The UNDP's Arab Human Development Reports and their readings

NADER FERGANY

Gamal Ad-Din al-Afghani[1]: The seeds of reform
"...The structure of absolute governance is tottering to ruin,
so fight to the utmost of your strength to destroy its foundations,
not to remove and get rid of isolated fragments of it".

This essay will be structured around four points. 1) A brief introduction to the Arab Human Development Report. 2) A brief analysis of what I call the predicament or the crisis in governance in Arab countries. 3) A presentation of an ideal society of freedom and good governance and 4) a discussion of alternative futures of freedom and governance in the Arab world.

The Arab Human Development Reports

I deliberately do not call it the UNDP-Report but the Arab Human Development Report, because the defining feature of the report has always been that it is produced by an independent team of Arab scholars and intellectuals; it is not a standard UN report, that is actually why it has become so distinguished from other UNDP reports. The Arab Human Development Report started in the year 2001 as an attempt by "Arab intelligentsia" to engage the Arab nation in an intellectual debate on the prospects of human development as the report defines it; it has become a debate that is loaded with passion.

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1   An Arab freedom fighter although of non-Arab origins.

Perhaps the most important finding of the first Arab Human Development Report which came out in 2002 is the now famous three deficits. The report identified three major problems that were considered to impede human development in the Arab world. These are deficits in knowledge, in freedom and in the empowerment of women. After the first report became a big success, the idea developed to produce three follow-ups to the first report, each one taking one of these deficits and doing an in-depth analysis of each deficit and presenting a strategic vision to overcome them in the Arab countries. Hence we ended up with a second report that appeared in 2003 on the knowledge deficit and ended up with a vision of building a knowledge society in Arab countries. Last year's report, which was delayed, came out in the spring of 2005 and is devoted to the very crucial deficit in freedom and good governance in the Arab countries. There has been some controversy surrounding the advent of the report by some governments. The US Administration and some Arab governments, especially Egypt, tried to suppress or modify the contents of the report. It seems that at least two governments, the American and the Egyptian, got a leaked copy of an earlier draft and were very displeased with it. The controversy has luckily been resolved with the UNDP taking the brave stand of agreeing to issue the report under their logo.

Governance crisis and development

The crisis in governance or the predicament of governance in Arab countries can be summarised as follows, present Arab governments and regimes have failed to meet the aspirations of the Arab people. At the same time these regimes do not promise radical reforms from within. The essential conclusion is that if there is failure coupled with stagnation there is a need for change – but *radical* change, as I will try to explain.

The Arab regimes have failed to deliver on two levels at least. The first level is freedom and human development: our definition of freedom in the report coincides to a great extent with human development.

First, the minimum definition of development is economic growth. Although there is an illusion that some Arab countries are extremely rich, the Arab regimes have failed to deliver economic growth. In the Arab Human Development Report we documented the fact that in the last quarter of the twentieth century the rate of growth in per capita income, which is the standard measure of economic development according to international financial institutions, was the lowest among all regions in the world. Actually we put it in a rather dramatic way in the first report: that if the rates of economic growth that prevailed in Arab countries in the last quarter of the twentieth century prevails, it will take the average Arab citizen one hundred and forty years to double his or her income. So by that criterion Arab regimes have failed in spite of the illusion that at least some of our countries are very rich.

In fact we also documented in the report that the Arab region as a whole is not very rich. The standard characterisation has been that if you pool all the gross national products of all Arab countries it will not come to the GDP of Spain or Holland. So on purely economic grounds Arab regimes have patently failed.

Second, if we move to the much higher level of human development in which we worry about things like knowledge and freedom as measures of human welfare, the failure of Arab regimes is much more conspicuous. The second report documents the very severe deficit in knowledge acquisition in Arab countries, and the third report documents the very drastic deficit in freedom and in good governance in Arab countries. It is extremely important to note that our definition of freedom accommodates an important element relating to national liberation. So our definition of freedom is not restricted to individual liberties, but also calls for important elements of societal and national liberation.

National liberation and foreign occupation

In the Arab world we have seen under the present governance regimes that national liberation suffers great losses. Take first the issue of direct foreign occupation; we started the century with one of the nastiest racist expansionist occupations, the one of Palestine. We have had it for fifty years. In the third millennium we will add to it the occupation of Iraq by a coalition led by the US and UK. The question of outside

interference is extremely important. I do not think that heavy-handed interference like the one we have seen in Iraq for example is at all useful. To the contrary, it is totally counterproductive and this in spite of the elections that took place in Iraq in January 2005. Imagine yourself holding elections with 200,000 foreign forces stationed on your soil, and you are going to the polls to choose between lists where you do not know the candidates and their platform and you have not debated the issues. In addition you have at the time of the elections a government of American spies running the elections. In addition you have every voter threatened with losing his food ration or ID card if he or she does not go to vote; and with the ultimate consequence that a significant segment of the population decides to boycott the elections. What would be your judgement of that election? You would have had elections but you would have no democracy, you would have no good governance and eventually you would end up with a government that is based on fractional and denominational representation, which is contradictory to our essential requirements of good governance being based on citizenship for all. In my opinion it is a farce.

Today about ten percent of Arabs live under direct foreign occupation. If we add to this the lack of national self determination that would be associated with the presence of large foreign troops located in Arab countries, we can see that the percentage of the Arab population that has suffered a loss of national liberation and self determination is much larger than the ten percent. In fact we should add that present Arab government regimes have invited foreign troops to come back to Arab territories after decades of independence.

The second element of the predicament of governance, as I see it, is that in addition to this failure we have stagnation in terms of governance reform, and governing regimes in Arab countries are not promising significant reforms from within. Actually we are seeing major signs of deterioration; suffice it to mention the fact that some ostensibly republican regimes are being transformed to dynasties, born out of coincidence.

Freedom and good governance

The Arab Human Development Reports are concerned with freedom on an individual level, as well as on the societal and national levels. But at the same time even on the individual level we are not restricting ourselves to civil and political liberties. We add to this freedom from all forms of curtailment of human indignity, i.e. you cannot be free if you are hungry, if you are sick, if you are poor, and so on. So we have a conception of freedom that is rather comprehensive and is actually synonymous to human development as the report defines it. Translated in terms of the human rights system, our definition of freedom accommodates all realms of human rights. It does include respect for civil and political liberties, as well as social, economic, cultural and environmental rights.

The report establishes a very strong link between freedom and a good governance regime, because freedom cannot be totally respected – especially in our comprehensive sense – unless we have a good governance regime. More importantly, freedom cannot be *preserved* without good governance and that is why our first requirement of defining a good governance regime is that it must safeguard, protect and promote freedom in the sense that we define it.

A good governance regime is based on effective popular participation and it is based on institutions. These institutions are required to operate efficiently with transparency and be totally accountable to the people. More importantly, all this has to be under the strict rule of law that is protective of freedom and applies to all equally. This law has to be supervised and implemented by strictly independent judiciaries, something which is lacking in many Arab countries.

This system of good governance not only protects freedom as we define it, but it also secures the right of citizenship to all and insures alternation of political power. Behind this definition lies an understanding of the essence of governance that revolves around two major axes. The first axis is the distribution of power: who owns power in society? And power does not only mean political authority, it is important to recognise political authority as well as wealth or economic power as two sides of power. In Arab countries we increasingly see a co-habitation of political authority and wealth, providing very clear inroads to

corruption. So, at present power is concentrated in the hands of a few, a clique, who normally control both political authority and wealth.

The second major dimension of governance is the method of the *exercise* of power. At present power is exercised through authoritarian dominant individuals and not through institutions as we require in good governance. Hence, if we desire a good governance regime, we have to do something about these two axes: the distribution of power as well as the exercise of power. Otherwise, we keep the essence of despotic governance intact.

As a result of this coincidence of the failure of governing regimes, as well as stagnation in governance reform, we have what we characterise as a state of anticipation and angst. I would like to describe it as the critical state of the Arab nation facing a historical moment in which one governing regime has failed and is in the throes of death, while a new one that is closer to our ideal of a society of freedom and good governance is yet to be born. This very complex state of anticipation and angst opens up to many alternative futures. In my opinion, it seems that while most of these futures are unacceptable or undesirable, some are promising.

Scenarios for the future

There are in my view three basic alternative scenarios for the future of freedom and governance in Arab countries. The first one is naturally a continuation of the status quo, the present distribution of power, the present authoritarian exercise of power. We have figuratively described this as 'impending disaster', i.e. a continuation of the status quo would lead to disaster in our countries. The operative concept here is that when you have a failure in human development terms it would imply injustice suffered by people, injustice suffered at the hands of national governance regimes as well as at the hands of foreign powers occupying and violating the fundamental element of national liberation. When you suffer injustice and you do not possess peaceful and effective means of addressing this injustice, the situation results in hopelessness and despair, an explosive combination that ends up as an invitation to violent protest behaviour.

In my opinion a continuation of the status quo can lead to a stage of violent social conflict in Arab countries. We are seeing the beginnings of this catastrophic scenario in some Arab countries. Saudi Arabia could be one example as it could be the archetype example of the failure of development in a country that is supposed to be extremely rich, at least this is the illusion! Nevertheless, until the present day there are still pockets of abject poverty in Saudi Arabia, and there is a very high proportion of Saudi youth unemployed and suffering addiction to drugs and other social ills. Everybody knows of course that in the last two years we have seen flare-ups of violent internal conflicts in Saudi Arabia that could even get worse if the present situation continues. We are seeing similar beginnings of violent internal conflicts in countries like Egypt and Morocco, as well as in Kuwait which is another very rich country, and a country some consider to be rather free. So, I believe that it is inevitable to end up with violent social conflicts in many Arab countries if the present situation with the present distribution and manner in which power is exercised continues. Protests against present regimes have always linked failures on the national arena with failures on the Arab scale or the national liberation arena, and people recognise this link between failure at home and failure on the front of national liberation.

We have borrowed the French word *épanouissement* to describe the second main alternative. In Arabic the term is *izdihar*, and that is how it is used in the latest Arab Human Development Report. The operative concept here is that we need a redistribution of power, we need to build an institutional system of good governance and this has to be negotiated in a peaceful manner. However, for this negotiation to take place we need what we call an opening act, a beginning of a process of transformation towards a society of freedom and good governance and that opening act requires total respect for the key freedoms of opinion, expression and association. By freedom of association we mean two things: the freedom to assemble and the freedom to organise in civil and political society.

The condition of total respect for the freedoms of expression and association would result in a much higher level of participation through civil and political society. There is no reason to worry at all because Arabs suffer high illiteracy rates, etc., democracy as we know is an exercise in governance by continuous learning.

I believe this opening act of total respect of the three freedoms of opinion, expression and association is the only criterion for genuine governance reform. Opening up the public sphere through respect for freedom of expression and association would result in an automatic upsurge in participation that would be reflected in a much higher level of accountability of governance in the region.

It is very important to require that the three key freedoms be respected together, i.e. you cannot have freedom of expression alone and say that you have a free society. Freedom of expression without freedom of association, which is the situation that characterises our societies at present, is counterproductive. There is, at least in some Arab countries, some margin for freedom of expression but no freedom of association. And that is a very wrong situation that has to be changed if we want to end up with a society of freedom and good governance. Let me add here that our vision of good governance in Arab countries is not restricted to governance reform on the national level, it has to be complemented by governance reform on the regional level and on the global level as well. By regional governance reform we would like to see regional arrangements that can end up with integration, the European Union could be a leading example.

Reforms on the global level

On the global level the most important issue is that the UN needs to be reformed in order to try to approach the ideal of good governance as defined above on the world scale. There are the two boundary scenarios for a future of freedom and governance in Arab countries: either an impending disaster or a human *épanouissement*. They are boundary conditions in the sense that they are extreme cases. Realistically speaking the future could lie anywhere in between these two boundary conditions. Here we recognise that at least one possible future can be realistic; by that we are thinking of what could come out of the G8 initiative (and I would rather call them the B-8, they might be big but they are not necessarily great; greatness should be based on moral superiority rather than power).

The G8 initiative for reform in the Arab countries is definitely less

unacceptable compared to the US Administration proposal of a 'Greater Middle East'. It has been watered down deliberately to allow Europe to sign on to it. I believe the problem here is that the G8 initiative is showing signs of deterioration into an accommodation between the G8 and present (bad governance) regimes in the Arab countries. Their recent meeting in Casablanca was essentially a meeting between the G8 and Arab governments, i.e. the same regimes that we think have failed and need to be changed. The inherent danger is that the G8 initiative, if it takes the form of accommodating the present Arab governance regimes, will end up as an impediment to genuine reform, which calls for radical reform in the distribution of power as well as the way power is exercised.

External versus internal pressures

There is also the problem of internal versus external pressures for reform. We recognise that there has been a reform movement in the Arab world but it has not been sufficient to attend to Arab aspirations for human development, freedom and dignity. So we believe that the way the G8 initiative is developing now could backfire in terms of impeding genuine reform towards a society of freedom and good governance. This is a challenge that has to be managed by the Arab reform movement. This is important since, in my opinion, it is inevitable from the way governance is structured in Arab countries – many Arab governance regimes derive their legitimacy not from popular support but from outside support – that there is going to be an element of external pressure for governance reform in Arab countries. We believe, however, that this external pressure has to meet certain conditions in order to succeed in producing the desired transformation in Arab countries.

First of all, this transformation has to be truly based on freedom for all. You cannot reform a country by occupying it and thus depriving its people of the fundamental right to self determination. There has to be a total respect of the international human rights law, in particular with respect to national liberation. There should be respect by outside forces for the fact that Arabs have to find their own way to freedom and good governance. There should be an effort to include all vital societal

forces in Arab countries in the process of reform. We have seen before attempts at exclusion of societal forces, sometimes under pressure of foreign powers. Outside forces have to be willing to respect the outcome of free popular choice in Arab countries. They have to work within the framework of a partnership of equals anchored in mutual respect and understanding, rather than the kind of patronage approach that has mostly prevailed.

Let me stress the fact that we are biased to the rather difficult and sometimes seemingly impossible scenario of human *épanouissement* and we approach it in the latest Arab Human Development Report from the perspective of helping to *make* the future rather than just trying to *predict* it. But we also realise that what we propose in the form of our preferred alternative to the human *épanouissement* scenario is something of a pure type on which variations would develop in each Arab society.

This process of transformation toward a society of freedom and good governance will require an opening act which would start with a total respect of the three key freedoms of opinion, expression and association, all together. This is likely to open up public space in Arab countries which has been restricted tremendously and would end up creating a vibrant and vigorous civil society that would lead the process of historic negotiation to real civil power and build a system of institutional good governance.

However, in the Arab Human Development Reports we do not make recommendations that we believe are suitable for each and every Arab society. We think that each and every Arab society should debate these proposals, take them as a strategic vision, and decide what to do with them after placing them in the specific societal context.

The Role of religion

Any meaningful analysis of Arab society cannot avoid the question of culture, and specifically religion – particularly Islam, being the dominant religion in the region. Our position, as explained in the second Arab Human Development Report was, in respect to knowledge, that Islam poses no impediment to the acquisition of knowledge. As a matter of fact, Islam was a major pillar in the building of a knowledge society

during the zenith of the Arab Islamic civilisation. There is also, in our opinion, no contradiction whatsoever between building a democratic society and Islam. However, having said that it is important at the same time to recognise that Islam is subject to interpretation. There are progressive and enlightened interpretations of Islam as well as reactionary and regressive interpretations. Bad governance regimes have tended to support and encourage reactionary interpretations of Islam. Part of the transformation towards a society of freedom and good governance would end up in our opinion with a predominance of enlightened interpretations of Islam.

We take a similar stand on Islam and freedom. There is no contradiction in our view between Islam and freedom. Although Islam does not describe a very detailed system of good governance it has many principles on which – using enlightened interpretation and scholarship, or *ijtihad* – a system of good governance can be built. We believe that presenting any false contradiction between Islam as a religion – looked at from the point of view of enlightened interpretation – and freedom, is a big mistake and is incompatible with the view of the Arab people at large.

Conclusion

You do not liberate a people by depriving them of national liberation, thus reforms must primarily be driven from the inside. This is the only way to have successful and sustainable reforms. If people share in forming the vision of the society they would like to live in then they respect it and they work for it. Nevertheless, we have governance regimes in Arab countries that derive their legitimacy not from popular support but from the support of outside dominant global forces. I can see, however, a potentially useful role for outside forces that are not empire builders but are genuine friends of freedom and human dignity throughout the world. I see them helping initiate this phase of legal reform that is needed for the total respect of the freedom of expression and association. But then allowing the internal reform dynamic, that is most likely to emerge, to take its course undisturbed or unperturbed. The question is: could Europe, for example, rise to that historical challenge of sup-

porting freedom and equity and provide genuine friendly support to governance reform in the Arab world or not? I think Europe has to put its own house in order first so as to become a credible global player in support of freedom and equity throughout the world.

Prospects for democratisation in the Middle East

RAYMOND HINNEBUSCH

Since at least the fall of the Berlin Wall and the 1991 Gulf war, pundits have been expecting the democratisation of the Middle East. They have generally been disappointed, but not because of any cultural resistance of the Middle East to democratisation. Rather, it is structural factors that need to be examined.

One reason for the failure of democratisation is simply that the indigenous authoritarian states are not, as naïve Western democratisers seem to think, "unnatural" or lacking in congruence with their environments. At the time when these states were built, the structural conditions for democratisation were unfavourable and the social forces that might have struggled for it were weak. On the other hand, the resources and techniques for authoritarian state building were available. As such, Middle East authoritarian states represent a *successful adaptation* to their particular environment; as long as their congruence with their environment persists they will remain effective obstacles to democratisation. However, as changes in it induce crises in the state, democratisation becomes one – but not the only – possible outcome.

Authoritarian state building

Artificial states

Unfavourable structural conditions were shaped by the circumstances in which the regional states system was imposed under Western imperialism – according to the interests of the West, not the desires of

political system believed that the country is structured primarily along fault-lines between Sunni Muslim Arabs, Shiite Muslim Arabs, and (mostly Sunni) Kurds. Seen in this perspective, Iraqi democracy could only be built on a confessional/ethnic basis. From an Iraqi perspective, the incentive structure promoted by the US Administration is clear: organise as a Shiite (or Kurd, or Sunni) and elect a specifically Shiite (or Kurd, or Sunni) representative in order to acquire political power or influence and public goods. So, will it ever be possible in the future to create an Iraq where everyone is truly equal under the law, where 'one person/one vote' applies? Many Iraqis clearly feel that they can, and should, mobilise on social, economic, and political issues *across* confessional, ethnic, or regional lines: witness the fact that the Kurdish parties received more votes than the proportion of Kurds in the population would suggest, and that the Shiite parties received considerably fewer votes than the proportion of Shiites in the population would suggest. The political system that Iraq is now in the process of building is better than the Saddam regime, yet 60 years of post-independence consociational democracy in Lebanon indicate that what lies in store for Iraq's own version may be equally unsure and unstable.

In all cases, whether striving for 'full' democracy or accepting more flawed versions (from consociational to 'limited democracy' or polyarchy), the most problematic challenge is how, then, to create a culture of mutual acceptance and accommodation, of tolerance of difference let alone dissent, in which minority opinions and realities are legitimate and count in a meaningful way? To put this question somewhat differently, in 'operational' terms, how to develop genuine political pluralism: multiparty and parliamentary politics?

This takes me to a final obstacle in the way of attaining democracy in much of the Middle East, which by the same token offers a route to improvement and genuine democratic reform. Democratisation requires effective and empowered legislatures, yet in most of the Middle East the power, authority, and prerogatives of parliaments are severely proscribed, if not wholly absent. For example, Syria under President Hafez al-Assad and then his son Bashar – and even Iraq under Saddam Hussein – has witnessed regular parliamentary elections, but remains unquestionably authoritarian. The conduct of elections in Palestine and

Iraq in January 2005 was far more meaningful, in contrast, but even then tells us little in and of itself about the process, nature, and outcome of politics there.

The role of parliaments

To my mind, a critical question is the nature and extent of powers exercised by parliaments, and the more subjective question of their willingness to wield and protect those powers. Few Middle East parliaments have any real ability to challenge government or to question policy, lest they be accused of questioning the president or monarch. In both republican, formerly socialist Egypt and monarchic free-market Jordan, for example, laws exist that make it an offence to criticise the head of state or his family; these are applied in particular to the press, muzzling it in effect. More generally, Middle East parliaments are largely unable to hold the executive branch to account – not least in the area of security, but on most matters of import as well – and cannot really determine budgets or hold the executive (and head of state or ruling family) to financial account. The preceding also underlines the fact that democracy involves much more than periodic elections; it is about an entire system and political culture cultivated over time of formal rights enshrined in legal institutions that implement and monitor those rights continuously, through transparent processes, and that can themselves be held to account on the basis of clear rules. The difference between a cosmetic parliament and an empowered one is an entire institutional, legal, and administrative mechanism that backs up democracy and makes it an everyday reality.

Both cause and consequence of the powerlessness of parliaments is the weakness of party politics. Simply put, why should anyone who wishes to participate in political life or pursue particular agendas look to a political party, when its principal forum for influencing or determining government policy is a parliament that lacks such capability? Why engage in parliamentary politics when becoming a parliamentarian generally means being unable to make a significant difference to anything? Hence the incentive, instead, to resort to extra-parliamentary means of mobilisation and pressure. Palestine offers a telling case of this

logic: Arafat made it abundantly clear to his people that the parliament they elected in January 1996 could be contained, co-opted, and marginalised by him. Little surprise, then, that the Palestinian Legislative Council, which generated the highest expectations, consistently fared worst of all government agencies in public opinion polls. More damaging, ultimately, was that there was little incentive to form new, civilian political parties as they had little chance of being effective and building credibility among the general public; instead, existing paramilitary forms of political organisation and mobilisation, best represented by Arafat's nationalist Fateh and the Islamist opposition Hamas, were far more effective, and logical, in that institutional and political context. There were no parliamentary parties because parliamentary politics did not work.

Western policy options and interventions

I will now address more directly the matter of Western policy options and interventions, and their likely impacts. I do not take the view that what the West does in the Middle East, in relation to democracy or otherwise, is necessarily bad or driven by bad intention; however, there are evidently problems with Western governments and policies, as there are with Arab governments and policies. Most governments have contradictory objectives and policies, but this is of particular importance when discussing Western efforts to promote both the normative goals of democracy and other more material agendas – such as general trade, arms sales, or economic liberalisation – in the region. This in turn gives rise to the tendency of Western governments to extol outward or superficial aspects of democratic process such as the conduct of elections, regardless of the substantive aspects of the process (such as the powers, or lack of powers, of those elected to public office), when it suits their purpose to demonstrate a favourable disposition towards the country or government in question. The reasons for such a stance could also extend beyond commercial and economic considerations, to include matters such as positions taken by the government in question towards strategic issues such as Iraq (1991-2003), the Palestinian-Israeli peace process, or the 'global war on terrorism'.

In the West the US Administration has a particularly bad record in this regard, compared to the EU attempt to address democracy and human rights in a more systematic, institutional way through the Euro-Med dialogue or 'Barcelona process', though of course the EU has also been accused (especially in the US) of subordinating principles to crass self-interest. In general, Middle East governments have to do little more than state a commitment to democracy and offer evidence of greater political liberalisation (or a slackening of repression and censorship), in order to receive trade, aid, and arms. Clearly, too, the major oil exporters of the region – the Gulf monarchies, Iraq, and Libya – are not in a position of need anyway, and hence the West has little economic leverage in such cases.

This relative 'blindness' is especially apparent in relation to the practice of Middle East governments towards Islamist opposition groups, both armed and unarmed. Algeria has offered a stark example since 1992, when the army – the dominant force in Algerian politics and government since independence – intervened to cancel the second round of elections after the landslide victory of the Islamic Salvation Front in the first round. The suspension of democracy and assertion of military rule was met, in effect, by a sigh of relief in the West. A more recent example is offered by Egypt, which is the second-largest recipient of US foreign assistance – including, ironically, considerable funds earmarked for democracy promotion. Despite having largely defeated the Islamic violence of the 1990s, the government has increased its repression of the non-violent Muslim Brotherhood at little or no real cost in terms of Western trade and aid flows, arms sales, or even political rhetoric.

But what options does the West have, concretely? After all, the evolution of democracy is a long, drawn-out and complex process that is shaped by many factors, not to mention the accident of timing and of personality of significant actors at particular moments in history. For external actors that are not situated in local contexts to direct events requires policy instruments that are necessarily blunt and difficult to use with precision – the offer or withdrawal of aid or trade, for example – even if such intervention can be morally and politically justified. Even where the West intervenes directly, as the US has done in Iraq, it is still

dependent on local actors to construct a democracy that can put down real roots and survive beyond the external intervention.

Furthermore, experience shows that governments are rarely able to ensure that the means they can deploy lead to the intended outcomes, as other actors, even much weaker ones, also interact dynamically with these inputs and seek to turn them to their own advantage or to adapt to them in ways that preserve their existing privileges and security. Efforts that seek to promote a particular social group that is seen as intrinsically disposed towards democracy and potentially capable of promoting it – such as the 'middle class' or NGOs – are often revealed to be based on simplistic, generalised assumptions about the nature of that actor or on inadequate information and a loose reading of local social, political, economic, and institutional realities.

It is not entirely unreasonable therefore, nor altogether without practical merit, that much Western effort to promote democratisation (in the Middle East and elsewhere in the developing world) is channelled into 'technical' areas such as security sector reform and training. This often arises because Western governments and their formal aid agencies, multilateral institutions (such as the European Commission or the World Bank), and some international NGOs find it difficult or even counter-productive to tackle directly such issues as security sector involvement in illicit commercial activities and the 'black' or 'parallel' economy or crony relationships between senior officers and state managers and their families. Instead, it is hoped that training police forces to be better at their job, including instruction in the law and human rights, will have a beneficial, if incremental, impact.

While the intentions are commendable and the effort worth undertaking in and of itself, the approach is no substitute for *democratic control* by *civilian government* over the internal security services (or armed forces). There are numerous examples of training leading to improved handling by the police of the general public and to fewer deaths of people in police custody – Jordan or the United Arab Emirates are among the more shining examples – but little evidence that this has altered fundamentally the nature and purpose of security sector activity, let alone affected the autocratic structure of political power in any meaningful way. Much the same could be said of other areas of technical

assistance, such as training in parliamentary procedure, which though helpful and potentially contributing to democratic process is ultimately stymied if parliamentarians and parties lack the will or opportunity to exercise political will and acquire greater prerogatives.

A second Western approach is to channel aid towards advocacy NGOs working on democracy, human rights, women's issues, and so on. Yet once again the results are very mixed, at best. Egypt again offers a good example: the US directed some $800 million in aid towards Egyptian non-governmental projects and organisations in the broad field of democracy promotion in the first 18 years or so after the signing of the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty in 1979. However, it would be difficult indeed to identify any tangible improvements resulting from this massive investment. This stark record is a reminder of the problem inherent in assuming that certain identified actors – such as the bourgeoisie or, in this case, NGOs – can take on the task of bringing about major political change. A similar problem arises when Western aid and development loans have been deployed to promote free market enterprise, in the hope that this will assist the emergence of an independent-minded and liberal middle class, which will pressure governments for greater democracy. Indeed, there can be adverse consequences, such as the transformation of the NGO community into a new business sector; this might seem an example of healthy entrepreneurship, but the price is the rise of a new dependency on Western aid flows.

Besides, economic liberalisation is not new in the Middle East. Even socialist-leaning economies in Tunisia and Egypt initiated trade liberalisation as early as 1969-1974, and there has been deeper and more widespread liberalisation throughout the region since the 1980s, and especially in the 1990s, including not insignificant privatisation in some cases. However, the process has also led to problematic results, not least increasing job insecurity and widening income disparity, a decline in literacy as well as in access to basic entitlements, and consequently the growth of the informal or 'black', parallel economy – all of which have undermined the drive to democratisation in a number of countries, where escape from the formal economy additionally means disassociation from the formal political system.

No less significant a consequence is that those who already hold

political and 'structural' power or who have access to it are best placed to seize and benefit from economic opportunities opened up by the liberalisation of trade and capital flows. This is a familiar phenomenon from the transitional economies of Eastern Europe and the former USSR after 1989-1991: the apparatchiks become the new capitalists and the new political brokers. So too in Egypt, Syria, Algeria, Palestine and elsewhere, the elites and corporate sectors that the West expects to democratise may find this threatening to their interests as political and commercial entrepreneurs within an emerging crony capitalism. The response is often to engage in political liberalisation in its broader definition: loosening state controls over the media, relaxing security service surveillance and intervention, and allowing political parties to form. This has arguably reached the level of 'limited' democracy in one or two cases – Palestine is one, which is ironic since it is not even an independent, sovereign state – but potentially promising examples such as Yemen, Jordan, and Egypt have all regressed visibly from that level since the mid-1990s.

As noted earlier, Western options and approaches for the promotion of democracy in the Middle East (or elsewhere) need to be seen in the wider context of Western policy agendas in general. It is natural for Western governments, as for multilateral organisations and international NGOs, to have their own objectives and agendas. The problem, however, is that action by one of these actors may contradict, and hence undermine, action by another. A foremost example is divergent US and EU attitudes towards Iran, with the former effectively wishing for regime change and the latter seeking more modest aims, placing improvement in human rights and combating terrorism in the context of a 'critical dialogue'.

There are other, arguably more pernicious examples of contradictory purpose and consequences of Western policy. Possibly the most important is that the economic liberalisation so energetically pressed upon Middle East governments by the West ironically tends to undermine democratisation in tangible ways, largely because its intended beneficiaries are also its victims. First, economic liberalisation usually results in significant rises in female unemployment and poverty – as the state sector is usually the main employer of women, and their jobs are generally the

more vulnerable during state contraction. Second, more broadly, 'strong' government is required lest the victims use the opportunity afforded by political liberalisation to mobilise against the government's economic reforms. Third, the cancellation or renegotiation on harsher terms of the 'social pact' between governments and poorer sectors of society creates a ready constituency for opposition movements, most notably the Islamists in the past two or three decades.

More noteworthy still is when different branches of the same Western government pursue contradictory agendas in the same recipient or target country. Typical is democracy and human rights promotion on the one hand, and trade and arms sales promotion on the other (often promoted by different departments of the same foreign ministry). Much depends on Western strategic or commercial interests that are served by the relevant Middle East government: from securing oil flows to securing sanctions against Saddam's Iraq or repression of Islamists in Algeria or Egypt. The example of Egypt has been mentioned previously – receiving over $800 million in funds earmarked for democracy promotion along with a much greater amount in US 'foreign military assistance', even as democracy regressed in the country. Palestine offers another: then US vice-president Al Gore congratulated Arafat on setting up state security courts, which were a travesty of democratic norms and civilian authority, even as USAID was funding technical assistance and training for the Palestinian legislature.

The flip side of the same coin is no less problematic from the perspective of promoting democracy: the 'carrots' offered by the West for this purpose may be outweighed by benefits accruing to recipient governments in the region from other areas of the relationship. This is evident in the case of the Barcelona Process, through which the EU promotes human rights and democratisation by targeting aid towards particular sectors, job creation, and so on. The problem is that from the perspective of governments in, say, the Maghreb, the $200-300 million they may receive over several years under the Barcelona Process is far less than the $2-3 billion that their immigrants in Europe may send back in remittances annually. The EU would have more success by reducing its own agricultural subsidies and tariffs and thus increasing the opportunity for Maghrebi agricultural exports to Europe, which in turn

would generate greater income and job creation in the Maghreb and potentially allow local social groups such as farmers to gain economic and thus political autonomy from the state.

Summary of options

I have set out a diverse range of issues affecting the process of democratisation in the Middle East, and emphasised the shortcomings and contradictions of Western policy instruments and approaches promoting that process. This leaves us with the two questions that have underlain this essay throughout: should the West in fact be involved in the process, and can it do so effectively?

Having adopted a critical view so far, it is fitting for me to stress my view that the distinction drawn between the 'external' and the 'internal' is largely fake, whether it is used by local nationalists to discredit and oppose Western involvement in domestic processes, or by outsiders who prefer to 'leave the locals' to deal with their own problems. Both positions are blind to reality: on the one hand local governments are happy to receive external (largely Western) exports, military assistance, and economic aid and are tied to the outside world in many material ways, and cannot credibly decry 'interference' when it comes to political issues and norms; on the other hand Western (and other) governments, multilateral organisations, and NGOs cannot deny the political, economic, social, and strategic impact of their extensive and multi-faceted involvement in the Middle East, and must take political and moral account. The question therefore is not whether the West should, or should not, seek to promote democracy in the region. This premise is false; rather, the real question is how the West can apply the principle of 'least harm' in its dealings with the Middle East in order to avoid inadvertently placing obstacles in the way of democratisation.

Of course, no matter how important or timely Western assistance and policy interventions are, they can only contribute to, rather than determine, the path and outcome of democratisation processes in the Middle East. The crucial role can be played only by local democracy advocates and reformers, who have to set the agenda generally, but who

moreover have to be willing to stand up for what they believe in, even if this places them in the minority.

the rural areas. The democratic spirit was also fostered by the birth and development of several parties, founded on new social backgrounds: the Baath, the National Syrian Social Party (NSSP), the Communists and the Muslim Brotherhood. State institutions were developed and unified, including the creation of a national army from the confessional militias established by the French. Democratic Syria became a founding member of the United Nations and of the Arab League, and quickly joined the Bretton Woods Institutions (1947)[2]. In Syria women had the right to vote before they did in France.

Democracy meeting the challenges!

A few years after full independence Syrian democracy was challenged in 1948 by the trauma of the "Nakba",[3] the creation of Israel with the backing of all superpowers. A series of *coup d'Etat* followed. Two of these were related to oil interests as Iraqi and Saudi Oil pipelines passed through Syria to the Mediterranean Sea. Syria had also entered the era of struggle between the superpowers, at the very beginning of the Cold War.

However, a bloodless coup organised jointly between the political parties and the military elites, which had all agreed to overthrow authoritarianism, restored democracy in February 1954. This second democratic period was in many aspects unique in both Syria and the other Arab countries, and is still present in the collective memory.[4] Many Baathists, as well as one Communist and one Muslim Brotherhood member were freely elected. It brought major achievements in the development of the Syrian state institutions and the economy. The country became the first Arab country to create a central bank and to launch major agricultural development projects (the draining of the Ghab marshes and the development of the Euphrates and Tigris val-

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2 To get rid of the imposed linkage between the Syrian pound and the French Franc.

3 "Nakba" in Arabic means disaster, referring to the "loss" of Palestine.

4 Memory reinvigorated recently in popular TV series, showing brothers and sisters, living under the same roof, adhering to different political parties and living the turmoil of this agitated cold war period.

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leys). The industrial and financial sectors were also vigorously active and in 1956 the Lebanese often called Syria the "California of the East".[5]

Politically, the basis of the second democratic period was different. New populist parties emerged more strongly on the scene in an atmosphere of radicalisation that culminated in the active support to Nasser's Egypt during the 1956 Suez crisis and war. In this atmosphere, the populist parties were tempted, each in turn, to seize power directly. Concomitantly strong pressures were made by the superpowers to change the Syrian democratic regime. French and British assets were nationalised in 1956 due to popular anger against these powers for their attack on Egypt and for their support for the Israeli invasion of the Sinai. Syria also made a irreparable mistake with regard to the US when, following Israeli skirmishes and threats, it started to buy arms from the Soviet block and appointed a pro-communist chief of staff. This happened while the US was building an iron curtain – which included Turkey and Iraq (the so-called "Baghdad Pact"[6]) – against the USSR.

Foreign pressure on Syria culminated in 1957, with Israel and Turkey threatening to wage war together. This left no other option for the Syrian democracy than to commit a more than symbolic "hara-kiri". In 1958, the Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser was offered a complete union of the two countries.[7] Nasser accepted the offer on the condition that all political parties were dissolved. The Baathists contributed to this rush, having their own agenda: to become themselves, as pan-Arabists and socialists, the party of Nasser in Syria, eliminating

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5 Phrasing the qualification made by a US Agricultural mission in the Euphrate-Tigris valley where an extensive program of irrigation and crop development was implemented during this period.

6 The Baghdad Pact, signed in 1952, included Turkey, Pakistan, Iraq and Iran, Jordan attempted to join. Riots overthrew in a week the government that announced it.

7 A Group of Syrian officers headed by the chief-of-staff went to Cairo in January 1958, with no authorisation from the President or the Government, and offered the union to Nasser.

their strongest competitors – the Communists[8] and the parties of the urban elites – after having earlier eliminated the NSSP.[9]

However great his intentions, Nasser failed to govern the complex Syrian mosaic on an authoritarian basis and to maintain the United Arab Republic. The union was broken in September 1961, with the intention of restoring democracy. A small army unit, manipulated by the US and European powers, was able to crush the dream of Arab unity, because of a general discontent over the Egyptian officers' authoritarian ruling of Syria, and the elites displeasure over the nationalisation of banks and industry.[10] A weak and unstable democratic period followed in Syria for a year and a half, interrupted by many coups. The popular feeling was for the restoration of the union on better conditions.

Decades of authoritarianism

The *coup de grace* to this unstable period came in March 1963.[11] A state of emergency was declared[12] and a new power system was established by a small group of army officers, mostly of rural background. All other parties but the Baath were quickly dismantled and their members persecuted. The elites of the big cities who had built the Syrian State were marginalised or forced into exile. Finally, even the founding political

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8   The communists were persecuted by Nasser, and the head of the Lebanese branch, Farjallah al Helou, was assassinated savagely by the Syrian intelligence services during the union.

9   The NSSP members were tracked and jailed after the assassination of the Baathi deputy chief-of-staff, Adnan Al Malki.

10 The nationalisations announced in the last months of the union were cancelled, but not the agrarian reform promulgated in 1958.

11 Initially in order to restore the union.

12 In fact, the state of emergency law (law 51 dated 22/12/1962) was promulgated in December 1962, during the instabilities for momentary reasons (specific for situations of war and heavy turbulences). Military order No. 2 of March 8, 1963 declared an indefinite state of emergency. It is still valid (and used by the authorities) until now, even if it is in violent contradiction with subsequent laws and with the Syrian constitution passed by a plebiscite in 1973.

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leadership of the Baath Party was itself ousted. It took the Baathist officers a few years to stabilise their new power system after fierce struggle between its members for control of all institutions, including a newly made development of the Baath Party as an instrument of control of the society. The confessional "assabiyah"[13] was widely manipulated during these struggles.

It was an anaemic and troubled Syria that went through the 1967 humiliation of the "Naksa",[14] leading to the occupation of the Golan Heights. Three years later another defeat followed during the Jordan-Palestinian "Black September".[15] These events brought about an end to the internal struggle, reducing the power system to a small and closed group around the late President Hafez Asad.

The authoritarian character of the new political system was asserted, leading to its "stabilisation". At the core stood Hafez Asad and a small group of family members and close collaborators. In the first circle, were the heads of the security services, of the elite troops and of the complex system to control the army, all directly selected and appointed by the core. In a second circle, the members of the regional command of the Baath Party,[16] the governors of the regions, and the heads of the regional offices of the party. A third and less decisive circle contained the members of the government, the army hierarchy and the state administration.

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13 For the Arab Middle Ages historian Ibn Khaldoun, "assabiyah" is a strong common feeling shared by a minority group, which acts as a cement to make this group cohesive, in particular in the context of controlling and stabilising the power system of a country.

14 Word meaning defeat used to denominate the 6 days war.

15 The "leftist" baathist officers sent Syrian tanks to Jordan in support of the Palestinians. Many were destroyed by the Jordanian army, with the support of the Israeli air force. The Syrian Air force commanded by Hafez Asad did not interfere.

16 The election of its members was far from being "democratic" even within the Baath.

However, the democratic movement did not die. Freedom of opinion and criticism developed, even in the government-controlled newspapers. New newspapers and magazines were published and tolerated. Activists launched several symbolic actions for political and social freedom and the regime has not completely returned to the practices of the 80's and 90's. Some of the trials of the political detainees[22] were even public. And representatives of foreign governments and NGOs were allowed to attend. Crackdown on opposition groups became random and rare instead of systematic, but remained efficient enough to create and maintain fear!

Is "spring" really democracy?

President Bashar Asad was right that "spring" is not exactly democracy. In fact, the evolution of Arab countries, and Syria in particular, towards democracy, raises several issues that constitute the basis of a sustainable democratic development:

– political parties;
– the relations between the State and the power system;
– the positioning of the business community;
– and strategies toward Islam, and in particular radical Islam.

It is on this basis that one can analyse any democratic reconstruction in Syria, and frame the intentions and practices of the US and the Europeans to support democratic reforms.

Are there any Political Parties in Syria?

Each democracy needs political parties to present government projects. Through free elections these parties will win or loose the support of the people, which again will lead to rotation in power.

In Syria, the Baath Party still dominates the political life. For decades it has created a system of efficient clientelism, where many young people, especially of modest origin, are forced to join the party in order to obtain scholarships, preferential entries to universities, as well as preferential access to public (and even some private) jobs. The party prepares its best staff to occupy key positions. Today the party counts two million members. It has internal elections, but they are far from being democratic.[23] The power system intervenes at different stages of the process to ensure the selection of loyal candidates.

Even the parties of the NPF cannot profit from such machinery, even if the limitations on their activities recently have been slightly eased.

The "Damascus Spring" did not lead to the establishment of a clearly delimited political movement, but it has shown, and still shows, the vivacity of Syrian political life. Its major contribution was to shake the operative scheme of the dominating political system. The critics did not only come from the so-called "intelligentsia", but even from members of the party itself. The Vice President, Mr. Abdul Halim Khaddam, faced fierce criticism from the Baath Party staff at Damascus University on February 18, 2001, for his and other Baathist leaders' abuse of power for personal (as well as their sons') interests. This "incident" was a major event, which significantly contributed to the decision of the power system to crack down on the "spring" in fear of a division of the party itself.

After the crackdown it was time to organise debates inside the party, allowing freedom to call for reforms, and involving external contributors, including some of the signing members of the Charter of the 99. Room was even left for calls to permit new parties and for an amendment of the Syrian Constitution, changing the Baath from "*THE leading party*"[24] of the country, to the "*government party*". However, the regime

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22 Most of those jailed in the 70's, 80's and 90's did not see a court.

23 The Regional Command of the party called more than a hundred party members, not elected by the branches, to join the last June 2005 Congress, and to be full members of the Congress, in contradiction with internal regulations.

24 Article 8 of the Syrian Constitution: "*The Baath Arab Socialist Party is the leading party of the society and of the State. It leads the National Progressive Front which works to unite the energy of the people to serve the aims of the Arab Nation*".

was not interested in precipitously convening the party congress,[25] which could have exposed different "currents" inside the party itself. In fact, not all party members approve of the take over by the "power system" of the party itself, and they have their own agenda.

The opposition parties have been weakened by decades of systematic arrests and, following the end of the Damascus spring, by random arrests coupled with the slow liberation of long-held prisoners. For decades, these parties have been grouped, in exile, as a National Democratic Front,[26] but without being able to regain an effective backing inside the country. The most prominent leader of these parties, Riad Turk, head of the Communist Party (political bureau),[27] who has spent around 17 years in prison, was jailed again during the crackdown on the "spring", but soon liberated after overwhelming internal and international protests.[28] In May 2005 the party held its national congress and changed its name to the People's Democratic Party of Syria.

The Muslim Brotherhood Party has been in exile since the early 80's, and its members are still sentenced to death in absentia.[29] During exile it has engaged in a dialogue with the other opposition parties on the basis of democratic principles. But even if it has even less freedom of action than the other opposition movements, Islamic identity reactions have spread in Syria again in the late 90's, as in other Arab and Islamic countries, and can potentially[30] sustain a large base of supporters for this party. Surprisingly, following the crackdown on the "spring", the Arab press on several occasions reported ongoing negotiations between the "power system" and the Muslim Brotherhood movement in exile, on the conditions of their return to Syria. But more recently, the movement opted for a democratic reform approach with the other opposition groups.

The NSSP took a different tactic and has now joined the NPF. Though forbidden in Syria since the events of the 50's, the NSSP never joined the opposition and its leadership in Lebanon allied itself with the Syrian "power system".

Finally, the recent period has shown the emergence of new leaders, and even attempts to create new parties. Riad Seif, a successful industrialist during the 90's, who became a deputy, and Aref Dalila, an economics professor, caught the attention of the system by their direct criticism of the "power system" itself. The parliamentary immunity of Seif was lifted after he wrote a letter to the parliament criticising the granting of mobile phone contracts without any license fees to the public treasury. Later, he was sentenced to 5 years in prison[31] for "trying to change the Constitution by illegal means". Others emerged as

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25 However, such a congress appeared urgent in order to change the by-laws of the party, placing "National Command" (representative of all Arab countries' Baath parties) above the "Regional Command" (that of Syria). And this is especially after the collapse of Saddam Hussein's regime, which has led to the categorisation of the Baath Party in Iraq as a "terrorist" party. The congress of the party was convened only in 2005, following Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon.

26 Since 1979 it has grouped the Arab Socialist Democratic Party, the Communist Party (political bureau) – that has changed its name recently to the People's Democratic Party of Syria – the Arab Workers Revolutionary Party, the Arab Socialist Democratic Baath Party and the Arab Socialist movement.

27 This corresponds to that half of the Syrian Communist Party which broke ties with Moscow in the 1970s and opted for Arab nationalism. It refused to join the National Progressive Front, criticised the entry of Syrian forces into Lebanon and denounced the authoritarian nature of the regime. Most of the staff of the party spent more than 15 years in prison, although it did not choose armed opposition as the radical Islamists of the late 70's did.

28 During his years in prison, Riad Turk became for Human Rights' NGOs the symbol of political prisoners in Syria.

29 Law No. 49 from 1980 sentencing to death whoever adheres to the Muslim Brotherhood Party, accused of having supported the uprising in several Syrian cities, including Aleppo and Hama, and of assassination of Alaouites linked to the power system (made in fact by a different radical Islamic group named "Taliaa Moukatila" – the combating vanguard). This episode almost ended by a civil war and with the Palmyra and Hama massacres.

30 Such potentiality is debatable, as the Islamic groups remaining in Syria are fragmented and do only have a local social basis, and the Muslim Brotherhood may have difficulties to federate them.

31 Dalila got 10 years.

human rights activists and are facing similar trials. Some groups also attempted to create new parties in 2004, for instance a "liberal party", whose founder after a few days of "tourism"[32] in jail was dissuaded by security services from doing so.

At the end of 2004, Syria has seen animated debates over a new law allowing the free creation and activity of political parties, with a view to the long promised congress of the Baath Party for official confirmation. The debates showed the necessity of changing the present constitution which does not explicitly guarantee such rights. Also, the parliamentary elections process should be changed, as it is not fitted for full functioning of the parliament on the basis of multiple political parties' representation and coalitions. Half of the deputies are to be directly selected by the Baath Party, as representatives of "workers and peasants".[33] And the recent elections have shown heavy implications of "interest groups" linked to the power system, financing the campaign of both "independent" or "workers and peasants" candidates.

The congress of the Baath Party was held in June 2005 after the Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon's strong impact on internal politics. The power system first tried to mobilise the Baath Party to defend its corporatist interests. As this did not work the President had to intervene personally to postpone the opening: no constitution change, no separation of powers between the Baath Party and the State, no principle of power alternation, no process of national reconciliation, no opening to opposition parties, and Muslim Brotherhood members shall continue to be sentenced to death. Heads of security services were also brought into the party regional command. The congress itself was preceded by a crackdown on the last "spring salon"[34] for free political debates.

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32   After his release the founder of the party wrote an article in the press detailing the excellent conditions of his detention, which later on made another civil society activist write a sarcastic article about this particular "tourism".

33   Article 53 of the Syrian Constitution.

34   The board members of the "Jamal Atassi forum for Democratic Debates" were later freed, except one who read aloud a letter from the Muslim Brotherhood in a seminar where all political parties, including the Baath, made their statements. After the congress, the secret services asked for the complete closing of the forum.

Since the congress, the situation became tense on the issue of political freedoms. The Syrian blogs and websites announce regularly the creation of new parties. The "spring salons" and the unauthorised political parties defy the authorities,[35] and the consensus on the necessity of political reforms has broadened.[36]

On the level of political freedom, the 2005 congress of the Baath Party led to a stalemate in Syria, but there are more political debates than ever. The power system closed its scheme for reforms around a "Chinese model" with no political freedoms. The above described parties, as well as many others are proactive, finding new forms of mobilising popular support. Also, it is not sure that the Baath Party itself will in the long term accept being taken over by the security services, i.e. by the "power system".

Is State and "Power" the same?

In Syria, as in most Arab countries, President Hafez Asad established a very clear conceptual and practical separation between the "power system" and the State. The circles of the power system are focused around the Presidency, which has its own logics of production, reproduction and control. The state is headed by a government, nominated by the President; the Ministers and the senior staff members have limited executive rights and autonomy from the "power system". The Regional Command of the Baath Party and other second circles of the power system suggest the candidates for government and for the major civil servant positions. The final selection is made by the Presidency according to different criteria: confessional and regional distribution, representation of the NPF, including a majority of Baathists and some "technocrats". The government does not rule according to any spe-

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35   Riad Turk defied the regime in July 2005, by appearing on a satellite TV debate jointly with Sadreddine Al Bayanoni, head of the Muslim Brotherhood, sentenced to death.

36   See for instance the declarations to the press of the Syrian economist Nabil Sukkar, who for decades kept a strict economic approach for reforms.

cific programme,[37] even if Syria has passed several phases since 1971, very different with regard to their economic, social and political issues. Anyhow, important decisions are in the end taken by the power system, acting sometimes formally through the Regional Command, or on other occasions through the security services.

This system has not been established without resistance. In the early 80's, Hafez Asad was forced to cancel the non-political function of the Director of Ministry (senior civil servant who guarantees the continuation of the institution) and replace it by Assistant to the Minister, who can be changed at will. This was necessary in order to pass new laws and rules that were contrary to the logic and legality of the administration and the State. The Monetary and Credit Board for example, governing the Central Bank, was not formally dismantled, but it was for 20 years unable to arrange a single meeting; its deceased members were simply not replaced.

All state institutions have their counterparts in the Regional Command of the Baath Party, which have to agree on major decisions, otherwise the Presidency intervenes as an "arbitrator". As low wages and inflation deprived civil servants of any reasonable purchasing power, the door was opened for massive and systemised corruption. Those loyal to the "directives" were granted advantages in nature: free cars, travel abroad, etc. Key decision makers were allowed to take "illegal profits" from their positions, a fact which could be used against them (and was used on several occasions). This was of course valid also for the army, where the hierarchy was doubled by a security organisation, detaining the real power. Different army units were granted rights to organise contraband on a large scale.[38]

This situation guaranteed weak state institutions and concentrated the strength in the closed circles of the power system. It also weakened any possibility to apply the rule of law, as no coherence was sought in the judiciary system, as the judges experienced the same low wages and ensuing corruption as all other civil servants.

37 During the "modernisation and development" era of Bashar Assad, a tentative attempt to elaborate a program for the government through a debate between key analysts and actors failed, even if it was limited to the economic sphere.

38 In particular from and towards Lebanon.

As Bashar Assad rightly indicated in his inaugural speech, there can be no democracy without the development of institutions and without administrative reforms. But more than five years of his presidency has not led to any tangible result. The organisation of the power system remains untouched. Only one rule was introduced in order to change key posts, on the basis of age of retirement! However, it was not applied in many "difficult" cases. A decision was issued by the Regional Command not to interfere in government affairs. But in practice, the first and second circles still intervene at different levels.[39] The major change came for a period from the modifications of internal functioning inside the core of the system and between this core and the first circles. Ultimate power was no more absolutely detained by one man, but shared between the players, who can have different interests and stakes. The other main change came with a major involvement of power system players in business activities, with the attempt of each one of them to control and "legalise" a personal rent seeking activity. However, following the party congress of June 2005, the "old guard" was dismissed and the core of the "power system" became again concentrated around the President and his close family.

At the level of the State administration, young staff members, some of them Western educated,[40] were placed in different positions. However, no major structural reform was implemented, and no significant effort was made to raise the "official" wage level of key civil servants. Many of the "new guard" staff have already been involved in mismanagement or corruption affairs. The other "reformists" were invited not to challenge any of the rent-seeking activities of the power system, or even to integrate their business development in the "reform programmes".

The continuation of this strong separation between the power system and the State structure not only prevents a peaceful and democratic transition of power, it even contains the roots of the decomposition of the state, which is typical of the situation of "weak states".

39 And new laws were promulgated where Baath Party members were given roles in regulatory authorities.

40 In opposition to most Baathist staff educated in the former Soviet block countries.

Where does the business community stand?

The historical Syrian business community suffered and lost confidence following the nationalisations of 1963, the dismantling of its political parties and the ousting of its relatives from the administration. Few linked their destiny with the functioning of the established state capitalism, or sponsoring and profiting from state purchase contracts. The majority went abroad where they prospered.[41]

In the early 1970s, Hafez Assad made a first step towards a handful of members of the business community, allowing them to invest with advantageous conditions in the tourism sector. And in the late 1970s, the same few had great opportunities to profit from huge public investments due to Gulf country transfers to Syria after the 1973 war. Similar opportunities were granted in the late 1980s for the barter deal with the collapsing Soviet Union, which led to a first broadening of wealth and capital accumulation.

However, it was in the 1990s that the business community prospered again: oil revenues, oil construction contracts, subsidisation of main agriculture crops, investment law No. 10, which transferred foreign trade from state organisations to the private sector, protectionism of local industries, contracts for the reconstruction of Lebanon, and trading with Iraq in the last years of Saddam's reign. All these factors have led to the development of a new wealthy and relatively large business community in the country.

However, this new business community did not ask to share power and/or to be directly involved in local politics. The complex and contradictory rules and regulations made it easy for the power system to crack down on any of its members for "illegal practices". Its most powerful members, and those who seized the original opportunities, are the direct relatives of the members of the power system.

In the early 2000s two groups clearly emerged. One, already powerful because of its direct links to the power system, sought to position itself in the most profitable rent-seeking activities: oil and gas, mobile phones, real estate, advertising, etc. This group favoured limited liberalisation of media and free speech, as long as it controlled such

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41   Estimates of Syrian expatriates' assets abroad often amount to $US 80 billion.

media to defend its interests against even the official media, where some Baathists or independents might take leverage. Another group, the largest in number, has asked for the acceleration of liberalisation, the rationalisation of the administration and the equality of chances for all.

When foreign pressures are high on the country, both groups fear instability and position themselves against the pressures. And when life returns to normal, the contradictions between the two groups are sharpened and exposed in public. All groups, including civil society at large, are convinced that the liberalisation and political reforms are an inevitable outcome of the system. The first group linked to the power system as it is, is eager to gain time to secure its positions for such an outcome in the economic sphere, and to put its loyalists in key positions in the state structures. The second group is directly hit by foreign trade liberalisation, by the cumbersome administrative procedures, and, recently, by the pressures of the first group to take over its chambers of commerce and professional unions.

The largest (numerically but weakest in terms of power) group of the business community sees the establishment of democracy and the rule of law as a precondition to develop its business activities and investments. The takeover by the power system on rent-seeking activities is considered the major impediment to a better investment climate.

Is Syrian Islam Radical?

Following the collapse of the peace process after Madrid, the UN sanctions on Iraq, and the US led invasion, Islamic feeling re-emerged in Syria as in most Arab and Muslim countries. This tendency to Islamisation was reinforced by the effects of liberalisation in the country, the spread of corruption and by the old and strong business links with the Gulf countries.[42] This tendency can be seen in the streets and the coffee shops, by the increase in numbers of women wearing "hijab", even among urban elites.

But however significant the awakening of Islam is in Syria, espe-

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42   This has created what some scholars name the "Saudi era".

cially in cities like Aleppo,[43] the phenomenon is in no way as strong as in Egypt, Saudi Arabia or Jordan. Sunni in its basis, proud of the Shiite Hezbollah (who forced Israel to withdraw from South Lebanon), easily allowing mixed marriage between Sunnis, Alawites and Shiaa,[44] Syrian Islam still maintains its liberal Umayyad roots: All Syria, including the Sunnis of the cities, was proud to have the Christian Pope entering the Umayyad mosque.

The power system had for decades, however, used confessionalism and regionalism to justify its domination in fear of a supposed "overwhelming" Sunni majority in the cities. It has positioned itself as champion of the protection of the minorities and of laicity.[45] This major argument, publicly expressed in recent debates, is used now to postpone political reforms.

The identity of the Syrian population refers more to city and region than to religion. However, any democratic development in Syria cannot avoid the issue of political Islam, and has, at some stage, to launch a reconciliation mechanism covering the events of the late 70's – early 80's: the "civil war" or the "Hama and Palmyra massacres", thus enabling the development of an Islamic democratic political movement. The manifestos and debates of the "Damascus spring" did not evoke the "sad events", in a spirit of reconciliation and a global impulse for reforms under the umbrella of the new President. The "sad events" had the effect of a wound, a reason to move ahead. The power system did not use the same spirit of reconciliation to address this issue. Today publicly and in his discussions with US politicians and officials, the crackdown on Hama is presented as an early war on "Islamic terrorism", decades before 9/11. The temptation to continue using "asabiyyat"[46] as

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43 Strengthened there by the feeling that Aleppo is neglected by the State based in Damascus.

44 Bashar Assad, himself an Alawite, is married to a Sunni woman born in Homs.

45 It is possible in Syria to find books critical of Islam, frankly secular or advocating new views on the understanding of Islam. Such books are not only banned in Egypt, but some are even prohibited in Lebanon, for confessional equilibrium reasons.

46 Several "assabiyah".

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a mechanism of excuse and control is still extremely strong. The last congress of the Baath Party confirmed this, forbidding any opening towards political Islam. Just as the congress was closing the security services arrested several individuals accused of being radical Islamists. Earlier the same people would have been called "ordinary criminals".

The "assabiyat" have however their own logic. Recently Syria experienced a strong awakening of the Kurdish identity, fostered by the developments in nearby Iraq and by poverty and social problems in the North-Eastern region. This is in spite of the fact that Syria has been much more successful than its neighbours in integrating the Kurds within its national and urban identities.[47] The problem has developed to a stage that forced the latest congress of the Baath Party to recognise some of the Kurdish claims.[48] Other clashes erupted between Alawites and Ismaelis in the coastal mountain region.

US, Europe and the Syrian Power System

It is a commonly held belief in Syria that the US and European powers played a role in breaking their democratic experience from 1949 by having manipulated army officers to make their "coups". During the 50's and early 60's they are believed to have actively brought instability to the country, forcing it to make the union with Egypt without preparation. And since then they have supported all authoritarian regimes in the region.

Syrians have no confidence in the US, the strategic partner of the Israeli "enemy", and give no credit to it as an "honest broker" for a

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47 In the 50's, several presidents were of Kurdish origin. The mufti of Syria, Mohammad Keftaro, was also Kurdish.

48 Hundreds of thousands of Kurds living in the North-Eastern region ask for Syrian passports, claim unfair treatment (land ownership, underdevelopment of the area, etc.) and have sympathy for the PKK and other Kurdish organisations in Turkey and Iraq. The Baath Party resolutions addressed the issue, without proposing a specific process of negotiations with the local representatives. The new economic plans of the State Planning Commission have focused on the urgency of developmental projects for the area.

Middle East peace.[49] Additionally, Syrians maintain a strong nationalist identity on both the Syrian and the Arab level, and they believe that the Western powers have been dealing with the Syrian regime only on the basis of direct interests. And since 1963 they have experienced strong variations in the relations between the superpowers and the regime.

During most of the period France had better relations with Syria, especially as the US and Great Britain sided with Israel during the 1967 "Naksa", and after General de Gaulle's famous *coup de gueule* on Israeli arrogance, which brought about immense sympathy for France in all Arab societies. A period of favouring France followed; for instance the purchase of some *Caravelle* civil aircrafts in the late 60's. After the 1973 war, the relations with the US and Great Britain deteriorated significantly, leading to the freezing of diplomatic ties. In 1976 Syrians suspected a US and European green light for the Syrian intervention in Lebanon. However in 1980, the US listed Syria as a country supporting terrorism and, following the Israeli invasion of Lebanon and the dispatch of "multinational forces", relations with all the superpowers deteriorated further, reaching the level of limited military confrontation. The UK broke its diplomatic ties with Syria in 1986 on the accusation of terrorism.

The relations of all western powers with Syria improved drastically when Syria sided with the "international coalition" against the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990, and participated in the following war. This positioning of the Syrian regime was not popular, and was felt as a "sacrifice" in the hope of a full peace agreement with Israel, which could in particular lead to the return of the Golan Heights.

The relations with the US and Great Britain deteriorated again with the collapse of the peace process, and especially with the preparations for the invasion of Iraq. However, Madeleine Albright, Secretary of State, as well as President Chirac attended the funeral ceremony of President Hafez Asad in 2000 and indirectly endorsed the succession of his son. The invasion of Iraq made a new reshuffle of the positions. France and Syria sided together in the Security Council to prevent a UN resolution allowing the invasion of Iraq.

It is worth noting that in 2003, following the US/British invasion of Iraq, the US Congress issued the Syria Accountability Act *"to halt Syrian support for terrorism, end its occupation of Lebanon, stop its development of weapons of mass destruction, cease its illegal importation of Iraqi oil, and hold Syria accountable for its role in the Middle East, and for other purposes"*. No mention was made of democratic reforms in Syria. Europe distanced itself from this unilateral US pressure on Syria, which clearly aimed to obtain Syrian support for the US invasion of Iraq. The Syrian authorities responded by a major opening towards Turkey and by accelerating the discussions for the signing of the Euro-Syrian "partnership", under the Barcelona terms. Some European countries siding with the US blocked the negotiations, for several months, in order to introduce stronger terms on weapons of mass destruction. In May 2004, George Bush escalated further by issuing an executive order:

> I, GEORGE W. BUSH, President of the United States of America, hereby determine that the actions of the Government of Syria in supporting terrorism, continuing its occupation of Lebanon, pursuing weapons of mass destruction and missile programs, and undermining United States and international efforts with respect to the stabilization and reconstruction of Iraq constitute an unusual and extraordinary threat to the national security, foreign policy, and economy of the United States and hereby declare a national emergency to deal with that threat.

Again, nothing on democracy for Syria was mentioned. The executive order included commercial sanctions. It was followed by a Department of Treasury note classifying the Commercial Bank of Syria, by far the largest bank of the country and responsible for most of the foreign trade financing, as a primary money laundering financial institution.[50]

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49   See CSS (Jordan Center for Strategic Studies) report "Revisiting the Arab Street, Research from Within", Feb. 2005.

50   Although it is common knowledge that the cumbersome regulations of the Commercial Bank of Syria can hardly allow it to launder money, and that the banks of some neighbouring countries are significantly involved in such dealings.

Shortly afterwards France abruptly[51] broke its "strategic coopera-tion" with Syria, and promoted the resolution 1559 of the Security Council on September 2004, supporting "free and fair presidential elections"... in Lebanon, as well as the withdrawal of Syrian troops. Syrian-French relations deteriorated substantially. However, the Euro-Syrian partnership agreement was signed in draft at the end of 2004. Syria agreed to organise elections for Iraqi residents on its territory and to make security arrangements with the US on its border with Iraq. It also went to Russia seeking re-establishment of "strategic relations",[52] canceling most of the old debts with the Soviet Union.

During all these fluctuations the Syrian population used to feel proud of Hafez Asad's foreign policy, as "he knew how to play it". This pride helped to accept his authoritarianism. The situation started to change after the collapse in 2000 of the last efforts to make a Syrian-Israeli peace-deal. The Basha-regime tried to play the same game. But despite the achievement of the deal with Turkey,[53] the Syrian regime is after the withdrawal from Lebanon more internationally isolated than it has been since the early 1980s. To the Syrian people the regime appears to have lost most of its regional cards and ability to interact "smartly" with international politics. The opposition hoped that this would bring the "power system" to an internal opening, seeking national unity in the face of adversity, but on the contrary, the congress of the Baath Party

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51   This was especially abrupt considering that the previous year President Chirac in the Lebanese parliament had publicly stated his "understanding" of the Syrian interests in Lebanon.

52   A major step, which is leading to the draft of most of the old debts Syria had with the Soviet Union, leaving the country as one of the least indebted developing and Arab country.

53   The deal might even be shaky as Turkey still has strong military ties with Israel. Turkey and Syria have major common interests in preventing the dismantling of the unified Iraq and the creation of an independent Kurdish state there. Other reasons for the deal may be the internal difficulties of the Turkish ruling party with its other minorities.

in 2005 postponed the opening, reinvigorated repression, and called for "improving the relations with the US".[54]

US, Europe and the Syrian political parties

As to political freedom in Syria, rights of free association and organ-isation of political parties, little has come during decades, either from the US or Europe.

The US State department issues yearly reports on human rights practices in Syria, where it is usually stated that:

... persons still in prolonged detention include members of the Ba'th Party, the Iraq Ba'th Party, the Party for Communist Action, the Syrian Commun-ist Party, the Arab Socialist Union Party, the Nasserist Democratic Popular Organization, various Kurdish groups, and the Muslim Brotherhood. Scores of doctors, health professionals, and engineers have been detained without trial since a mass arrest in 1980, and hundreds of Palestinians and Lebanese citizens arrested in Lebanon and in Syria were detained without charge, although most were subsequently released.

The opposition parties listed in the report have little chance to get US support. Most are leftist parties. And during the Cold War era, no one could imagine the US supporting communist or socialist political organisations, as it is now doing in Iraq. And the State Department reports, contradicting the above where many parties were named, con-tinue astonishingly:

The Government uses its vast powers so effectively that there is no or-ganized political opposition, and there have been very few anti-regime manifestations. Serious abuses include the widespread use of torture in detention; poor prison conditions; arbitrary arrest and detention; prolonged

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54   And not with the European countries! Although such an alignment of the regime with the US is unpopular (see CSS report).

detention without trial; fundamentally unfair trials in the security courts; an inefficient judiciary that suffers from corruption and, at times, political influence; infringement on citizens' privacy rights; denial of freedom of speech and of the press, despite a slight loosening of censorship restrictions; denial of freedom of assembly and association; some limits on freedom of religion; and limits on freedom of movement.

Open US diplomacy did not make a strong case of defending political rights or political freedom, while it strongly pressured the Syrian regime publicly to allow Syrian Jews to emigrate or to end its support of the Kurdish PKK party. In its 2002 human rights practices report, the State Department did mention the crackdown on the opposition, discussing several individual cases, without presenting the dimension of the political movement of the "Damascus spring" opposition, and again no major public statement was made.

Everything looks as if the US has a problem with the very nature of the opposition parties and movements in Syria. This is the only thing that could explain the launching in the US of the Farid Ghadri Reform Party of Syria and its invitation to the State Department; that "party" has no backing in the country and no political credibility. The comparison was easily made with Iraq's Ahmed Chalabi, especially after Ghadri called for regime change in Syria by US military intervention. Nothing could be more efficient in removing all credibility from the US statements on fostering democracy in the region.[55]

The Europeans did slightly better. In fact during the dark decades of brutal repression, the leftist political activists who escaped prison mostly found refuge in France whereas the Islamists went to Germany and the UK (in addition to Jordan and the Gulf States). There were many public statements from the European parliament (EP) asking for the liberation of political prisoners, and Riad Turk, as well as others, were officially received at the EP after they had been allowed to travel abroad.

All these actions have not, however, reached a level of political dialogue with Syrian political parties or the "intelligentsia". No direct sup-

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55 Astonishingly, one of the promoters of the liberal party joined the Ghadri movement and returned to Syria without being bothered by the Syrian security services.

port was given to these parties, and no direct pressure was put on the Baath Party. There was in particular no formal political work done by European political parties to assist the Syrian political parties to host and train their staff, weakened by years of repression, as they had done – not so long ago – with the Spanish or Portuguese parties during the repression periods in their own countries. There was also no systematic pressure on or dialogue with the Baath Party itself in order to develop more democratic practices. The ambassadors of Western countries, including the US, regularly meet in Lebanon and Egypt, the head of even banned political movements, and even the radical Islamists. There are very few reports of such meetings with Syrian political activists.[56] Rare were the conferences organised by foreign embassies in Syria on internal political issues, even during the "spring". No one took the occasion of the publication of the Arab Human Development Report, sponsored by the UNDP, to assist public democratic debates in Syria.[57]

Such interventionism in Syrian politics would have been difficult and risky. The Syrian political activists do not trust foreign Western powers, for the very same reasons as the Syrian population in general does not, and they particularly fear stronger repression when the authorities accuse them of "contacts with foreign powers", especially the US. And the US and European countries, as well as the EU, would also run a high risk concerning their geopolitical and commercial relations and upsetting Syrian authorities by making political contacts inside.

The Barcelona process could have been a good framework, but little was done. Even the Euro-Syrian partnership, which deepens Syria's involvement in the process, does not set any practical modality for fostering democracy in the country. Three articles symbolically refer to human rights and democracy, stating that "political dialogue" (i.e. between governments) shall cover such subjects (see Appendix 1, for the text of the related articles in the Association Agreement).

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56 The Syrian Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued a note in July 2005 asking foreign embassies to seek authorisation before meeting civil society activists!

57 Only the Konrad Adenauer foundation of the German Christian-Democratic party, CDU, dared organise a symbolic meeting in Damascus to discuss the civil liberties issues that the report had raised.

In the middle of 2005 things slightly changed. The EU countries postponed the association agreement. The reasons were not clearly stated, and vary between the Syrian regime's continuous – i.e. also after the withdrawal – intervention in Lebanese politics, and the human rights record in the country. Also the US statements differ between "cheap regime change"[58] and strong pressures on the regime for its various policies, in Iraq (insurgents fleeing the border), in Lebanon (complicity in assassinations, support to Hezbollah, interventions in Lebanese politics) in Palestine (support for Hamas). But however strong the pressure, the Syrian population still sees no clear sign of Western commitment to democracy in their country.

Who support the strengthening of the State?

Another indirect way to foster democratic reforms is to help strengthen state structures in relation to the "power system", or, more selectively, to pressure the "power system" itself.

For decades, the Syrian administration has received little assistance from the US or Europe. Most of the Baathist staff has been trained in the universities within the old Soviet block. There was no direct assistance from the World Bank or IMF, partly because of Syria's financial collapse in 1986, and the debt crisis that ensued until the end of the 90's. The authorities were also aware that "strange ideas" could be introduced with the assistance experts and it regularly advocated that Syria does not need foreign assistance, especially after its oil boom.

It is still inconceivable in Syria to receive US-AID assistance for either public institutions or civil society associations. The attitude is more positive vis-à-vis the European Commission, which has launched large assistance programmes for administrative and economic reforms (EC, by the way, advocates the same Washingtonian ultra-liberalism, fighting for downsizing the state). However, this experiment started too late, and is unlikely to produce decisive results owing to the complexity of EU procedures. More could be expected from direct state-to-state cooperation, as with the French assistance launched two years ago,

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58   I.e. without military intervention.

which aimed specifically at administrative and judiciary reforms. The report on administrative reforms has been classified as "confidential" (!)[59], the one on the judiciary was still in process when the advisor to the President in charge of both files was fired (early 2005).

Astonishingly, pressures or sanctions from the US and Europe do not distinguish between the State and the power system. The trouble these commercial sanctions causes to the population creates adverse results: Complete cohesion of the population behind its State, and consequently the power system, and rejection of the unfair pressures and sanctions. A typical example of this is the Syria Accountability Act. The US administration chose to block exports of technological equipment for the internet, advanced health materials, electrical power plants, and to contain the activities of the major state-owned bank. All Syrians from the business community to the leftist activists considered such sanctions unfair. The sanctions were then rightly understood as an attempt to force concessions from the regime on the Iraqi, Hezbollah and Palestinian fronts, and not as pressuring the regime to work for a true democratic transformation.

The same negative reaction from the Syrian population occurred when France sponsored UN resolution 1559 on free presidential elections in Lebanon. The gesture of Chirac was felt as a betrayal. France has better ways to exert pressure, as most Lebanese and Syrian intelligentsia stated in *An Nahar* newspaper:[60] "The democratisation of Lebanon passes by the democratisation of Syria".

This refusal to separate state and "power system" in Arab countries looks like a nightmare in the light of the recent events in Iraq. The

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59   Leaks indicate that the report stated that the administrative reform should start with the Presidential institution.

60   In recent years, the Lebanese *An Nahar* newspaper became simultaneously the major voice of Lebanese opposition to the hegemony of Syrian secret services on its political life, and, the voice for Syrian intelligentsia asking for democratic reforms. The phrase in italic is the title of a book by one of the main editors of *An Nahar*: Samir Kassir. In the last months, the debate went as far as discussing views of both Syria and Lebanon after the "withdrawal" from Lebanon. Samir Kassir was assassinated July 2nd, 2005.

Iraqi population suffered 13 years of hard sanctions because of their dictatorship. Then, when several hundreds of thousands of American and UK troops invaded the country to overthrow the regime, and to establish democracy (sic!), the first thing they did was to … destroy the state institutions! The ministries were left to be looted. The army and police forces were dismantled. One could have expected that such state institutions, and the army in particular, were not happy for the disastrous outcome, but that they would have followed the occupation forces and later on the new regime emerging from elections if there had been stable security and living conditions.[61] Chaos was the choice of the US, and so was the awakening of all kinds of tribalism, confessionalism, regionalism, etc. What a positive democratic perspective for the population of neighbouring countries!

Economic reforms before political reforms?

No democratic reforms could develop without a strong backing from the business community, which could see in these reforms a guarantee for the development of its activities, both in terms of economic growth and of social stability.

Significant economic developments and capital accumulation has occurred in Syria since 1990. The growth rates were high in the early 90's, due to oil revenues, but mostly due to the first measures of the authorities towards liberating … business(!). The US and Europe[62] exerted pressure to negotiate Syrian debts multilaterally within the Paris club (while most of the debts were Soviet Union Military assistance). In the 1990s the Syrian business community sided with the state and the power system in refusing the economic "hegemony", and to gain time to obtain a step-by-step bilateral solution.

Growth rates decreased significantly after 1996 (becoming nega-

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61 It could be argued that state institutions were controlled by Baathists, but this argument is not valid as it would have been easier, and politically more efficient, to have dealt with the Baathists in a democratic nation-building period in stead of the present situation of chaos and radical Islamist insurgents!

62 Mostly Europe, and especially France.

tive in 1999) and despite oil revenues they are still low due to structural problems of the economy: The absence of a friendly investment environment for the local business community as well as for foreign investment. The internal economic liberalisation was slowed down, favouring the members of the "power system".

US and European companies were, however, operating and investing in Syria. The biggest foreign company since the end of the 80's is … Shell, followed by Elf (now merged with Total). Both are extracting oil in the country and they have made large investments with the equipment and works mostly delivered by American and European contracting companies. Business, almost as usual! Certainly, these operations have their own Syrian "sponsors" who cannot exist outside the power system. Another example is car imports, which has also been a rent-seeking activity due to longstanding imposed import limitations. Dealers developed their activities, until a point where they were asked by members of the "power system" to transfer the agreements with the dealers directly to them. Many other examples exist where US and European export to Syria passed through a sponsor in the "power system".

The long-term outcome is, however, beneficial neither to the US nor to Europe. US companies have focused on oil while French and German companies concentrate on supplies to state-owned enterprises. When the State became less efficient, oil activities slowed down and Europe's share in Syrian imports decreased from 50 percent in the early 90's to less than 20 percent in 2003, as state procurements decreased significantly and the Syrian business community moved to import from … Asia.

Pressures from the US and Europe on Syria for opening up of foreign trade have led to the reinforcement of the "power system". The part of the business community it has created lives on rent-seeking activities and services (oil, foreign trade, mobile phones). It has no interest in fostering a democratic political development. By contrast, the early Syrian democracy was supported by productive, and not rent-seeking, capitalism in agriculture and industry. This is not a specific Syrian problem, it is linked to the basic issues of economic liberalisation and globalisation. What economic and social development does such liberalisation promote in third world countries? And does such liber-

alisation promote social groups which have an interest in consolidating democracy?

The newly-signed Syrian-European association agreement could offer a better framework, as it discusses in detail the rights of business development and the liberalisation of services, as well as the necessary transparency of state-institutions procurement. The other more productive part of the business of community welcomes a positive development in this field, with the hope that while bringing fair competition of European companies to the Syrian market, it will help them to obtain a similar fair competition in their own country. However, the examples from other Arab countries have showed that such association agreements have not helped the development of a genuine business community or of democratic practices. On the contrary, many have experienced the reinforcement of crony capitalism, so economic reforms are clearly not sufficient.

US, Europe and Syrian Islam

The weakening of the state and the development of crony capitalism in Arab and Islamic countries has left most of the poor population without a perspective. This favoured the development of Islamic welfare groups and a return to Islamic values because of a general feeling of injustice. The return of religion is a worldwide phenomenon, which has to be dealt with as well in the context of international relations and the fight against terrorism, as in the understanding of local democratic developments.

Syria is located next to Turkey, where a democratic political Islam has now proved to be a reasonable alternative, even in the context of the aftermath of 9/11. The basic heritage of Syrian Islam (Umayyad) is also by nature secular. And social competition in Syria is much more between the major cities[63] and the cities and the countryside, than between religious confessions or ethnic identities (such as Kurds, Tcherkese or Armenians).

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63 Damascus, Aleppo, Homs, Hama, Rakka, Deir Ez Zor, etc... This kind of Syrian identity differs very much from what is found in Lebanon for instance.

Europe, and especially France, has long manipulated the "assabiyat" in a way similar to the local "power system". From grants for studying abroad to immigration rights, Europe has long dealt with Syria within the framework of the "Question d'Orient". The elements of this framework are: Distrust of the Arab Sunnis, support for Kurdish separatism, "protecting" minorities and increasing its cultural influence amongst them. The US did not use this methodology until recently and it is more than symbolic to see that the two prominent universities in Beirut (where many Syrian elites send their sons to study) are: Jesuites Catholic Religious for the French, with mostly Christian students, and secular for the Americans,[64] with a majority of Muslim students.

However, US and Europe could benefit much from the peculiar secular nature of Syria Sunnism, and the strong integration function of Syrian cities. The country, in particular, harbours many Islamic doctors who are liberal-minded, and has Muslims developing theories on new interpretations of the Quran and the religion. Both groups could be helpful in neutralising the effects of the "conflict of civilisations" viewpoint, not only in the Arab and Muslim worlds, but also, and most importantly, in the West.

Whatever its practices, the particularities of the Syrian "power system" have led to the protection of secular thinkers, who developed their ideas on a Muslim and Arab historical background. Their values are strongly present in the education system and can be seen on bookstore shelves. For decades, the secularisation on the basis of an Arabic identity has created the union between the tens of communities of the country and it is the bedrock of Syria's national cohesion. The secular Arabs, like all communities, observe in horror the tribal and confessional outcome of the Iraqi "democracy". US and Europeans call now for the end of Arabism, and for the end of the "schizophrenia" of the Syrians, and push them to choose between their Syrian and Arab identities. A dangerous perspective for secularism, even if Arabism has been defeated in practice and if the concept needs to evolve.

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64 It was, however, a Protestant college at the beginning of the 19th century.

Conclusion and perspectives

Rhetoric in the US and Europe concerning Syria has only recently focused on fostering "democracy". The Syrian historical experience acknowledges that both the US and Europe have acted, as powers, in the collapse of its early democratic experience.

The country has undergone years of authoritarianism, with a build-up of a "power system" autonomous from the state. This power system withstood the transmission of the presidency from Asad father to Asad son. The little tokens of basic freedoms gained during the "Damascus spring" have largely been offset by the empowerment of members of the "power system" through rent-seeking business activities. In this context, US and European attitudes, positive or negative, deal with this "power system" as such and in many ways reinforce its position.

US and European support for democratic reforms should be analysed in terms of the very issues which for the Syrians could effectively bring about such reforms: the development of political parties; the reinforcement and professionalisation of the state structures separate from the "power system", enabling the creation of a framework for democratic transition; assisting the business community to widen and sustain real productive – and not rent-seeking – activities, and maintaining the dialogue with all Syrian religious and ethnic groups alike, in particular taking advantage of the secular nature of Syrian Sunni Islam and of Arabism as a progressive identity.

Maybe Syrians are asking too much?

Appendix 1

References to democratisation in the Association Agreement

Preamble: "*Considering the importance which the Parties attach to the purposes and principles of the Charter of the United Nations, the observance of human rights, democratic principles and political and economic freedoms, which form the very basis of the Association*".

Article 2: "*Respect for the democratic principles and fundamental human rights established by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights shall inspire the domestic and external policies of the Parties and shall constitute an essential element of this Agreement*".

Article 6-1: "*The political dialogue shall cover subjects of common interest, and in particular peace, respect for international law and territorial integrity, regional stability and security, human rights, democracy and regional development, and shall aim to open the way to new forms of cooperation with a view to common goals, in these areas*".