Chapter 7

The European Union and Democracy Promotion in the Middle East and North Africa Countries: Bridging the Gap Between Constructivism and Realism

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Abstract

The discourse of European foreign policy is based on transferring fundamental concepts; including democracy, human rights, and fundamental freedoms derived from the role of the European Union (EU) as a non-traditional global actor "normative power". However, the EU's experience in promoting democracy in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) shows that its commitments in this field remain selective and depend on the calculation of interests. This study explores the factors which have had implications on the Euro-Mediterranean partnership in promoting democracy; and it argues that understanding the EU's approach to supporting democracy in the MENA requires a combination of both constructivist and rationalist assumptions. According to the findings of this study, the EU always prioritizes its security considerations and economic interests over standards and values when normative influence is insufficient. This is not due to a problem in the normative content of the EU's foreign policy discourse; but it is due to the complexity of its security and economic interests in this region in particular. This study concludes that the contradiction between the EU's normative dynamics and its strategic objectives undermines its normative power.

Keywords: EU, MENA, normative power, democracy transition, constructivism, realism

7.1. Introduction

After the end of the Cold War, the world has witnessed a set of dramatic changes on the international level which have reshaped international relations; such as the rise of civil society organizations, globalization, and interdependence. The world has emerged the era of new sovereignty, which requires individual governments to work together to achieve common goals that are nearly difficult for one state to achieve when acting alone (Nincic, 1970). As a result, countries began to push out of isolation into an era of cooperation and solidarity in order to address increasing necessities and interests. Most countries see cooperation with international organizations as a pragmatic way of achieving mutual benefits of an economic, military, cultural, and/or political nature between the sovereign states.

To maximize that, the EU took on new goals for a common European foreign policy, rather than just economic integration among the European countries (Laïdi, 2008). The integration became more active in expansionism. It has presented itself as a normative power by exporting its norms of democracy, human rights, and the rule of law as articulated in its constitutional treaties, the Maastricht Treaty of 1993 on the European Union (Lazarou et al., 2013).

The EU's foreign policy has identified MENA countries as a prioritized region and made democracy development and the rule of law in MENA a focus (Jonasson, 2013). In 1995, the EU launched the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP), known as the Barcelona Process (Joffe, 2014), which is considered a new era of cooperation between the north and south of the Mediterranean, regardless of the huge gap which existed in between. By this partnership, the EU developed a package of instruments for democracy reforms which became a fundamental principle in the partnership agreements.

Scholars argue that the EU plays a significant role in supporting democracy in many countries worldwide and that it has been effective in promoting political reform and supporting democratic transition in Central and Eastern Europe after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Many academic debates argued that the EU as a union of sovereign states, only seeks to expand for economic benefit and security rather than establishing democracy, while it is impossible to balance between common security interests or democracy support, which is considered "schizophrenic" in character. Scholars suggest that the EU was unable to cope with

the challenges of a more complex international environment for democracy and human rights in the MENA countries, whereas these countries did not achieve the desired level of political and democratic development as Eastern European countries (Youngs, 2010).

This study aims to find out why the Euro-Mediterranean partnership was ineffective in promoting democracy transition and the rule of law. Is this due to a problem in the normative content of the EU's foreign policy discourse, or do the challenges require the EU to be a rational actor more than a normative one? However, the following two questions are sought to be answered: How does the European Union view the issue of democratic transformation in the Arab world before and after the Arab uprisings? Does the European policy of democratic conditionality succeed in supporting the dynamics of the Arab movements? The main contribution of this study is to enrich the debate on the EU's normative power and its promotion of democracy in the MENA countries which are characterized by diverging dynamics (Bicchi, 2006). In addressing these questions, this study offers two arguments: Firstly, the interests of the EU drive the norms promotion. This explains the EU's late response to the events of the Arab Uprising and Libyan Civil War in 2011, and its non-role in the processes of democratization in these countries (Hamchi, 2018). Secondly, this study demonstrates that security concerns trump normative concerns in the turbulent and uncertain MENA region for the EU.

7.2. Democracy promotion is a normative process

During the Cold War, the European Community was not considered a great power having a great role in the international system. As Hedley Bull argued, there was no evidence of Europe becoming a player in international affairs due to its weakness in the military and defence power (Bull, 1982). Nevertheless, after the collapse of the communist camp on the one hand, and the increasing internal conflicts in East Europe, as well as the challenges and threats coming from the south, the international organizations have taken on new roles. It was no longer enough for the EU to present itself as a form of economic organization. European decision-makers worked on doing international politics differently by representing the EU as a normative power in its foreign policy "value-driven" (Hamchi, 2018).

The normative power is synonymous with many alternative concepts, such as civilian power and soft power. Ian Manners explained the normative power of the EU and has centred his argument on Robert Rosecrans's assumption that "European attainment is normative rather than empirical" (Manners, 2002, p. 235). Manners defined the EU's normative power as the ideational impact of the EU's international identity and role as representing normative power (Manners, 2002). The normative power of the EU is embodied in its ability to achieve foreign policy goals through attraction and persuasion rather than military power (Nye, 2004); by placing its norms of human rights, liberty, and democracy as principles in its external relations with its neighbours and convincing the other political actors to adhere to its norms and ideas to obtain the desired behaviour.

Promoting democracy is a normative process. According to the Treaty on European Union, in this sense the EU uses the instruments of the normative power to put demands on countries to take steps for democratic reforms, while its main tools are creating incentives such as economic benefits or promises to be a member of the EU. The EU used democracy reforms as a condition in making its enlargement decisions in Eastern Europe (Malová & Dolný, 2008). The constructivist theory of international relations highlights the role of norms in promoting normative change in international relations by shaping the choices and acts that constitute a political order and rejecting realist assumptions regarding norms' effects. Finnemore and Sikkink (1998) claimed that norms act as a corset on states, they control the behaviour of the players and redefine their identities. Constructivist scholars stress that international standards (and institutions) help to overcome the difficulties of cooperation imposed by the anarchy structure. However, the realist perspective contradicts this assumption by seeing that the core element in an anarchy system is the distribution of capabilities among great powers (Mearsheimer, 2001).

Other scholars suggest that norms based on material interests can obtain normative power; as norms are intertwined with material interests (Diez, 2005). For Youngs the European Union knows what it does when it spreads democracy as part of a larger strategy involving consolidating regimes and encouraging third-party support for itself, and it is not possible to clearly differentiate between norms and interests. The assumption of a normative sphere without interests is nonsensical (Youngs, 2004).

7.2.1. The Euro-Mediterranean partnership approach policy in promoting democracy in the MENA countries

The Barcelona Process in 1995 was an advanced policy striving to promote peace, stability, and prosperity; largely following the model of EU policies towards Eastern Europe after the Cold War. EMP emphasizes the importance of democracy to obtain stability and peace; and it is based on the idea that states cannot produce a secure area without democracy (Balfour, 2004). EMP represents a major shift in the EU's policy towards the Southern Mediterranean countries. As such, it is considered a bridge between the two shores of the Mediterranean, as it adopts the concept of participation rather than cooperation, which indicates a contractual relationship and a cooperative strategy.

The European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) was adopted in 2004 due to the interaction of the EU with the effects of the 9/11 attacks and the American war in Iraq in 2003. The aims of the organization were to avoid the emergence of new dividing factors between the enlarged EU and its neighbours on the Southern Mediterranean and to prevent any negative consequences which could result from neglecting the South and shifting eastward. The ENP could be explained in the context of a review of the Barcelona Process (Aliboni, 2004). It aimed to strengthen prosperity, stability and security for all the neighbour countries under the umbrella of full economic integration. The EU expected that higher rates of economic development would automatically lead to political reforms. The general trend of the ENP is to set standards and commitments, which are the main tools for the normative power of the EU. The action plan was the general framework of the ENP which regulates the relations between partners and promotes political dialogue between them. The Action Plan is designed to provide a common platform for political and economic reforms to be followed through the financial assistance of the EU.

As part of its promotion of democracy vis-à-vis its Mediterranean partners, the EU has adopted a package of instruments which rely on persuasion and active cooperation to encourage democratic reform (Van Hüllen, 2012). The main approach is positive conditionality "reinforcement by reward", the EU's neighbourhood policy (European Union External Action official website, 2015). In line with its target of deeper integration, EU offers financial assistance to neighbouring countries, but under the condition of undertaking democratic

reforms. The level of EU aid is determined by if a country accepts a high level of economic and political requirements.

While positive conditionality has been implemented effectively in the context of EU's enlargement decisions, these aids proved ineffective when applied to Arab countries since they have no chance of becoming EU members (Lavenex & Schimmelfennig, 2011). Therefore, negative conditions such as sanctions should be included in the ENP to prevent such partner countries from breaking collaboration agreements. There are policies mentioned in the Action Plan, which are considered critical for promoting democracy; such as the good governance, the rule of law, exchanges and mobility between individuals and groups of the partner countries, and cultural and religious dialogue (Calleya, 2005).

7.3. Challenges to the Euro-Mediterranean partnership in the promotion of democracy before Arab uprising

The EMP attempted to strengthen democratic reform in the Southern Mediterranean; but the trends of the reforms' implementation were disappointing. The partners of the EMP are not serious about promoting democracy. It could not influence the countries which do not have a hope of joining the EU.

7.3.1. The Priorities of European foreign policy towards the Arab countries

It is argued that the Euro-Med partnership is not working properly because it is an EU policy (Storey & Durac, 2009). Therefore, in discussing the priorities of the EU's foreign policy in the EMP, it should be clarified that the EMP has been reduced to the economic side only. The EU's primary goals were its common interests in energy, migration, and security; while there was less emphasis on the values of democracy. This led to an understanding of the EU as a realist actor rather than a normative one. At best, it can be said that the EU pursues interests within a strongly normative framework. A glance at the attitude of the European Union, before and during the Arab revolutions in 2011, it can be said that the EU preferred to seek only its interests. Moreover, it provided assistance to the regimes in Arab countries. For example, the partnership agreement between the EU and Tunisia

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created in 1998 -during the Ben Ali regime- covered all the fields of cooperation including even intelligence; and the relations with the EU were neighborly regardless of the democratization issue (Euro-Mediterranean Association Agreements, 2004). In Egypt, the EU praised the Egyptian leader Hosni Mubarak for his role in combating Islamic fundamentalism, even just a few days before its overthrow (Hewitt, 2011). Moreover, the protests for political reform in 2004 held the first multi-candidate presidential election in Egypt's history in 2005. Nevertheless, it was a far cry from democracy, since the elections were held under tight restrictions, there was fraud in the voting, and means of discrimination such as intimidation were used (Ayoub, 2011). The EU continued the debate on the action plan, and financial aid has not been withdrawn in response to these abuses.

The first reason for the weak position of Europe on Middle East issues is that the structure of the European Union makes it difficult to make decisions consistently. In the EU, there are no unified goals between its member states, and decision-making is determined by which country holds the strongest position at the time and works to implement its policies. France and Germany are the two major powers in the union. Each one has a different perspective and interest regarding the countries of the Middle East. Moreover, each one has a different history in the region, resulting in differences in its approach. Although the European Union has existed for decades, there is no single centre for making foreign policy. The foreign policy of the European group lacks strength, capabilities, means, integration, and harmony, so the Union has been unable to translate its political ambitions towards the Arab world.

Another important argument is that the EU preferred political stability as a means to achieve its interests. It has remained in doubt about the Islamist parties' involvement in the electoral process (2004). The EU perceives that Islamist movements are not compatible with its liberal values of it and with international issues -such as the Arab-Israeli question- which it deems important for international stability (Pace & Seeberg, 2013).

Azmi Bishara (2021) addressed the impact of regional and international factors on the stability of an authoritarian regime. He believes that the international and regional external factors that impede the process of democratic transition are commensurate with the geostrategic importance of the state; they will therefore have less influence if the countries undergoing a transition are of less strategic

significance, especially in light of the Arab-Israeli conflict and the production of oil. This is one of the most important differences between the Egyptian and Tunisian experiences. The Egyptian transition was more affected by external factors than the Tunisian transition.

Addionally, The US as a hegemon power in this anarchic international system seeks to be the strongest power and strives to prevent any power attempts to push it (Mearsheimer, 2001). Therefore, the most important objective of the EU is a geopolitical goal, resisting to US hegemony over the traditional areas of influence for Europe, which considers the South Mediterranean essential to protect its back from any sources of danger (Morillas, 2012).

7.3.2. The non-cooperation of the Arab countries

The failure to spread democracy in this region is not only Europe's fault. Democracy reforms also depend on the target regime to adopt external democracy promotion efforts. Some opinions claim that the rewards of the EU have not been enough to encourage the reforms. However, the answer is not about sufficiency, since the provided financial aid is useless as long as the ruling regimes are characterized by corruption. The regimes in Arab Mediterranean countries seek from this partnership security for themselves and the ruling regimes; therefore encouraging the EU to consider them a special case in terms of democratic accountability and human rights. Since the ruling elites regard themselves as the protectors of Europe from terrorism -a great mission -, by fighting the roots of terrorism as a pretext for fighting terrorism and Islamic extremism; governments have been maintaining permanent states of emergency and restricting freedom of expression and association. It can be seen that the overthrow of the Brotherhood by the Egyptian people in 2013, and Egypt's classification of the Brotherhood as a terrorist group, paved the way for other Arab states to pursue this party. In July 2020, the Jordanian top court decided that the Muslim Brotherhood had been officially dissolved and had lost its legal personality (The Jordan Times, 2020). Despite the fact that the Brotherhood in the past did not threaten the regime in Jordan and the insistence of the elements Jordan Brotherhood that the movement's strategy is to participate in the government and not to rule (Schenker & Barnhard, 2015). But due to ideological shifts in the ranks of the group (Al-Mubaidin & Eyadat, 2013), and its political divisions between the Palestinian "hawks" who are hard on

political stances, and the "doves" of the East Bankers (lenient in their stances) which led to creating a case for dealing.

In fact, the partnership project emerged from the desire of the European party to play a key role in the new international system, and the process was characterized by the acceleration of the pace of normalization and the transition of the conflict path to a path of settlement and peace (Qelwaz & Gharby, 2016). In the Euro-Mediterranean partnership project, the Arab identity is completely negated by dividing the Arab states into the Mediterranean and non-Mediterranean countries and excluding these latter states from the partnership. The European High Commission does not deal with the Arab League as a pan-Arab institution, as this institution is absent and not represented in the European partnership project. Therefore, some Arab regimes such as Libya under Qaddafi's regime and Syria were not yet convinced about the EU's commitment to supporting democracy, because of its ambivalence about the Arab - Israeli conflict. They consider that the priorities of the EU partnership are to ensure the stability of Israel. In addition, because of the colonial period, Arabian countries, in general, are distrustful of the EU's intentions in promoting democracy. That is why there has been a trend that calls for expansion toward the East, rather than forward towards the West. Furthermore, they view external attempts to promote democracy as abuse and interference in internal affairs, while they perceive that common external policies diminish their sovereignty.

The role of the regime varies from opponent to partner; boycotting or actively engaging in the external actor's efforts (Van Hüllen, 2012). For example, during Egypt's "transitional period," calls for the closure of European civil society organizations have spread, accusing them of threatening the country's security and sovereignty (El-Sayed, 2014). This is so, despite the acceptance of partnerships requiring that states allow for such policies and these partnerships derive their powers from the explicit consent of the contracting states. Therefore, if the EU is really keen on supporting the common values, it should stop the contradiction between its normative power and interests. These types of organizations are the columns in the field of democratic transformation and they should increase their funds to civil society organizations which aim to raise awareness on the rights and freedoms.

7.4. The trajectory of the EU promoting democracy after the Arab uprisings

Due to the dramatic challenges in the MENA region -such as the collapse of regimes, revolutions, civil wars, illegal migration, the fight against terrorism, and energy security- the EU has revised its policies in the region. The EU has sought, in view of the divergence of foreign policies of its member states, to contain the transformations in the region and control their repercussions on regional stability. It established two joint communications in 2011: one on the EU's southern neighborhood and on a new revised European Neighbourhood Policy, which established the following principles:

'More for more'; entails financial support from the EU to countries that make more economic and political reforms. The EU adopted the standards in the spring program; which require the presence of free and fair elections; freedom of assembly, opinion, and expression; and the rule of law in the framework of the independence of the judiciary.

The deep democracy; is not only establishing democratic constitutions and organizing free and fair elections. It also includes the preservation of an independent judicial system, the freedom of the media, and civil society. It focuses on the views of people, groups, organizations, emotions, and personal experiences. In general, it is the idea of supporting a deeper dialogue that has been around. Furthermore, the Civil Society Facility was created to support civil society in promoting reform, and to ensure the participation of civil society organizations in policies at both national and local levels in the Arab Spring countries, while increasing the participation of civil society organizations in developing programs based on the monitoring of the EU aid into related programs.

In spite of this, the review of the democracy promotion policy did not succeed either. This review cannot be considered a new policy with future implications. These are just the same tools, such as positive conditionality, which are more for more, or less for less. Despite the EU's attempts to support these countries in democratization after the revolutions such as by sending an election assessment team to Libya and helping the authorities to organize elections and provide technical assistance, this was not enough (Salem, 2015).

The MENA today has become the source of serious challenges. Some Arab

countries are experiencing complex internal situations; such as returning to autocracy, active conflicts, terrorism, and immigration; which all have contributed to making reforms difficult. Several MENA countries have sought alternatives to deal with local instability, conflicts, and regional tensions. Morocco, the United Emirates, and Bahrain have reached a peace agreement or normalization of relations with Israel. This orientation has been encouraged by the administration of President Donald Trump (Lynfield, 2022). Peace with Israel is a way to mend the power balance in the face of Iran. Since the European Union is unable to move to the next political step, according to Henner Fürtig (2004) the European Union cannot provide the military protection that the Gulf countries need as the United States does.

The key geo-strategic feature of the region become is its division into competing axes, which has led to the countries conglomerating within the axis they believe will provide security against the risks and threats posed by the other axes. Ghazi Dahman (2020) explained the conflictual regional dynamics as follows:

The resistance axis led by Iran includes elements in the Iraqi state, Syria, Hezbollah, and the Amal movement in Lebanon. They regard Western allies as colonial forces that must be fought, while Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Egypt, Jordan and Bahrain make up the Arab moderation axis. This axis is closely linked to the West and collaborates with Israel in assessing Iran's threats. Iran is seen as a source of Middle East instability. Political Islamist movements in the region are likewise distrusted by the members of this coalition. Another regional conflict emerged which was the Liberal Sunni/Islamic Sunni dichotomy; a struggle between Saudi Arabia, and Egypt on one side versus Turkey and Qatar on the other (Hajjal, 2018, 131). This regional ideological rivalry intensified the Gulf crisis of 2017 and has led to further militarization and polarization in the MENA countries (Megerisi, 2019). The reason for this conflict is that Qatar and Turkey are considered responsible for supporting the Islamist movement.

Europe's foreign policy has become less influential. There was no reaction to the coups against democracy in the Arab neighborhood and it was regarded as an ideological conflict or a state of violence and turmoil between the components of the people (Shaker, 2016). As well as the conflicting foreign policy objectives of the EU member states, including the French-Italian rivalry over hegemony in North Africa and their involvement in Libya's post-Gaddafi conflict (Keshadah, 2018). Relations

between the two countries have been strained over the last decade due to their competing interests in Libya, especially since the rise of the far-right in Italy in 2018. Coalition leaders Luigi Di Maio and Matteo Salvini have waged a war of words against France, which they accuse of having "no interest in stabilizing" countries like Libya (Igrouane, 2019). Besides the problems Libya faces already, the issue of whether Paris or Rome will be the main international voice regarding Libyan affairs compounds those issues (Asheikh & Direkli, 2022).

Italy's economic interests are in Tripoli, as Italians have won over the past years many projects in the oil sector, and they do not want French companies to compete with them in the sector. Ceccorulli and Coticchia (2015) highlighted that the pressure of military and economic lobbies and the promotion of stability in strategic areas for the Italian economy are the main elements behind Italy's defense policy actions abroad. Italy's support is also rooted in history, considering that Italy colonized Libya in 1911 and fought through World War II to retain control there. Meanwhile, France backs Khalifa Haftar's Libyan National Army (LNA) in the east and south. The French concern for the lawless south is rooted in Paris' interest to protect its political investments in the Sahel (Kausch, 2019). For instance, in April 2019, France blocked a European Union statement calling for Haftar to cease his offensive in Tripoli (Baczynska & Guarascio, 2019). The European Council on Foreign Relations reported that "[t]he role of foreign states in Libya's civil war has long been murky, yet hugely significant. Interventions designed to serve foreign states' political or regional interests have been a constant feature of the country's post-revolutionary fractiousness and strife" (Megerisi 2019, para. 2).

Additionally, the Russian increased role in MENA has expanded the scoop of political and military conflict in the region. Arnaud Dubien, director of the France-Russia Observatory, explained "Vladimir Putin sought to reinvest in the African continent, and more generally in former Soviet allies", (Daou, 2017, para. 19). For example, Moscow hopes to have a say in the dispute talks and re-establish the trade prospects that were disrupted by Gaddafi's demise (Rumer, 2019). For Russia, the alliance with the LNA and Haftar provides a possible opportunity to improve its position in North Africa (Mullin, 2020). While the United States remains an observer of this extraordinary political reality.

According to some, the external factors hindering democracy in many non-Arab countries are not inevitable, but they changed as a result of changes in the

international system and the emergence of local democratic forces. Therefore, it is possible to neutralize these factors in Arab cases, but this depends on the emergence of democratic forces at home, as well as their ability to influence and change the nature of interactions taking place in regional and international systems (Hussein, 2021).

Consequently, the problem is not the failure of the EU's policies to spread democracy but rather the logic of interests and national security (Shaker, 2016). Therefore, if the EU is really keen to support common values, it should stop the contradiction between its normative power and interests. The EU should support peace-building programs and the rule of law in ongoing conflict countries; and it should adopt the bottom-up approach by supporting civil society organizations that aim to raise awareness of the rights and freedoms, as these organizations are the pillars of democratic transformation.

7.5. Conclusion

The EMP succeeded in establishing a joint process of political dialogue and decision-making between the EU and its southern neighbours. However, it is no secret that the EU is not able to strengthen its role in the MENA region. The EU's policy of promoting democracy in this region through the EMP has failed. Even though the EU adopted different instruments to encourage these countries to make political reforms, the behaviour of the EU before and post-Arab uprisings did not face a change.

The fact remains that the EU is less interested in promoting democracy and more in insecurity and economic interests. The EU's foreign policy reflects the interests of its member states, their priorities being material interests such as energy and maintaining security. The ultimate objective of the EU member states will not change in the future, since we have seen that, instead of strengthening democracy in these countries, it is aligned with the most oppressive regimes.

This policy is the outcome of the anarchic structure of the international system. In the absence of a world government, the behaviour of states and their goals will not be any different than it was in the past century. There is no place for morality. All states seek security and fight for their interests. We can consider the exporting of values to be the approach used by the EU's foreign policy in the southern Mediterranean countries, and we can consider it ineffective in promoting

reform. The EU should be ready as a real power to give up its new mission of promoting democracy for its stability and commercial interests. But the aim of the EU for the Euro-Mediterranean partnership is to contain the problems flown to it from the southern shore of the Mediterranean, while the ruling regimes in MENA countries have been seeking stability for their regimes.

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