Casablanca or Tangier’.⁴³

Nor, unlike, the United States, does the EU possess a significant common European and defence competence. Even if non-military instruments are held to be more relevant to the nature of the challenges at issue, the possibility of the US *in extremis* backing up its objectives with effective force account for its being a far more potent influence in world affairs than the EU.⁴⁴

A number of significant consequences flow from this. In the first place, the EMP places great emphasis on building partnerships with governments in the region. Because, the EMP extends to so many areas where enhanced cooperation is sought

‘it becomes very difficult to develop a democracy promotion strategy that does not conflict with efforts that require consent and collaboration in other areas’.⁴⁵

This, in turn, leads to a preference for a cautious bottom-up approach to political change which is expressed in support for civil society organizations.

⁴³, Ibid, p.199. See also Kopstein’s observation that the EU ‘has precious few policy instruments to deal with states not slated to become members in the short or medium term’. Kopstein, ‘The Transatlantic Divide’, p.92.

⁴⁴ Gillespie and Youngs, ‘Themes in European Democracy Promotion’, p. 6.

⁴⁵ Ibid, p.14.

However, the limitations of a bottom up, gradualist approach have been made clear. EU strategy in this regard has been criticized for its flawed conception of civil society in the Middle East which is usually limited to secular, liberal groups, excluding those inspired by religious faith and the willingness to limit civil support to partners that are known to and approved of by ‘partner’ governments.⁴⁶

One of the primary consequences of this approach is that the EU, like the United States, is exposed to the charge of double standards. Chourou argues that

‘after sifting through all the rhetoric, one can identify Europe’s three real concerns in the Mediterranean: oil, markets and immigration’.⁴⁷

However, even if the EU managed to overcome problems of coherence and consistency in its promotion of democracy in the Middle East, it is doubtful that EU policy has the potential to offer any significant alternative to that of the United States in the short to medium term. Despite some points of difference, usually expressed through rhetoric rather than actions, between the EU and the US on aspects of foreign policy in the region, there is little evidence of either the desire or the capacity on the part of the EU to do more than assert its ‘right’ to a greater role in the region, in partnership with, rather than in opposition to the United States. As a result, ‘the major powers [including European ones] and their policies are perceived by most Muslims

⁴⁶ Gillespie and Whitehead, ‘European Democracy Promotion in North Africa’, p.197.

⁴⁷ Bechir Chourou, ‘Why are Europe’s relations with the southern side of the Mediterranean not as warm as Europeans sometimes like to think?’, *American Foreign Service Association*, October 2001. Available at www.afsa.org/fsj/oct01/Chourou01.cfm Accessed on April 5th, 2005.

as being primarily responsible for keeping Muslim societies in the sad plight they are in today.’⁴⁸

Writing in 1998, Perthes noted that, in the past, Europe critiqued US policy on the Middle East on a number of points, including the American tendency to ‘demonize’ certain actors in the region, its failure to act in an even-handed fashion in relation to Israel and Palestine, and its assumption that only one external player, namely the US itself, could play a political role in the region. Nonetheless, he argued that, contrary to some Arab hopes,

‘the EU and the majority of European policy makers have no intention of counterbalancing US policies in the Middle East.’⁴⁹ This is confirmed in policy documents and official statements. The European Security Strategy commits the EU to an international order based on effective multilateralism, but multilateralism in this context places a particularly high value on the EU’s good relations with the United States. As the ESS notes:

⁴⁸ Mohammed Ayoob, ‘The Future of Political Islam’, *International Affairs*, 81 (2005), p. 959.

⁴⁹ Volker Perthes, ‘Points of Difference, Cases for Cooperation: European Critiques of US Middle East Policy’, *Middle East Report*, 1998. Perthes reasserted this point in 2004: ‘Despite all the differences over Iraq or the Middle East peace process, the United States and Europe... share key interests with regard to the Middle East’, ‘America’s “Greater Middle East” and Europe: Key Issues for Dialogue’, *Middle East Policy*, 9 (2004), pp. 85-97.

‘One of the core elements of the international system is the transatlantic relationship’.⁵⁰

The strategy document implicitly recognizes some of the relative weaknesses of the EU in foreign policy matters in asserting that a ‘more capable Europe is within our grasp, though it will take time to realize our full potential’, and in acknowledging the challenge ‘to bring together the different instruments and capabilities’ of the EU and its members in order to promote security and development.⁵¹ The important, if unintended effect of this, as Toje points out, is that ‘the ESS illustrates that the EU will continue to rely on US agenda setting’.⁵² More recently, Benita Ferrero-Waldner, the EU Commissioner for External Relations and European Neighbourhood Policy, has reiterated the commonality of American and European policies on the Middle East.

⁵⁰ The Council of the European Union (2003), ‘A Secure Europe in a Better World: European Security Strategy’, Brussels, 12 December, 2003 Available at: <http://ue.eu.int/uedocs/cmsUpload/78367.pdf> Accessed on April 6th, 2005. See also

⁵¹ Ibid. See also the point made by Musu and Wallace that, whereas the European approach to the Middle East has rested on ‘civilian power instruments: diplomacy, trade, financial assistance, the American approach ‘has rested on all of these *and* the ability to project credible military power’. See Costanza Musu and William Wallace, ‘The Middle East: Focus of Discord’ in John Peterson and Mark A. Pollack (eds.) *Europe, America, Bush: Transatlantic relations in the twenty-first century* (London, Routledge, 2003), p.101.

⁵² Asle Toje, ‘The 2003 European Security Strategy: A Critical Appraisal’, *European Foreign Affairs Review*, 10 (2005), p. 132.

‘...the truth is EU-US differences are routinely exaggerated and our common objectives stay on the plate’.⁵³

At the same press conference, President of EU Commission, Jose Barroso, emphasized the complementarity of EU and US approaches: ‘Does anyone really think that the United States alone or Europe alone can meet the global challenge? It’s impossible... So let’s work together because the basic values are the same...’⁵⁴

Section Three: Tunisia – a missed opportunity for democratization

The contradictions and the complementary strategies of both the EU and US foreign policies towards democracy promotion are in evidence when it comes to the case of Tunisia.

At first glance, the country seems to offer the best potential for democratization in the entire Middle East and North Africa, which would lead one to assume that external forces might make a considerable difference in pressuring the leadership to end authoritarianism while, at the same time, promoting potential opposition actors.

Tunisia has a number of advantages over other countries in the region. Lebanon and Yemen might also be considered ‘good’ candidates, but Lebanon is still plagued by sectarianism and foreign destabilising interventions (both Israel and Syria directly

⁵³ Visit of Condoleeza Rice – Transcript of Press Conference, Brussels, 9 Feb 2005. Available at: http://europa.eu.int/comm/external_relations/news/ferrero/2005/sp0584.htm Accessed on March 30, 2005.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

interfere in Lebanese politics), while Yemen suffers from poorer socio-economic indicators than Tunisia. Such advantages consist of the following: a) its limited size and population mean that the country *per se* is not a key strategic asset for Western powers (unlike Morocco); b) the absence of significant natural resources further decreases its strategic value and therefore meddling from external actors with a high degree of dependence on current ruling elites (unlike the Gulf States or Algeria); c) the relative lack of regional standing and cultural influence do not make Tunisian politics as internationally relevant as Egyptian politics; d) the absence of a credible Islamist threat would seem ideal for the opening up of the political system given that the Tunisian Islamists had been interlocutors of Bin Ali's during his first year as President⁵⁵; e) recent solid economic growth has contributed to the rise of a moderately wealthy middle class and created a potentially vibrant civil society. All this should represent a clear advantage on all the other countries in the region and it would therefore seem that if both the EU and the US were seriously promoting democracy, Tunisia would be the perfect 'target country' on which to apply pressure for change. However, not only this does not happen, but over the course of the last decade the rule of Bin Ali has been strengthened and, paradoxically, his police state has come to represent the paradigm of what other countries in the region should aspire to in order to satisfy the governance requirements of the US and the European Union.

Focusing on the external dimension as a 'reinforcer' of authoritarianism in Tunisia does not automatically marginalise 'domestic' explanations regarding the ability of the regime to remain highly authoritarian. Béatrice Hibou for instance points out that the control of economic levers by the leader and his security apparatus allow

⁵⁵ Larbi Sadiki, 'Bin Ali's Tunisia: Democracy by Non-Democratic Means', *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 29 (2002), pp. 57-78.

for the exercise of unrestrained power given that the merchant classes and the rising middle classes profit economically by rallying to the regime rather than from confronting it.⁵⁶ Similarly, Emma Murphy⁵⁷ and Stephen King⁵⁸ convincingly argue that the lack of political democratisation can be related to the hijacking of economic liberalisation, which strengthens authoritarianism rather than weakening it. What is contended here is that external actors facilitated such reinforcement of authoritarian rule by decreasing the costs of repression of the regime to such an extent that the paradox is that the regime is today rewarded precisely for remaining authoritarian.

The Tunisian Political System

For a year or so after coming to power in a bloodless coup in November 1987, it seemed that Bin Ali was setting about transforming the country and directing it away from its authoritarian past and towards a more inclusive and democratic future. One of his very first political moves was in fact to launch a political pact for democratization among all the political movements and parties that were active in Tunisia at the time including the Islamists.⁵⁹ However, ‘as soon as he entrenched his stranglehold on the

⁵⁶ Béatrice Hibou, ‘Domination and Control in Tunisia: economic levers for the exercise of authoritarian power’, *Review of African Political Economy*, 108 (2006), pp. 185-206.

⁵⁷ Emma Murphy, ‘The State and the Private Sector in North Africa: seeking specificity’, *Mediterranean Politics*, 6 (2001), pp. 1-28.

⁵⁸ Stephen King, *Liberalisation Against Democracy: the local politics of economic reform in Tunisia* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003).

⁵⁹ Lisa Anderson, ‘Political pacts, Liberalism, and Democracy: The Tunisian National pact of 1988’, *Government and Opposition*, 26 (1991), pp. 244-260.

reins of power, he discarded the more formidable opponents⁶⁰ and began to set up a façade democracy that has all the institutions and ‘formalities’ of a liberal-democratic state without having any of its content.

The Tunisian political system, its authoritarianism and the role of Bin Ali in hijacking the country’s institutions have been quite widely detailed⁶¹ and it is not the purpose of this paper to recount his story in detail. It suffices to say that since 1987, Bin Ali has been the linchpin of an authoritarian system that has enjoyed the support of the international community and the lauds of prominent European and American politicians. How is this possible in an era when democracy promotion has been at the top of the foreign policy agenda of all western powers and the international organizations they control?

It’s the economy stupid!

As mentioned earlier, one of the pillars of European democracy promotion in the region has been economic integration. While not offering the prospect of membership, the European Union believes that pro-market economic reforms will have beneficial repercussions in terms of democratization on authoritarian regimes. The logic therefore of partnership prevails among EU policy-makers who claim that it is through economic engagement that political developments will occur. In this context, grants and aid are offered to the target country to make the reforms necessary to be

⁶⁰ Larbi Sadiki, ‘Political Liberalization in Bin Ali’s Tunisia: Façade Democracy’, *Democratization*, 9 (2002), p. 125.

⁶¹ See for instance Nicolas Beau and Jean Pierre Tuquoi, *Notre Ami Ben Ali*, (Paris: La Decouverte, 1999); and Michel Camau and Vincent Geissier, *Le Syndrome Autoritaire*, (Paris: Presses de Sciences Po, 2003).

able to 'integrate' the regional economic exchanges. Such logic is based on the theory that economic advantages, which will inevitably occur in the target country after a period of 'adaptation', will create new centres of independent power that will make demands on the political system to reform and accommodate through democratic procedures the 'demands' of new sectors of society. The European Union links with Tunisia, which have seen the two actors sign an Association Agreement, have partially reflected the validity of such a theoretical construct. In the decade from 1995, Tunisia has made considerable economic progress and most economic indicators are better than for most of its regional neighbours.

Valentin Mbougueng, who argued in 1999 that we were witnessing the arrival on the world scene of the 'desert tiger', has examined Tunisian economic success in some detail.⁶² With respect to the support and crucial role of the European Union in terms of fostering Tunisian economic success, Testas argues that EU investment has led to higher level of total investment in the country and a development of greater economic activity.⁶³

This economic development has however not generated significant repercussions at the political level in terms of credible democratization or even liberalization. The recent creation of a second chamber devoid of any power seems to have been executed simply to satisfy the need for the EU to 'tick a box' when it comes to highlight democratic improvements in a partner country.

⁶² Valentin Mbougueng, *Bin Ali et le Modèle Tunisien*, (Paris: Editions de l'Orient, 1999).

⁶³ Abdelaziz Testas, 'The Contribution of EU Investment to Tunisia's Economic Development', *Journal of North African Studies*, 5 (2000), pp. 9-24.

If anything, the newfound economic success has led Bin Ali to further restrict political access to different groups in society in order to negate the possibility of debating the important social and economic issues that the boom has created. For instance, much of the improved economic indicators fail to highlight the unfair distribution of wealth, which sees those close to the regime benefiting from rents to the detriment of large sectors of the work force. In addition, access to consumer goods has certainly led to a higher standard of living, but with very heavy personal levels of debt. This risks becoming a problem in case of economic downturn, something that is already occurring in light of higher energy prices and de-localization away from Tunisia to other more profitable parts of the world. All these issues have therefore become a potential bone of contention for the regime and the political opposition in all its guises, which leads the regime to crack down harshly and impedes any movement away from authoritarian rule as the theory predicted.

The EU however is not disturbed and continues to praise Bin Ali and his efforts to modernize the country. The very logic of a neo-liberal economic integration that strongly favours European businesses over Tunisian ones (agriculture is excluded from the Association Agreement) and the enforcement of rules/regulations that are perceived to be unfair by sectors of Tunisian society make an alliance with Bin Ali necessary. There is very little incentive for the European Union to use the human rights clauses that are present in the agreement to punish Tunisia because the economic benefits that the EU now derives from the relationship might be jeopardized with a change at the top. Some data will suffice to highlight the positive outcomes that exist for the European Union when it comes to economic exchanges with Tunisia.

The EU represents by far the largest market for Tunisian goods (78.6% in 2002 rising to 84% in 2005) and the EU is also the primary exporter to Tunisia with 70.3% of goods in 2002, rising to 72% in 2005, coming from EU countries. The balance of payments heavily favours the EU, which had a surplus of almost 4 million Tunisian dinars in 2002. In addition, it should be highlighted that the EU also donates 78.4% (2002) of all foreign aid to the country.⁶⁴ The EU itself states that ‘Tunisia is one of the key beneficiaries of financial co-operation in the Mediterranean, because, thanks to its absorption capacity, it has received around 13% of the MEDA budget while having only 4% of the population of the Mediterranean region.’⁶⁵ Finally, it should be noted that while Tunisia is highly dependent on the EU, Tunisian goods represent a risible percentage of EU imports. All this shows how strong the hand of the European Union is vis a vis Tunisia. It is therefore all the more surprising, if we are to take the EU rhetoric at face value regarding democratisation and human rights, that the EU is incapable of pressurising Bin Ali’s regime into promoting serious liberalising and democratising reforms. A more convincing explanation for the absence of pressure rests on the EU’s interest to fully integrate Tunisia in the economic ‘region’ the EU is building in the Mediterranean. This region sees the EU itself as the central actor and main beneficiary of the liberal reforms occurring in third countries. It is again no surprise that in the National Indicative Programme for Tunisia published by the EU in 2005, the vast bulk of the money the EU provides (48.6%) is destined to strengthen economic reforms and market economy institutions, with the rest going to human resources development (such as vocational training) and to

⁶⁴ A summary of the economic data regarding the EU and Tunisia can be found at <http://www.deltun.cec.eu.int/fr/article.asp?ID0=12&ID1=179&ID=179>. Accessed July 10th, 2006.

⁶⁵ http://ec.europa.eu/comm/external_relations/tunisia/intro/index.htm. Accessed July 10th, 2006.

economic infrastructure. There is almost nothing in the Indicative Programme about human rights and democratisation aside from a brief statement about the EU's belief in the promotion of democracy and respect for human rights as core objectives.

In its 2006 report on Tunisia, Amnesty International for example indicates the following: a) 'Freedom of expression remained severely curtailed'; b) 'Human rights defenders continued to face harassment and sometimes physical violence', c) 'judges' activities and right to freedom of expression were further restricted'.⁶⁶ At the more general political level, Bin Ali's control over the political system has allowed him to modify the constitution to enable him being re-elected to the post of President despite an original ban on more than two mandates. Opposition parties are not permitted and the popular Islamist party is still outlawed. All this occurs despite the legal obligations in the Association Agreement with the EU to respect human rights and promote democratisation. The EU has never punished Tunisia by enforcing the human rights clauses present in the Agreement.

EU policy-making towards Tunisia indicates quite clearly that material interests are more important than democratisation and human rights despite the rhetorical commitment to it in both the European Security Strategy and the region-specific initiatives such as the recently launched European Neighbourhood Policy.

⁶⁶ Report available at <http://web.amnesty.org/report2006/tun-summary-eng#2>. Accessed on July 10th 2006.

Security first

The European Union has been traditionally more reluctant to co-operate openly and directly when it comes to hard security issues, but “ the terrorist attacks of 11 September, the Djerba tragedy, and the numerous arrests all over Europe have triggered an intense debate in Europe about internal and external security measures in the fight against terrorism.’ In this context, Tunisia is a primary ally because of the expertise of its secret police and its ability in dismantling its own domestic Islamist network. It is therefore no surprise that the European Union Counter-Terrorism Coordinator announced much tighter co-operation with all the North African governments.⁶⁷ While this might make sense from a strictly security-related point of view in the short-term, it should not be forgotten that it is precisely the Tunisian security and intelligence services that are to blame for their hold on the political system and their repression of all domestic opposition, thereby undermining the long-term democratisation requirements the EU purports to promote.

On its part, the United States has been much more active in deepening the links with the Tunisian regime with a view to strengthen its coalition against terror. The threat of Islamism in Tunisia does indeed exist, but not in the extremist and violent forms that make the headlines these days. In spite of this, the United States supports the heavy-handed practices of Bin Ali and Tunisia has become an important ally in the war on terror. Since 11 September 2001, contacts between the two countries have reached unprecedented depth, with Former Secretary of State Powell

⁶⁷ Gijs de Vries, ‘The European Union’s Role in the Fight Against Terrorism’, *Irish Studies in International Affairs*, 16 (2005), pp. 3-9.

visiting Tunisia in 2003 and Tunisian Foreign Minister visiting Washington in 2004. During that visit the US State Department declared that ‘Tunisia has been a voice for moderation. Tunisia has been a voice for regional harmony. Tunisia has been a voice for putting efforts and resources into development.’⁶⁸

On its part, the Tunisian government asserts that ‘Tunisia and the United States have been strengthened within the framework of common adherence to the values of liberty, democracy and free enterprise.’⁶⁹ The strength of these days was confirmed when Bin Ali visited Washington in February 2004 and President Bush lauded him for his efforts in the fight against terrorism.⁷⁰ As we can see, at the heart of US-Tunisian relations it should be the democratization of the country because, according to the Bush doctrine, it is only through democracy that terrorism will be ultimately defeated according to the Bush administration, but this does not happen. In fact, co-operation occurs in the military and intelligence domains,⁷¹ while MEPI funding does not appear to make any impact on the Tunisian political system. Again, short-term goals override such long-term beliefs.

⁶⁸ See <http://www.tunisiaonline.com/government/tn-us-relations.html>. Accessed on July 11th, 2006.

⁶⁹ See <http://www.tunisiaonline.com/government/tn-us-relations.html>. Accessed on July 11th, 2006.

⁷⁰ See <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2004/02/20040213-2.html>. Accessed on July 12th, 2006.

⁷¹ According to the State Department, ‘the United States and Tunisia have an active schedule of joint military exercises. U.S. security assistance historically has played an important role in cementing relations. The U.S.-Tunisian Joint Military Commission meets annually to discuss military cooperation, Tunisia's defense modernization program, and other security matters.’ See <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/5439.htm>. Accessed on July 12th, 2006.

The EU and the US share the same objective and therefore their democracy-promotion strategies are bound to fail. The maintenance of the international status quo, the enforcement of neo-liberal economic arrangements and the absolute control over the definition of what constitutes security make it impossible for these two actors to credibly promote democracy as the probable outcome is likely to throw up parties and movements that would contest precisely such objectives. Previous experiences are not encouraging in this sense. The FIS victory in the Algerian election in December 1991 were greeted with stunned preoccupation in Western capital and the subsequent military coup depriving the FIS of power was hailed in the West as the means to save democracy.⁷² The more recent case of the shunning of Hamas obeys to the same logic of ‘boycotting’ what democracy in the region produces because it does not conform to the EU and US vision of international peace and security. Thus, in terms of obtaining both security and material gains, Tunisia provides the perfect paradigmatic partner: economically integrated, but non-threatening (unlike the Asian tigers), co-operative on security matters, but not ‘devious’ (unlike Saudi Arabia or Pakistan), militarily weak and accommodating, but sufficiently strong to withstand potential Islamist pressure, and finally, docile when it comes to the Arab-Israeli conflict. If only the whole of the Arab world could be just like Tunisia...

Conclusion

On a general, and regional, level, the asserted existence of a transatlantic rift seems to suggest that a ‘softer’ and meaningful alternative to US *realpolitik* in the Middle East exists, in the form of EU policies. All the evidence, as this paper has

⁷² Francesco Cavatorta, ‘The Failed Liberalisation of Algeria and the International Context: a Legacy of Stable Authoritarianism’, *Journal of North African Studies*, 7 (2002), pp. 22-43.

argued, is to the contrary. The strategies of both the US and the EU, despite some rhetorical differences, show very similar contradictions and inconsistencies because, fundamentally, they are both preoccupied with maintaining the status quo in the absence of a 'reliable' and pliable political opposition in the region. Those who argue that the rift between the US and the EU is irreparable and bound to characterise international politics in the future seem to miss the mark.

In addition, the evidence gathered indicates that the promotion of democracy, irrespective of the intentions of its promoters, takes the backseat when confronted with more 'realist' goals. While this might be satisfactory in the short-term as it seems to guarantee a positive outcome for both the EU and the US, the long-term effects of such a choice might be much more problematic. Specifically, all of the double-talk about democracy in the Middle East and North Africa has profound and negative domestic implications. In a country such as Tunisia, (but also in Egypt and elsewhere), it gives false hope to local activists and actors, while doing next to nothing to undo the structures which preclude meaningful popular political participation. In turn, this has three further effects. First, it brings the whole idea and the 'ideal' of democracy into disrepute thereby legitimising the ideological discourse of those who articulate the rejection of democratic governance. Second, it further diminishes the credibility of the United States and other Western actors as promoters/supporters of democracy in the region. Thus, even those who are favourable to a Western-style democracy feel compelled to distance themselves from its external proponents. This makes both the US and the EU lose important constituencies. Finally, and paradoxically, the incumbent regimes continue to enjoy all the fruits of office, unchallenged by the very policies ostensibly designed as their undoing.