

Is the EU losing credibility in Palestine?

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»» The Israeli attack on the Gaza Flotilla and the resulting diplomatic reverberations have engendered clear international agreement on one subject: that the Israeli blockade of the Gaza Strip has to be lifted. The EU's foreign policy chief, Catherine Ashton, was quick to condemn the attack and urged Israel to lift the blockade, calling it 'unacceptable' and 'counterproductive'. This move would be a first step to improving the deteriorating living conditions in Gaza. But it must be remembered that the Middle East Quartet contributed to the current impasse through its political boycott of the elected Hamas government and, perhaps more crucially, of the National Unity Government, which would have provided an opportunity for Palestinian reconciliation.

The divide in Palestinian society prevails. In 2009, national elections originally scheduled for January 2010 were postponed to an unknown date. This postponement counted with the EU's silent support. Now President Abbas has also delayed the municipal elections planned for July 2010. The elections had already been boycotted by Hamas and were to take place in the West Bank only.

The postponement of the elections comes in the wake of the Flotilla attack with mounting calls for Palestinian unity to bring about an end to the blockade of the Gaza Strip. Fatah was afraid that elections would compromise its credibility. In addition, divisions within Fatah have been deepening. The municipal elections were seen as an important test-run for the national elections, which now seem to have been even further deferred to a date in the unforeseeable future. The continuous postponement of elections obviously subverts a precarious democratic process.

HIGHLIGHTS

- The EU should actively support a Palestinian reconciliation process, resulting in elections without further delay
- The EU has lost credibility as a normative actor since its political boycott of Hamas: it should re-energise its approach to democracy promotion, focusing on Palestinian civil society capacity building
- For Palestinians, democracy promotion also means that the EU should be more assertive towards Israel regarding occupation policies

»»»»» The EU should now actively support a reconciliation process, which must result in elections without further delay. This could provide a way out of the EU being limited to dealing with Fatah instead of an elected, representative Palestinian government – an important condition for any attempt to reinvigorate credible peace talks.

And, crucially, this must kick-start a re-energised EU approach to building democracy in the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT). I carried out a large number of interviews with Palestinian politicians, civil society representatives, academics, activists and artists in the West Bank and East Jerusalem in 2010: these show that the EU is fast losing goodwill among key sectors of the Palestinian population.

THE EU'S APPROACH TO DEMOCRACY BUILDING

The EU's democracy building agenda in the Mediterranean started with the Barcelona Process and the establishment of the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR). However, it experienced a slow start. Following the Oslo Accords and the establishment of the Palestinian Authority (PA), the EU was willing to tolerate authoritarian rule and human rights violations by President Arafat for the sake of keeping alive the peace process. This changed with the second Intifada, and the 9/11, London and Madrid terrorist attacks. Both the Bush administration and the EU changed course. While the policy had hitherto been built on the belief that successful peace was a condition for democratisation, this assumption was now reversed. Subsequently, the democracy agenda received a boost with the introduction of the Action Plans in the frame of the European Neighborhood Policy (2004) and an upgrade of the EIDHR (2006/07).

The new approach also meant a change of stance towards the Palestinian Authority. In 2002, the EU set out to limit Arafat's presidential powers by urging the PA to introduce the office of a

prime minister; by fostering the rule of law with an independent judiciary and the call for the abolition of the infamous state security courts; by fighting corruption within the PA through the introduction of auditing mechanisms; by placing revenues under the auspices of the ministry of finance; and through an attempt to enhance the oversight capacity of the Palestinian Legislative Council.

This approach was reversed after the 2006 elections, when the office of President Abbas was strengthened again relative to the office of Prime Minister Haniyeh. EU aid was once more distributed in opaque ways.

In addition, the majority of EU aid (approximately EUR 530 million in 2007) is dedicated to short-term socio-economic relief, instead of sustainable, long-term support for institution building. An even smaller amount is allocated to civil society capacity building. In recent years, funds for democracy have been modest and have concentrated on fighting corruption in the executive (EUR 27 million from 2004–2008), election support (EUR 20 million from 2000–2006), and on fostering the Palestinian judicial system (EUR 8 million from 2004–2008). Bottom-up democratisation through civil society bodies receives a maximum of EUR 1.2 million per year through the EIDHR.

PALESTINIAN PERCEPTIONS

Palestinians see the Western political boycott of Hamas as highly hypocritical, negatively colouring their image of the EU and its democracy agenda in the region. Although in the past decade the EU constantly tried to disassociate itself from American democracy promotion in the Middle East, it is perceived in a similar way to the US.

Indeed, there is a striking gap between the EU's perception of itself as a 'normative power' and the Palestinian perception of the EU as a traditional power, which – in the words of Saman

Khoury, General Manager of the Peace and Democracy Forum – ‘deals with autocrats and dictators whenever it serves its interests’. Furthermore, several of my interviewees claimed that what really underlies the double-standard in the EU’s application of democratic values is a discriminatory approach towards the Palestinians. As Mustafa Barghouti, Founder and Director of the Palestinian National Initiative (Al-Mubadara) observed, ‘why do they not see us as equally capable of being democratic?’

Thus, if the EU is serious about building democracy in the Palestinian quasi-state, an honest encouragement of Palestinian national reconciliation – including some kind of engagement with Hamas – appears to be crucial. This would not only support the EU’s democracy agenda and restore its

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image, but also provide an important precondition for reviving peace talks and helping the conflicting parties out of the current deadlock.

Secondly, Palestinians barely distinguish democracy promotion from the EU’s general foreign policy towards Israel and the OPT. Many interviewees, including Sari Nusseibeh, Palestinian academic and Director of Al Quds University, claimed that they are living under an ‘unfolding reality of Apartheid’ and that the two-state solution is on the verge of collapsing, which makes European democracy promotion towards the PA all rather pointless. Palestinians expect the EU to exert more pressure on Israel, particularly regarding the application of different laws towards settlers and Palestinians (Israeli versus military law), the constraint on the freedom of movement, and the holding of elections in East Jerusalem in accordance with the Oslo Accords. Rami Hamdallah, Secretary General of the Palestinian Central Elections Commission, and many others, referred to the difficulties of carrying out elections under the restraints of occupation. The EU could be much more assertive towards Israel in this respect.

Thirdly, many NGO representatives, including Walid Salem, Director of the Center for Democracy and Community Development, complain that they receive ‘peanuts’ as the EU prefers to work with ‘the men in ties’. In addition, Hakim Sabbah, Director of Project Hope, pointed out that several grassroots organisations even prefer not to apply for EU aid. Palestinians are generally proud that they are building democracy by themselves. Mustafa Barghouti even claims that the bottom-up development of Palestinian democracy provides an inspiration for the entire Arab world. Many interviewees wonder why the West does not acknowledge this achievement. Many Palestinians stress that they do not understand why their democratic achievements are ignored, as they associate themselves with a common heritage in the Mediterranean and feel close to European values.

This represents an important perception of ownership of Palestinian democracy, as well as a sense of association with European values on the part of civil society, which the EU should build on. A bottom-up approach in EU democracy building would make Palestinian democracy more sustainable and turn the EU into a credible actor that works in partnership with Palestinians, instead of imposing democracy from above, which is perceived as ‘patronising’ (Sari Nusseibeh) and ‘preaching’ (Saman Khoury).

Fourthly, many lean towards a tolerance-based model of democracy. For example, Adly Yaish, the Mayor of Nablus, commented that, ‘Democracy for us means mutual respect and a harmonious coexistence of different religions’. Also repeatedly invoked was the rule of law as a central aspect of democracy, as well as the demand for more participatory models of democracy. Almost all interviewees stressed the importance of social justice and a more egalitarian or social model of democracy. This idea is perceived by some to contrast with the liberal model of democracy, which the EU is seen as promoting in Palestine. As many of the European member states – such as the Scandinavian countries – are built on more egalitarian versions of democracy, their example could serve as a

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»»»»» better model to export. In this respect, the EU has a comparative advantage over the US and should seize this opportunity. This is important as social democracy can play an important role in reconciliation and can alleviate rocky transition processes by generating broad support for democracy, through a guarantee of economic and social rights for citizens.

Fifth, regarding domestic problems, most stressed the fact that Palestinian society is still based on a tribal or clan structure, 'where the prevailing attitude is not to express oneself independently' (Saman Khoury). Many interviewees also argued that this tribal structure is aggravated by the current situation, in which Palestinians are increasingly dependent on the help of the tribe. Some interviewees, including Sari Nusseibeh, claimed that democracy promotion has to be built up from the very bottom: in the family, where one learns how to relate to others with respect. He suggested that teaching tolerance at home, in schools, universities and mosques is essential to building a high quality modern democracy.

CONCLUSION

The European Union has lost credibility as a normative actor since its reaction to the 2006 Palestinian parliamentary elections. This limits its ability to contribute to the building of democracy in the OPT. In addition, its policy of boycotting Hamas was counterproductive as it increased the moral high ground of the movement, as well as the split between Fatah and Hamas, with negative consequences for the possibility of peace talks. As Mustafa Barghouti pointed out, real peace can only be achieved with an elected Palestinian government, not by choosing the easiest partner for negotiations. The EU should learn from this, consider some kind of engagement with Hamas and work towards a reconciliation process. It should also call for elections without further delay.

Furthermore, the EU should become more responsive to the specific needs of Palestinian democratisation and increase its support for

grassroots organisations, which would enhance a sense of partnership on both sides and improve the EU's credibility. The EU should also consider incorporating aspects of social justice into its model of democracy. This does not imply short-term socio-economic measures, but the development of a long-term strategy to build up a solid welfare state and to foster social and economic rights, as well as the institutions at state and civil society level which can guarantee such rights. None of this will provide a panacea. But if such advances are not made, the tragic events of recent weeks are more likely to recur.

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