

Introduction to the Project

This research project seeks to cast empirical and theoretical light upon an increasingly important aspect of international politics: attempts by the 'West' to export democracy to other regions. While acknowledging that the European Union (EU) is not the only actor with a democratisation agenda for the Middle East and that there are strategic reasons for the EU's involvement in the region, the research considers whether a self-reflexive process on the part of EU actors on the precise nature of the 'normative' element in the EU's democratisation agenda for the Middle East may be long due, if EU policy is to be effective.

By focusing on the specific case of the European Union (EU), this three year project seeks to explore how EU actors' self-construction of the EU as a 'normative power' shapes conceptions and policies of democratisation. It also seeks to investigate whether EU actors' self-constructions are shared by 'agents of change' in areas where the EU seeks to export its norm of liberal democracy.

The research thus aims to explore any inherent paradoxes, contradictions and challenges in equating conceptions of the EU as a normative power with EU engagement in the promotion of democracy in the Middle East, and the ways in which the EU's initiatives are playing out in the region. Both Egypt and Palestine have been chosen as case studies in order to gauge how EU actors' policies' understandings are received within target countries of the EU's democratisation policy. The research focuses on the period from the 1990s - since this coincides with one of the defining periods when the EU opted for democracy promotion as a key external relations instrument - to date.

The research addresses the following questions:

- How do EU policy-makers conceptualise the EU's democratisation agenda in the Middle East?
- How do EU policy-makers perceive the 'agents of change' in the Middle East?
- How do societal actors in Palestine and Egypt interpret EU actors' self-understanding of the EU's normative, democratisation agenda for the Middle East?

The project is complemented by the findings of the Principal Investigator (PI)'s British Academy two year funded research project (April 2007 - March 2009) on 'A 'Modern' Islamist Democracy? Perceptions of democratisation in the Arab-Mediterranean World'. This project was aimed at gauging the pulse of democracy in the Middle East and investigated how state and non-state actors perceive democracy in two specific case studies: Egypt and Palestine.