<div align="center">

OUTLINE OF REMARKS

Islam, Democratic Transition and Regime Stability in the Mediterranean

Tim Niblock
Director, Institute of Arab and Islamic Studies
University of Exeter

</div>

Introduction

Islam and regime stability constitute two of the three key variables which impinge on the issue of democratic transition in the southern and eastern Mediterranean region. The third is economic liberalisation – i.e. the extent to which an open economy is necessary for a democratic polity. So as to provide a full analysis of the prospects and problems in democratic transition, this paper will examine the interactions between all three of the variables and democratic transition.

The central theme is to outline the paradoxes and problems which surround the process of democratic transition in the area, and to recommend in the light of that the lines of policy which the EU could be pursuing.

Paradoxes and Problems

Democratic transition and the three variables mentioned above are clearly all positive values taken individually: the lack of democracy and of governmental respect for human rights has robbed societies of their natural spontaneity and skewed political and economic priorities; a stable political entity is necessary for productive human interaction; in Islamic societies, a political entity which fails to recognise Islamic cultural/religious values will be alien to its own society; and where the role of the state inhibits the most productive use of national resources, liberalisation of some form is required so as to engender economic growth. The problems arise due to the inter-connectedness of these positive values, and the reality that effective pursuit of one may impact negatively on others. In addition to this, there is the additional set of

paradoxes stemming from the involvement of external powers in forwarding/limiting positive development in any of these fields.

Similar (if not identical) paradoxes and problems face democratic transitions in any part of the world, yet there is little doubt that because of a mixture of resource-based, global-system based, and cultural considerations the dilemma is particularly acute in the Mediterranean/Middle Eastern region.

1. Stability and democratic change may be complementary in the long-term, but are unlikely to be in the short-term.
   - Impact of socio-economic division
   - Role of Islamist organisations
   - Impact of regional issues: Iraq, Israel/Palestine etc
   - Is stability always a positive value? Possibility of excessive stability.
   - External interests and the issue of stability

2. Democratic transition is in principle promoted by Western powers, but in practice more representative governments in the region may be less receptive to Western strategic, diplomatic and economic objectives in the region.
   - Divergence between US/EU pronounced principles and the practical policies pursued on democratisation
   - Relevance of Iraq, Israel/Palestine
   - Impact of conflicting interests among Western countries

3. Moving away from the command-economy model of economic organisation is necessary both for economic regeneration and (it seems) for effective liberal democracy, yet the social tensions created by economic liberalisation in the IMF could undermine the prospects for a stable democratic polity.
   - Socio-economic effects of dismantling welfare structures
   - Political consequences: creating the space for militant opposition
   - How long is the short-term? Awaiting positive effects in the long-term
   - Economic crisis can, and often has, provided an impetus for political change, but conditions of economic crisis can distort the outcome of democratic transition

4. Economic liberalisation can, for similar reasons to those given in 3, run counter to stability – at least in the short term.

   - EU priorities: short-term or long-term?
   - Impacts on the northern shore: flows of migration. EU interest in stability on the southern shore.

5. Islamic values can underpin successful democratic transition, but opening the political arena to radical Islamist political organisation may be problematic to democratic processes.

   - No system in the area could be described as democratic if it does not permit political organisations to form based on religious precepts (or any other precepts which enjoy widespread acceptance)
   - Fears that Islamist organisations may use electoral processes to gain power, and then restrict freedoms (including freedom of political organisation)
   - Democratic practice may in the long-term fashion the political agendas of Islamist movements
   - Negative impact of the "War on Terrorism"
   - The role of external powers and their presence/policies in the region
   - Problems in promoting democracy-favourable interpretations within Islamic circles
   - Respecting both cultural relativism and universalistic principles

6. Countering current socio-economic divisions within the societies of the region (necessary for stable democracy) requires strong governmental action, yet such government in the past has tended to be autocratic and anti-democratic.

7. Authoritarian governments have been shown capable of controlling radical Islamist organisations within their own territories, hence creating the stability which external powers may favour. Yet the stability within may simply result in instability being exported elsewhere in the region and outside ("international terrorism").

8. A strengthened civil society is necessary for successful democratisation, yet civil society is not necessarily supportive of universalistic rights and values.

9. Moves towards political liberalisation must be seen as positive, but in practice they can be used by regimes to frustrate more fundamental change.

10. External powers should clearly be supporting democratic transition, but their involvement may render democratisation more difficult: enabling regimes to resist change through mobilising support against external intervention (identifying local campaigners for democracy as foreign agents etc). The policies pursued by external powers, moreover, may be distorted by their pursuit of their own strategic and economic interests.

Conclusions

Defining the paradoxes and dilemmas should not inhibit action, but help to shape its character.

The framework of the EU, while having some problematic aspects, probably constitutes the most effective external instrument for democratic change in the Mediterranean region. Pressures from the EU in general are subject to fewer negative dynamics than those coming from individual states. There is more opportunity, moreover, for the pressures to be systemic rather than specific – i.e. resulting from the dynamics of engagement, not from specific instructions to a specific government. Criticism from the European Parliament and bodies such as the Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Network, and the aspects of positive conditionality incorporated in the European Initiative for Democracy and Human Rights, all represent forms of systemic pressure. The principles laid down by the Barcelona Declaration and the ensuing policy refinements, provide justification and legal basis for engagement – whether by official or non-official bodies. The Association Councils, among whose responsibilities lies purview over the implementation of Article 2 of the Association Agreements (that relating to human rights and democratic principles), have a defined role to play – although so far have effectively failed to do so.

In carrying forward a policy of intensified pressure through engagement, however, some considerations should be kept in mind:

- Positive developments in one value-sphere may have negative effects elsewhere.

- Effective external engagement on democratisation depends on the external player's role being seen as legitimate. This will be critically affected by other policies which the external power is pursuing in the region. Calling on regimes to respect international codes of human rights requires those who issue the call to respect international law themselves.

- Concern with human rights issues must travel in both directions. Southern and eastern Mediterranean countries have a right to concern themselves with human rights issues in Europe, as well as the other way round. Issues involving migrants in Europe rightfully fall within this scope.

- If democratisation in the south and east leads to governments coming to power which are less sympathetic to the West than those in power at the moment, this is a rightful part of the democratic process.

- Governmental instability may sometimes be preferable to authoritarianism.

- Recognising that Islamist political organisation is legitimate (if operating, like any other political organisation, within a defined system of rights and freedoms) requires an acceptance that civil society and political systems may take rather different forms from those in Western countries. Secularism is not necessarily the critical element.

- Effective EU influence depends to some extent on what the EU is offering economically and politically. The existing packages may be inadequate.

- Positive conditionality may be more effective than negative conditionality.