THE EUROPEAN UNION IN THE MIDDLE EAST

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Jointly organised by the University of Birmingham, United Kingdom and the Arab Forum for Alternatives, Cairo, Egypt

Presentation by Dr Michelle Pace, Principal Investigator, University of Birmingham

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Report on the Proceedings

Prepared by Michelle Pace, Principal Investigator, ESRC Project on Paradoxes and Contradictions in EU Democracy Promotion Efforts in the Middle East, University of Birmingham
The workshop was opened by Mr Mohamed Al Agati, Executive Director of the Arab Forum for Alternatives who welcomed Dr Michelle Pace and all the participants. He briefly introduced Dr Pace and her Economic and Social Research Council project on Paradoxes and Contradictions in EU Democracy Promotion Efforts in the Middle East. He then passed the floor to Dr Pace to kick start the first session with her presentation on The European Union’s Internal Discourse on Democracy Promotion in the Middle East.

Dr Pace started by stating that all her findings for this presentation were based on two weeks of intensive interviews with EU officials in Brussels at the European Commission, Council of the European Union, European Parliament and Permanent Representative Offices of key Member States of the EU. She also stipulated that she was very keen to hear views from the audience on whether the Middle East ‘hears’ the EU’s discourse in the way EU actors think they do and therefore emphasised that participants had a very important role in this workshop.

In terms of methodology her project has also been carrying out a discourse analysis of EU documentation on the EU’s so-called ‘democracy promotion’ agenda in the Middle East since the 1990s to date. Dr Pace argued that interestingly, there is no working definition of democracy in European Union documents: the meaning of democracy can be inferred from some policy docs. Moreover, there is clearly a mix of policy areas ranging from Human Rights/Development/Democracy Promotion/Security/Trade/Stability/Good Governance/ Rule of Law, to mention just a few. In 2006 the Council of the EU acknowledged that a clearly defined general strategy on democracy promotion was called for. This discussion came to a standstill and was not taken up again until 2009 with the Czech Presidency, followed by the Swedish Presidency of the Council of the European Union in the second half of the same year. She claimed that some clarity was expected from the Presidency Conclusions of November 2009. She further stipulated that EU actors interviewed have a strong belief in democracy growing from within societies and that it cannot to be imposed from outside. Most interviewees, Dr Pace stated, insist that since the EU itself stands for democracy, they (EU actors) believe it is only ‘natural’ for the EU to promote this system of governance. Moreover, the EU has various instruments at hand to promote political liberalisation in the Middle East. However, it is clear from her findings, that the issue of Democratisation and Human Rights is not a priority in EU foreign policy / external relations vis-à-vis neighbouring countries especially those not eligible for EU membership: Security always comes first in the EU’s priority lists. Dr Pace further highlighted how in the Middle East arena, the EU acts as a hesitant spectator, waiting for the US to give the green light. Furthermore, the EU seems to be more interested in the promotion of liberalisation rather than democratisation in the Middle East. Having said all the above, Dr Pace emphasised that it has to be acknowledged that there are severe limits on the EU’s role in the Middle East, not least that the Council, which is the key decision-making body of the EU, is made up of 27 different member states. This results in fragmented approaches. Another limit is the EU’s actual capacities in comparison to its declared ambitions and despite any positive intentions for change in the Middle East. However, she added, that there is clearly a problem if democracy in the Middle East is reduced to a concern with periodic elections, as the case of Palestine shows. Moreover, there is nothing inherent in the EU’s focus on civil society, as the
shakers and movers for political reform in the Middle East, that attaches it to a democratising project. Actors of civil society are often part of the elites of those societies and remain split from the marginalised groups.

Dr Pace concluded her presentation by arguing that there are several lessons that the EU has learnt from the Palestinian experience. There now seems to be an understanding that, following a reconciliation agreement between Fatah and Hamas, the EU will show much more flexibility and adaptability, as well as pragmatism, this time round. EU actors tend to link democracy promotion in the Middle East with a successful outcome for the Middle East Peace Process. Yet, the EU is not consistent in terms of Human Rights/Democratic issues: there are some strong reactions by way of statements at times in case of violations of Human Rights but not in a consistent manner. Moreover, the EU’s pressure on selective democracy/human rights concerns and the expressed desire to assist MENA regimes in furthering the process of political liberalisation, do not translate into a proactive programme of reform-oriented assistance. Thus, she argued, if any democratisation process in the contemporary Middle East is to have authenticity and legitimacy, the involvement of external actors is problematic. EU actors across the board (Members of the European Parliament, Council officials and Commission representatives) acknowledge the limits of what the EU can do. Hence, the EU’s role in terms of democratisation in the ME is / can only be limited. However, the leverage of Trade and Cooperation Agreements offer an enabling factor for the EU to begin and continue, in a consistent fashion, a formal Democracy/Human Rights dialogue with governments in the MENA region. It is also important for the EU to acknowledge that Euros cannot produce the bravery or love of freedom and justice that individuals in MENA need to make possible the transition necessary in their countries. She therefore posed the question to the audience: Should the EU rethink its financial assistance programmes in the MENA? MENA democratic movements do not need foreign handouts; they need the moral support of the international community and condemnation of their regimes’ for systematic violation of Human Rights, etc. EU actors recognise these facts but ask – what is their alternative? This is another core question that Dr Pace stipulated would best be left for discussion and in concluding she thanked all those present for their attention and said that she really looked forward to the following sessions of the day’s worship.

Session two on ‘Does the Middle East ‘hear’ EU discourse in the way EU actors think they do?’ was chaired by Dr Sayed Yassin, Professor of Sociology and Former President of the Al-Ahram Centre for Political and Strategic Studies. In his opening comments, Dr Sayed introduced the panellists: Dr Amr El Shobaki, Head of the Euro-Arab research program, Al Ahram Centre for Political and Strategic Studies and Arab Forum for Alternatives main consultant; Mr Diaa Rashwan, Deputy Director of Al Ahram Centre for Political and Strategic Studies and Ambassador Gamal Bayoumi, Head of the Euro-Egyptian cooperation program, Ministry of International Cooperation. Dr Sayed argued that a country’s social history reflects itself on that same country’s state of democracy. In response to Dr Pace’s presentation he said that it was important that the EU recognises that it cannot impose democracy in the Middle East. He acknowledged that both the US and the EU provide millions of funds for democracy projects to Egypt, but unfortunately ‘civil society’ made many profits out of this transfer of money which should have gone to real democracy-building projects. On the issue of elections, he also questioned their legitimacy and emphasised that America has no legitimacy in defending human rights. He also said that he would be keen to have a look at the questionnaire Dr Pace used when interviewing EU actors in Brussels. He called for the need for ‘alternative politics’ stressing that if the Egyptian
people are not happy with their social life then they need alternatives and such alternatives need thinking about. He referred as a model to the German case where every political party has a think tank and argued that Egyptians miss such a structure. He then passed on the floor to Dr Amr El Shobaki, first discussant on Dr Pace’s presentation.

**Dr El Shobaki** started his contribution by commenting on the EU’s 27 absence of an external policy. He asked where the idea of a united Europe was going as it seems absent from the present configuration of the EU especially since the enlargement to the Central and Eastern European countries. He also noted the absence of European support during Israel’s incursion into Gaza during December 2008/ January 2009. He also stated that the world is now facing a new US administration which appears to have a more liberal position than the main EU member states. He said that he considers Germany’s Merkel, France’s Sarkozy and Italy’s Berlusconi as key conservative EU member states heads. Britain is automatically connected to America but the EU as a whole is now more conservative than the US. This is a new scenario, Dr El Shobaki argued.

Dr El Shobaki then moved on to the EU’s challenge of opening up for a dialogue with Islamists. This is still an issue which is very much up for discussion in Brussels he argued. President Obama, during his speech in Cairo, did mention such a possibility, however, it is still not clear what the EU’s position is and the latter is much less clear than the position of the US administration. He finalised his intervention by emphasising that the EU must intervene more in cases of human rights’ violations and not just dictate the political meaning of the term.

**Dr Diaa Rashwan** was next in taking the floor as second discussant on Dr Pace’s presentation. He stated that the historical background in the day’s discussion needed some further probing. When the EU started to talk about the Mediterranean, it came as a late interested party. It was not an interest that emerged out of a concern for the Arab citizenry, but for political purposes and particularly Europe’s concern with instability in the Middle East. Hence, what the EU cares about, especially since 9/11, is ‘democracy in the Middle East from a security perspective’.

Dr Rashwan also questioned whether there was any link between EU perceptions and US perceptions on Democratisation in the Middle East. For George W Bush democracy was a tool to end ‘terrorism’. For the EU it seems a functional instrument not for the sake of human beings in the Arab world. So do people support/believe the EU in its ‘efforts’ in this policy domain? No. He argued that the EU cannot be trusted due to its colonial history in the region and it actually does not play a role in the Middle East. The Arab world has had the ‘ripe’ structures in place for democracy while there is also a ‘foreign’ model of supporting equality in the Arab world but the European experience does not allow Arabs to trust Europeans. There is a big problem with Europe’s historical support to Israel: the US has now replaced Britain and France in this support. This makes for a negative role of outsiders and also for hypocrisy in their policies and opinions. Dr Rashwan argued that this does not only apply to foreign elites but also to their general public.

On the other hand, Dr Rashwan questioned whether Europeans trust the possibility of building democracy in the Arab world. According to him, Europeans have little trust in cooperating with the Arab world. Democracy in the region could only lead to one trend: leftist/nationalist/Islamist trend. There is not much trust in the decision making circles in
Europe or the US. He also noted the media’s focus on what will happen in the Arab world if Islamists take over. He emphasised that the main key behind the Democracy/Human Rights rhetoric of external actors since 9/11 is terrorism. This has created a division in US policies toward the Arab world: war on terrorism on the one hand and the war on Islam on the other. This scenario does not reflect well in the Arab world with regard to trust relations in Europe or the US. On Dr El Shobaki’s point as to whether there is a unified Europe, Dr Rashwan said that this is just an illusion. He agreed that the EU has no external policy towards the Middle East. Neither France nor Italy nor Germany nor Britain have a unified external relations policy especially in regard to the issue of democratisation. Since this is absent, there exists no trust in external actors/the EU’s democracy support agenda. We therefore need to ask whether the EU has a perception of democracy in the Arab world. What are the differences/the limits that the Arab world and the EU can agree on in regard to democracy in the Middle East. The EU does not even have a unified policy on the 25 million or so Muslims living in Europe itself, let alone those outside Europe! Dr Rashwan argued that this is an issue about integration. There are clear problems of Muslims in Europe, living inside European states. The absence of a unified European policy for those inside Europe raises doubts about EU policy externally.

Dr Rashwan stated that historically different coalitions with the US existed within Europe, for instance under the umbrella of nuclear cooperation. There is a problem in European relations with Washington. He therefore asked: how independent is Europe from the US in dealing with democratisation in the Arab world? Moreover, Europe does not know one single model of democracy: it has various models. There may be common principles perhaps but there are clearly different models in Europe say from Turkey, due to historical developments. There are also secular heretics in Germany. There is clearly not one model regarding the relationship between religion and the state. He therefore raised some questions from the Egyptian perspective: How unified is Europe in perceiving a model for countries in the Middle East. Do Egyptians for instance have to emulate the French or the British model? Or is there a model for an Arab state? What he noted, Dr Rashwan insisted, is that there is no clear statement about this critical, problematic issue in European documents. There are different models in Europe and various political movements. European countries are seeking to have views on Islamists’ thinking but there seems to be a common misperception: that Islamists are dangerous. So there is no perception on dealing with Islamists.

So, Dr Rashwan insisted, there is no clear position regarding Islamists, is there are free elections, if Islamists agreed on the conditions for free elections and when they do take power we do not hear any announcements from the EU. The EU seems to want stability and peace without democracy, without elections – does that really satisfy Europe? In Dr Rashwan’s opinion, Europe does accept this model. So while for some European countries this is acceptable for some Arab countries this clearly is not. So in his opinion, decision-makers in Europe sacrifice stability for democracy.

In his final comments, Dr Rashwan returned to the main issue of the session – democracy from inside the Arab world. In terms of procedural democracy, he stated that we are not talking of one Arab world but various countries at different stages of development, different legislative structures – many of which are far behind in the latter. Are we equally in support of democracy in the Arab world, Dr Rashwan asked? Do Europeans distinguish between different realities in the Arab world? He left these questions open for further discussion with the audience.
Dr Sayed thanked Dr El Shobaki and Mr Rashwan for highlighting the general criteria needed for political reform in the Arab world and argued that we clearly cannot put say Egypt and Oman in the same basket: that is, we cannot generalise a democracy discourse but need different patterns. He asked why Hamas was boycotted and why it is on the EU’s list of terrorist organisations. He then passed the floor to Ambassador Gamal Bayoumi for his contribution to the session.

**Ambassador Gamal Bayoumi** started by stating that it is quite a big problem to define democracy. He said that even though he had been working on a practical level on this issue, this remains a contested notion. During 1995, the EU would not sign any convention with any Arab state unless a human rights clause was included in the association agreement [Article 2]. If one party violated this agreement, in theory the other party could take the necessary steps to address this violation. It is a supposedly essential element of these agreements, supposedly an important element …

But Europe plays with words – sometimes a condition is applicable to Egypt but not to Israel. The Central and Eastern European member states of the EU have a surprising supportive stance to Israel. During 1967 the Egyptians had good relations with these CEECs.

Ambassador Bayoumi argued for the need of a definition of democracy. Ironically, democracy is about the choice of the people! Regarding the nuclear issue, Ambassador Bayoumi asked why the Americans seem patient with North Korea but not with Iran. He also queried Israel’s position on its own nuclear activities. He said that these were questions posed by Egyptian diplomats to their American counterparts. If Israel is a democracy, would its use of nuclear power be a democratic decision? What are the priorities of the West? What are the Egyptian priorities? During Communism, Israel was the enemy. Now it is terrorism. Democracy should be for social justice and alternatives. There are developmental priorities such as the importance for people of having food. Ambassador Bayoumi argued how he admired the G7 and how they sit together and talk – the so called board of the world. The Arab Council has many bureaucratic features. The EU is just an economic giant but a political elf: it has no external policy that one can talk about. Existing EU policies cannot do anything for the Middle East: the EU is just a soft power. The US is doing all the work in the Middle East. This is because the EU is not interested in the region. There is also the added difficulty of decision-making at the EU level. Discussions always end up being about how many votes should go for Germany, how many for Hungary, etc. Europe will not take a Muslim state like Turkey inside the EU. Inside the Arab League, Egypt has one position, Qatar another: a general perception is related to democracy without Hamas and democracy without Hezbollah. Many dream of peace and of a two-state solution. Russian Jews have the right to live in Israel but Arabs don’t and Europe is supporting this policy.

In terms of diplomatic work, Ambassador Bayoumi argued that there are three alternatives: continue the dialogue for a practical definition of democracy – relating this to social justice, prosperity and rule of law as well as basic rights. During February 2008, the European Parliament’s 50-strong delegation insulted Egypt about its human rights. The Ambassador stated that this provoked him and he had argued then that this was not the right way to approach Egypt. He wanted to understand his own country and go back to the declarations that Egypt had signed with the EU. He insisted that the EP and the Council should revert back to dialogue and was not prepared to have Europeans dictate to Egyptians what to do – this was an unacceptable position. He then went on to question whether it is possible to link
democracy with financial assistance and argued that this is a quantitative change not a qualitative change. Ambassador Bayoumi asked Europe what they were doing with Egyptian funds emanating from Egyptian exports which increased at a rate much faster than European exports. He claimed that Egyptians contribute substantially to Europe’s financial flows. This is a price Egypt has to pay (an opportunity cost for Egypt) and Europe’s support is an Egyptian right. It would be foolish to ask Europe to stop its financial support to Egypt.

Ambassador Bayoumi concluded by arguing that democracy needs ethical and moral support not just financial assistance. He said that there are many fears in Europe and that many officials in European states are being manipulated. There have been instances when members of the European Parliament or even Presidents were changed because they mentioned Jews. He further questioned why European underestimate Syria. Syrians had given Egyptians US$3 trillion due to the financial crisis. Europe however always takes the Israeli side on trade conventions and he therefore wanted to request the EU not to politicise issues.

The day’s event thereafter moved on to Session three which opened the floor for questions and comments from the audience and participants to a panel composed of Dr Pace, Dr El Shobaki, Mr Rashwan and Ambassador Gamal Bayoumi.

Mr Mounir Abdel Nour, Parliament member, Al Wafd Party, argued that democracy may well be the road to achieve one’s goal especially in terms of basic needs like food and agreed that Europe is a political elf and that what is important for Europe is stability, security, illegal migration and trade (and related propaganda). Every now and then Europe shows interest in democracy and human rights but he insisted that the EP is not just any other European institution. Many institutions cared about people like Ayman Nour, Coptics, etc. He said that it is not right that European institutions don’t talk to each other. For him the only exception is the position of the Spaniards – because of their own experience in the transition to democracy and genuinely wants to transform its own experience for the case of Egypt. But France, Britain and Germany do not care about democracy in the Arab world/Middle East.

Mr Nour then highlighted five points of disagreement with the previous speakers. First, he disagreed with Diaa Rashwan in regard to the Arab world’s lack of trust in Europeans because of the latter’s colonial history. Mr Nour said that the mistrust is there regardless of the European’s colonial history in the region. Europeans however are always expected to take a more just position from that of the US. He argued that Egyptians consider Europe a hope since the US has taken the Israeli side.

Secondly, regarding the position of Europeans vis-à-vis Islamist movements and the link with terrorism: Mr Nour said that there are clear doubts on the EU’s position on Hamas. In his opinion it is logical and it makes sense that the EU calls for democracy and for a separation between the state and religion. Hamas is equated with an undemocratic movement if it equates state and religion.

Regarding Europe and Syria, Mr Nour stated that we are all paranoid: we think that everyone has a conspiracy against us (as Egyptians). Israel is a power which mobilises public opinion, everyone in the Arab world. The EU’s position can be explained because of the Lebanese issue (the Hariri issue) not Israeli one. What is needed is a ratification of the agreement between the EU and Syria. To finish off on a positive last point, he asked the audience what
they would request from the EU: more economic relations for Egypt’s development? More cultural relations so as to enlighten thinking on democracy?

Mr Essam Shiha, also from the Al Wafd Party was next to take the floor. He said that there are indeed alternatives. He said that Dr Pace’s research was important but misses alternatives. On for instance the monitoring of elections in Egypt by the EU, he said that the Egyptian perception on this is that it is intervention in Egyptian affairs. Egyptian civil society is still a baby learning how to crawl. Monitoring of elections can be done by the US. He then asked what the role of the EP is when the EU does not have an external policy. He then moved on to the issue of distrust between Arabs and Europeans and the history of colonialism. Mr Shiha argued that the view from the Arab world is that Europeans just follow the Americans on any policy related to the Middle East. Although the Europeans stipulated that a path to democracy is free elections, what was their position when Hamas won free elections in Palestine in 2006?

Mr Khaled Ali, Director of the Egyptian Centre for Economic and Social Rights argued that what was needed from Europeans is moral support not funds. Human rights need a rights based discourse to determine their destination. Unfortunately, Europe is not really interested in what is happening in the region in regard to Human Rights and Democracy – for instance we have the cases of Iraq and Palestine. Egyptians need to talk about social justice, economic and social rights, access to human security, healthcare, etc. Egypt has no real elections. Addressing Ambassador Bayoumi he said that there are many appointments in Egypt of people with no dignity and therefore people are afraid to express themselves. Egyptians are suffering as a consequence. Europeans only talk of democracy when an important figure like Ayman Nour is in the limelight but they have no position when 37,000 workers in Egypt are suffering in terms of their low salaries etc. Hence, Europe is criticised for its double standards. People in Egypt are going out on strikes but Europeans do not talk about these events.

Mr Khaled Kandil, a civil society activist noted how Europeans has encouraged former colonial states in other regions in the world to develop. He then questioned whether Arab elites need support to trust the EU. The EU clearly supports dictatorial regimes and there is a clear problem in the EU’s and the US’s understanding of the region which creates radical thinking in the Middle East – so now they pretend to care about democracy. He asked whether the Arab world really necessitates the intervention of external actors. He argued that Arabs amongst themselves are not clear on this point. He further argued that democracy is needed in the Arab world for all people to have access to basic needs such as food but that the real priority should be good economic conditions with democracy. Civil society is not taking such actions in the direction of social and economic rights – there is indeed corruption in civil society in the Arab world but also in the Egyptian government’s circles, especially in the misuse of USAID funds. There should also be a distinction made between monitoring and supervising elections. In Egypt the latter does not exist and doesn’t work with the current government structures. The Egyptian government refuses technical assistance from external actors.

Ms Nawla Darwich, President of the New Women Foundation introduced herself as a member of one of the NGOs in Egypt (not civil society). She said that civil society is weak in Egypt. There are no political parties – the NDP is not a real political party. There is not a social movement milieu in Egypt either, due to ‘siege’ imposed on Egyptians for 50 years
now. Thus democracy is necessary in all these sectors. Back to the EU, Ms Darwich argued that it builds its policies on the position of official government representatives only and no other voices. For instance, on the issue of the development of democracy in Egypt, the EU works on the basis of the Presidential programme. How can the EU talk of democracy based on these texts? This flaw is reflected in the EU’s agenda which laments illegal immigration, focuses on trade, talks about security/peace without democracy and asked whether this will continue to satisfy Europe and she answered by stating that clearly yes, the EU is happy with the status quo. The EU is thus a bureaucratic machine and members of the European Parliament simply have no authority. On the reality on the ground in the Arab world, as a member of the NGO community in Egypt, working on a project funded by the EU, Ms Darwich argued that the promotion of democracy from village to city is an ambitious aim which creates problems with the security authorities in Egypt (they intervene often in the NGO’s work). The EU is only interested in quantitative outcomes from such projects. What Egyptians need is not only a change in legal terms but also a cultural change which cannot be easily measured. Sadly all EU aims in these projects are quantitative.

**Mr George Ishak**, founder and member of the *Kefaya* movement in Egypt, insisted that he personally could not trust Europeans, nor Americans because of his own experience with European and American officials. They continue to upgrade relations with Egypt and continue to give aid to Egypt while at the same time they say they are against dictatorships. Because of this double rhetoric and action Mr Ishak said that he does not want to meet any Western officials. What is important is to focus on the Egyptian people. Civil society in Egypt lacks transparency. Europeans continue to give funds to civil society but the question has to be asked: to whom do Europeans send these funds and why? What is important for Europeans is indeed quantity not quality. They are not playing a role – just showing off and pretending to raise awareness. Mr Ishak concluded his intervention by arguing that if Egyptians themselves did not achieve democracy, nobody was going to do this for them.

**Mr Ibrahim Ali**, editor of islamonline.net said that there were signs of hope from the EU. He stipulated that European states had different positions for instance against/for Bush’s administration, so the European side is not that bad. Despite the unconditional support for Israel, European policies help Palestinians in their economic sector and played a better role than the Bush administration did. The EU however does not distinguish between liberal and extremist Islamist groups. He wanted to see more questioning on the part of the EU as to whether Islamists are really all linked to terrorism. He argued that such answers from European officials would help perceptions of the EU in the Arab world. He referred to European dialogue with Hezbollah which shows that they understand the movement’s power in political life in Lebanon and this could be a sign of European focus on positive political interests rather than Euro-centric principles/values.

Mr Ali also referred to the European experience in promoting democracy in the CEECs. He asked whether this could be a question of identity especially when one contrasts this experience with the way in which the EU is attempting to promote democracy in Turkey. Could there be a positive outcome for the Middle East from the experience of the CEECs and that of Turkey? He also called for a rethink of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership because there are different models of democracy. Many talk about what Europe has done for Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia (the Maghreb) – that they have good practices and that they can build on the experience of these countries in the MENA. But the EU didn’t. Many states have different historical trajectories so the EU must focus on these different histories. In
Palestine there is no democracy, no reconciliation between the factions. Democracy needs to be built on human values.

Mr Mohamed El Agati, Executive director of the Arab Forum for Alternatives, stipulated that it was important to make a distinction between promoting democracy and the EU’s external policies for instance towards Hezbollah. He insisted that methodologically one needs to distinguish between such issue areas.

On Dr Pace’s research on Palestine and Egypt, he said that people in the region looked at the EU as a positive alternative to the US – but this view was only present in the Eastern part of the Middle East because Morocco and Tunisia for instance are different due to their very specific experiences with Europe. Thus Dr Pace’s research should also focus on the Maghreb because of their different experiences.

Ambassador Gamal Bayoumi said that democracy is the mission of Egyptians – not anyone else’s mission. Egyptians could learn from Europe regarding election management for instance. He said that he himself often tells civil society representatives in Egypt to learn from Europe.

Dr Pace turned to Ambassador Bayoumi and said that in regard to his comments on alternatives, it is important to highlight the characteristics of such alternatives. To the audience she said that her project would definitely be extended to other countries in the MENA region. To Dr Rashwan and similar comments from some members of the audience, in regard to the point about Arab countries’ colonial experience, she said that even the country where she was from, that is Malta, was a former colony but the Maltese have moved on. She accepted the fact that Malta in her view is not a perfect democracy (it is actually very difficult to find such a case worldwide) – corruption for instance is also ripe in Malta, but basic rights and freedoms are guaranteed. Modernisation is an important part of the process of transition to a democracy and the context is different today. Governments must be accountable, transparent and legitimate and should represent their people’s needs not business interests. She further stipulated that she does not disagree with the point raised from the audience that democracy is about social justice and economic and social rights as well as the satisfaction of basic and human needs. But she asked who in Egypt represented the Egyptian people? Are Egyptians aware of their rights as citizens? Do they have freedom of expression? In a democracy it is also important to agree to disagree. The development of a democratic ethos and the need for people’s subjectivity to flourish is what makes people become democratic. What is needed in her view in the case of Egypt is the space for the development of critical thinking not a people who say ‘yes’ to anything dictated by their government without any questioning. This ethos has to start from the educational system within Egypt from a very early age.

Mr Rashwan said that theoretically there is no relationship between war, peace and democracy; democracy is a modern experience. All decisions in Iraq and Afghanistan have been ‘democratic’ decisions. Thus, the West’s dependence to such an extent on democracy as a tool for peace is not a reasonable way forward. Furthermore, trust in Europe is not inherited: One cannot compare between the US and the EU. Europe takes sides. Arabs know Europeans and Americans through their policies: some policies and their implications cannot be forgotten or forgiven. Arabs know of Westerners through the tourists they see in their Arab streets and through media images of what Europeans and Americans have done in the
Middle East. On questions of war and peace, Arabs simply do not trust the West. Is there any possibility for another Europe and what can it do? This is a question for all in the workshop to ponder on. Europe has no one model of democracy. It has its resources and priorities: stability, security, old and new conflicts to address including the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, new conflicts such as Iraq, the current negative financial and economic global situation, etc. What does the EU have to say on these issues of war and peace; economic conditions worldwide; how is it to deal appropriately with these – if some of these questions are answered, it could be a way for building more trust in the EU amongst Arabs. A focus on real economic development in the MENA would resolve the issue of illegal migration. Europe is a rich continent: it has money, it can pay. Egypt’s support from the EU is only US$3 million. The EU has more to give but does not want to go beyond the surface to the bottom issues in the Middle East.

On democracy promotion, Mr Rashwan noted that the Arab League is not clear as to whether it wants external support for democracy. The official discourse of the Egyptian government is that if the Europeans observe Egyptian elections, the elections would not be fraudulent, but after the Europeans leave the country, the decision would surely be reversed. The Egyptian government has been trying to exclude judges from observing elections for some time now and Egyptians are awaiting a decision on this matter. European observers disagreed with judges having this role but were comfortable with civil society having this part. For the 2010 elections, it will be very difficult to measure fraud but Europeans will most probably be in Egypt and the Egyptian government will use them as a pretext but it is not true that civil society will have this surveillance role.

On Europe’s position on Islamists he asked whether they are afraid at a political level alone or are there any cultural aspects to this ingrained fear in Europe? One needs to compare Islamists today with former Communist leaders in Europe. Communists killed many people. Mr Rashwan then spoke of regime changes in the Arab world, of the revolution in Iran and the coup d’etat in Sudan.

Ms Habiba Mohsen, Research Assistant and Administrative coordinator at the Arab Forum for Alternatives said that funding in Egypt is affected by the global financial crisis. Europeans now have less money to distribute. NGOs think of development in Egypt as charity not as a sustainable project for the long run.

On this note, Mr Mohamed El Agati thanked Dr Pace and all the panellists, chairs/discussants as well as the audience for their stimulating inputs throughout the day. He concluded by saying that he hoped there would be more possibilities for the Arab Forum for Alternatives and the University of Birmingham in the UK to cooperate on similar events which offer an environment for a truly open dialogue on such interesting issues as the day’s programme had shown.