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Plus ça change: Europe's Engagement with Moderate Islamists

Kristina Kausch

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Plus ça change: Europe's Engagement with Moderate Islamists

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Contents

From exclusion to engagement? 1

A cost-benefit analysis of engagement 2

EU institutions: Hitting a brick wall 5

Member states: Political constraints 7

Trial and error in a diplomatic grey zone 9

Conclusion 12

From exclusion to engagement?

Direct engagement[1] with Islamist political movements has typically been a no-go for European governments. In recent years, however, the limits of the European Union's (EU) stability-oriented approach towards cooperation with authoritarian rulers in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) to defend EU strategic interests in the region have become increasingly obvious. Incumbent MENA rulers' attempts to portray the European choice of interlocutors in the region as either stabilising governments or de-stabilising Islamists are increasingly perceived as short-sighted and contradictory. Recent debates suggest that the search for viable alternative policy approaches is leading to a shift in European policy makers' attitude towards moderate[2] Islamist actors.

There is no shortage of incentives to redirect the course of EU policies in the region. Preventing the radicalisation of Islamist movements in the region is an integral part of the EU's counter-terrorism strategy. It has become common wisdom that substantial political reform will only happen through effective pressure from within. Non-violent, non-revolutionary Islamist parties that aspire to take power by means of a democratic process have therefore often been portrayed as potential reform actors that carry the hopes of a volatile region for genuine democratic development and long-term stability.[3] The moderation of many formerly violent Islamist movements, their integration into national political processes and their increasing ability to turn broad societal backing into electoral successes have turned moderate Islamists into interesting political interlocutors.

Analysis and debates on political Islam have mushroomed in recent years, helping to differentiate Western views on Islamists' goals and means to some degree. Scepticism of Islamist movements' intentions and the potential benefits of engagement with them is widespread. Many observers question moderate Islamists' true democratic commitment and ascribe a hidden totalitarian agenda to them.[4] Some critics argue that foreign governments' open engagement with Islamists would provide the latter with undeserved attention and legitimacy. Some doubt that Europeans can have any substantial impact on Islamists' internal direction. Others argue that the very assumption that Islam serves as the foundation for political identity in the region is mistaken.[5] Meanwhile, others deem the categorisation of Islamist movements on a moderate-radical continuum as misleading and simplistic. Reservations about the substantial 'grey zones'[6] in mainstream Islamist movements' political platforms are broadly shared by both critics and advocates. In spite of all fair scepticism, however, the lack of viable alternatives appears to lead to a growing consensus among analysts that some form of engagement will be necessary.

The time to engage is now. Many argue that advantage should be taken of the relative openness currently shown by moderate Islamists towards the idea of engaging with the West, and especially Europe, in order to reach out to them and establish strategic links. Moreover, removing the stigma that has been attached to political actors with an Islamic reference over the last decades is becoming particularly important as

1 'Engagement' is here understood as any kind of formal or informal direct contact. The degree of intensity and institutionalisation of engagement may vary greatly, ranging from personal conversations over occasional informal encounters up to long-term institutionalised partnerships.

2 This essay refers to 'moderate' Islamists as those parties or movements among the Islamist spectrum that have eschewed or formally renounced violence in the domestic context and aim to achieve their goals within the margins of the political process.

3 See, for example, Hamzawy, Amr, 'The Key to Arab Reform: Moderate Islamists', *Carnegie Policy Brief* 40, August 2005; and Asseburg, Muriel (ed.), 'Moderate Islamists as Reform Actors. Conditions and Programmatic Change', *SWP Research Paper* 4, April 2007.

4 See, for example, Tibi, Bassam, 'Why they can't be democratic', *Journal of Democracy* 19/3, July 2008.

5 Brumberg, Daniel, 'Islam is not the Solution (or the Problem)', *The Washington Quarterly* 29/1: 97–116.

6 For a detailed assessment of such democratic ambiguities, see Brown, Nathan J., Hamzawy, Amr, and Ottaway, Marina, 'Islamist Movements and the Democratic Process in the Arab World: Exploring the Gray Zones', *Carnegie Paper* 67, March 2006.

Islamist parties are increasingly frustrated over their inability to meaningfully influence political realities in their countries via the political process. Overall, it has thus been dawning upon EU capitals that Islamist actors can and should no longer be ignored. But how far has this timid inclination to engage found its way into policies and diplomatic practice? Has there actually been a shift of approach towards a systematic engagement with those who used to be the 'untouchables'[7] of EU relations with the MENA?

Much talk about Western engagement with moderate Islamists stands in contrast to thin evidence. While headlines about EU member states' bilateral contacts with Hamas and Hezbollah dominate, little is known about the systematic engagement with moderate Islamist opposition parties and movements in the rest of the region. The present attempt to contribute to this lacuna assesses neither mainstream Islamism's democratic credentials, nor the potential usefulness of engagement with specific groups. Needless to say, the very political delicacy that has inhibited an open public debate on this issue also makes it difficult to conduct primary research on the topic. Hence, this document aspires no more than to provide a broad and fragmentary overview of the tendencies in European governments' engagement with moderate Islamist groups across the MENA region; the motives and fears behind this engagement; and the channels, levels, policy frameworks and limits in which it typically takes place. Based on this assessment, the conclusion drawn states a number of implications for EU democracy support and de-radicalisation in the MENA.[8]

A cost-benefit analysis of engagement

Not surprisingly, the emerging consensus among analysts in favour of engaging with moderate Islamists is not yet matched by an equally strong consensus among European government representatives. Providing long-term stabilising support for autocratic regimes in the region does not sit easily with actively seeking engagement with the first serious opposition the region has seen in decades. Moreover, a persistent, often ill-defined uneasiness towards Islamist interlocutors in general appears to be stalling the EU's search for a common direction.

Against the background of competing policy priorities in the MENA, individual diplomats keen on engaging with Islamist political actors are finding it difficult to assemble the necessary political support. EU policy circles, aware that some sort of shift of policy will be necessary, currently 'fear the political implications of raising the issue', as many are concerned that it 'would look like a change of position'. The question of when and how to engage with Islamists in the diverse national settings across the MENA is largely being debated on a flexible case-by-case basis. Fearing potential negative implications of bilateral relations with the host governments, most member states have been keen to maintain full decision-making power on this issue at the national level.

The main determining factors of engagement include the degree of European interest in establishing dialogue with a specific group (for example, a rising political force likely to win elections); the diplomatic risk entailed (the group's legal status and overall relation with the regime); the interest in engaging as opposed to other strategic interests that require good relations with the domestic regime (such as regional conflict, anti-terror cooperation, trade,

7 Youngs, Richard, 'Europe's Uncertain Pursuit of Middle East Reform', *Carnegie Paper* 45, June 2004, p. 12.

8 The main findings of this document are based on personal interviews with European diplomats and Islamist politicians in European and MENA capitals, ministries, embassies and Brussels institutions carried out between June and November 2008.

migration, energy); and the possible repercussions engagement may have in the European domestic context (for example, in large Muslim immigrant communities).

EU government relations with Islamist opposition parties and movements in the MENA vary greatly according to different national settings:

- In **Morocco, Jordan, Kuwait and Bahrain**, Islamist movements (such as the Justice and Development Party, PJD; Islamic Action Front, IAF; Islamic Constitutional Movement, ICM; al-Wefaq) are legal, recognised political actors with parliamentary representation. Contacts with European government representatives take place regularly. Thanks to the comparatively liberal environment in these countries, European embassies are also able to make occasional contact with illegal but non-violent Islamist movements (for example, Morocco's Justice and Charity) on a low-key basis, even though this is considerably more sensitive. While the regimes leave no doubt that they do not appreciate such contacts, meetings with illegal moderate groups are not usually prevented, nor do they lead to major diplomatic rows.
- In **Algeria and Egypt**, moderate Islamists also enjoy parliamentary representation, either as members of a legal party (Movement for the Society of Peace, MSP; Movement for National Reform, MRN; Islamic Renaissance Movement) or as independents (Muslim Brotherhood, MB). In Algeria, the MSP forms part of the governing coalition, but sees itself rather as opposition. In both countries, contact is being made with Islamist parliamentarians, even though the regimes do not appreciate this and often give diplomats a hard time. In Algeria, incentives to meet Islamist parliamentarians were often considered too low to risk good relations with government counterparts for the sake of engagement with a co-opted, unpromising Islamist opposition. In Egypt, interest in the Muslim Brotherhood is substantial and most European embassies occasionally engage with MB parliamentarians and, to a lesser degree, with non-parliamentarians.
- In **Tunisia and Syria**, Islamist parties are illegal. Contacts with Islamists at the domestic level are practically impossible due to heavy constraints, surveillance and the political repression of Islamist movements. The regime's confrontational relationship with the outlawed al-Nahda and the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, and the resulting constant surveillance by the secret services, impede any direct domestic contacts. In contrast, encounters between European diplomats and exiled members of outlawed Islamist movements do take place on European soil, outside the direct radar of national security services.
- The most complex, controversial and sensitive cases are, of course, **Palestine and Lebanon**. While both Hamas and Hezbollah do not fulfil the criterion of non-violence here used to describe 'moderates', they cannot be left aside, as any assessment of European engagement with moderate Islamist movements must be seen in the light of the politicised regional context shaped by these two cases. Open engagement with Hezbollah was largely uncontested when the party was in government, and now most EU member states still consider engagement justified and necessary, as Hezbollah is a legal party and an integral part of the Lebanese political landscape. It is acknowledged that 'there will be no solution without them'. EU formal political contacts with Hamas have officially been banned since Hamas was listed as a terrorist group by the EU in 2006. As a non-EU member, Norway is free to engage with Hamas, and is the only European country to have done so openly. Several EU member states have nonetheless maintained contacts with Hamas in spite of the ban, using diplomatic grey areas to bypass the common EU line.

Within this variety of national settings, a number of different motives guide the EU's interest in engaging with particular groups. The motive most frequently mentioned by EU diplomats is obtaining reliable information about the goals, policies, internal debates and trends of the group in question, and its analysis of domestic and regional developments. Aware of notable past Western misreading of trends in the region, it is

understood that European analysis of domestic and regional developments must be based on first-hand information from representative stakeholder sources on the ground. Embassy staff in particular stress the need for direct contact in order to be able to provide a realistic report of the political situation in the country to their capitals. They claimed that the image portrayed of Islamist and other opposition groups in a region where the mass media are controlled by the regimes constituted an insufficient basis for thorough European policy decisions.

Engaging with Islamists in a bid to positively influence domestic developments in anticipation of an upcoming political shift or a democratisation boost may often be stressed by analysts, but it is rarely mentioned as one of the major driving forces behind European engagement. Exerting influence is mostly understood in the sense of improving Europe's image, rather than boosting democratisation. At the same time, the notion of positively influencing the development of Islamist movements through engagement – socialisation – did gain substantial weight in the context of European security and anti-terrorism policies with a view to preventing radicalisation.

Improving their image is also an argument frequently mentioned by Islamist leaders in favour of engagement with European actors. By engaging with the West, they hope to upgrade their image from an undifferentiated and blurred extremist/terrorist notion towards the picture of a moderate, potentially reformist force. By deconstructing what they perceive as prejudices in European public opinion, many moderate Islamist movements ultimately hope to influence European policy-making towards the region to move away from stability-oriented cooperation with authoritarian governments.[9]

At the same time, engagement with Western governments, and at times even with non-governmental organisations (NGOs), can bear a series of risks for Islamist actors domestically. Depending on the varying degrees of harassment that different movements and individuals may expect from their home regime when accused of plotting with foreigners, Islamist politicians are often reluctant to engage directly with foreign officials without the regime's knowledge. Frequently, the latter's reaching out to the West provides the occasion regimes need to target and clamp down on a particular group or individual. There are countless examples of instances in which MENA regimes have tried to prevent European officials from meeting with Islamists, and of Islamists having been punished as a direct consequence of such engagement. Often Islamists reject invitations to Europe or other engagement offers out of fear of domestic clampdowns. The risks for individual Islamists increase with the potential public repercussions of contacts with the West.[10] Outlawed movements such as the MB therefore increasingly 'outsource' these contacts to their European branches, which are well connected and maintain regular contacts, for example, with parliamentarians across Europe. On the domestic front, some troubled Islamist leaders say that they will now prioritise direct engagement with European NGOs and think-tanks, which are somewhat less anathema to the regimes, hoping that this will eventually influence Western public opinion in their favour.[11]

9 For an account of Islamist leaders' views on European foreign policy see Emerson, Michael and Youngs, Richard (eds), *Political Islam and European Foreign Policy. Perspectives from Muslim Democrats of the Mediterranean*, Brussels: FRIDE/CEPS, 2007.

10 For example, Muslim Brothers in Cairo rejected European embassies' offers to meet in the direct run-up to the 8 April 2007 local elections, stating that they did 'not want to give the regime extra reason to clamp down on us'. MB leader Khairat el-Shatir was arrested in 2005 following his publication of an article in *The Guardian* in which he encouraged the West to trust in and engage with the Brotherhood (el-Shatir, 'No need to be afraid of us', *The Guardian*, 23 November 2005).

11 In an attempt to balance engagement interests with a reconciliatory course towards the regime within the margins of the law, the Egyptian MB has often stated that while it would not meet with foreign government representatives in secret, it was open to meeting with foreign officials at any time in the presence of an Egyptian foreign ministry representative. Notwithstanding the fact that the Egyptian authorities are unlikely to allow (let alone attend) such a meeting, the failure of Western governments to ever respond to this offer is being interpreted by Brotherhood members as confirmation of the West's persistent choice of stability over democracy.

EU institutions: Hitting a brick wall

Common EU policy lines regarding engagement with opposition groups in general, and Islamists in particular, are hard to discern. The EU member states' lowest common denominator in this regard is the EU list of terrorist groups and individuals.[12] The inclusion of a group or individual on this list is mentioned by most member state representatives as the one absolute criterion inhibiting any sort of political contacts. Indeed, much of the debate on engagement with Islamists in the MENA revolves around the listing of Hamas as a terrorist group. Incidentally, the vast majority of European diplomats interviewed for this volume judge this to have been a mistake committed too hastily, as it not only paralysed the EU's role as an actor in the Arab-Israeli conflict, but also 'poisoned' the general EU debate on engagement with other Islamist actors.

Engaging with and strengthening non-violent, non-revolutionary Islamist actors in order to prevent radicalisation has become a common notion in European policy discourse. EU policy documents in recent years have been replete with explicit and implicit calls to engage more strongly with moderate Islamist organisations both within and outside Europe. The 2005 EU Strategy for Combating Radicalisation and Recruitment to Terrorism states: 'We need to empower moderate voices by engaging with Muslim organisations and faith groups that reject the distorted version of Islam put forward by al-Qa'ida and others. [...] We must ensure that by our own policies we do not exacerbate division'.[13]

According to Commission staff, the issue of engaging with moderate Islamists 'flashes from many EU documents', but these implicit allusions and vague hints of non-exclusion are 'nothing coherent and too vague to be taken as a clear policy'. A notable exception is the May 2007 European Parliament Resolution on Reforms in the Arab World, drafted by former French Prime Minister Michel Rocard, which recognises that 'the moderation of Islamism depends on both the stability of the institutional framework in which they evolve and the opportunities which the latter offers to influence policy-making'. The Resolution also calls upon Europe 'to give visible political support to [...] those political organisations which promote democracy by non-violent means, excluding sectarian, fundamentalist and extremist nationalist forces but including, where appropriate, secular actors and moderate Islamists [...] whom Europe has encouraged to participate in the democratic process, thus striking a balance between culture-based perceptions and political pragmatism'.[14]

However, implementation of such demands for a proactive inclusion of Islamists has been negligible. Engagement has been undertaken by EU member states mostly on a decidedly informal, bilateral, low-key and ad-hoc basis. There is no common EU policy line on engagement with moderate Islamist interlocutors in a general sense. In early 2006, following on the heels of the elections in Palestine, an *ad hoc* 'Task Force on Political Islamism' was set up in the Directorate General for External Relations in the European Commission. The *ad hoc* Task Force aims to overcome the EU's lack of information on Islamism worldwide. Since 2007, the Task Force also organises internal training programmes on Islamism, which have now become part of the Commission's mainstream training. Moreover, some efforts have been made in the Council to foster an EU consensus regarding definitions and categories (for example, adopting a common 'lexicon' of relevant terminology and 'mapping' Islamist movements).

The Commission Task Force drafted a discussion paper arguing in favour of EU and member states'

12 The EU list of persons, groups and entities subject to specific measures to combat terrorism, last updated by EU Council Common Position 2008/586/CFSP of 15 July 2008.

13 Council of the European Union, *The European Union Strategy for Combating Radicalisation and Recruitment to Terrorism* (14781/1/05 REV 1), Brussels, 24 November 2005, p. 4.

14 European Parliament, *Resolution on reforms in the Arab World: What strategy should the European Union adopt?*, [2006/2172(INI)], 10 May 2007.

engagement with non-violent, non-revolutionary Islamist groups, which was eventually submitted to the Council and External Relations Commissioner Ferrero-Waldner for her consideration. According to one civil servant, one of the main aims of the paper is to 'uncramp' relations with these groups by agreeing on a set of general principles of action. The paper was well-received by the Commissioner, who even suggested developing specific staff capacities in the Commission, especially with a view to preparing for the launch of the new External Action Service. However, the Commission failed to gain the necessary support from member states for a common approach, some of which showed 'quick opposition' to the paper. Several adjusted and modified versions of the paper likewise failed to get the necessary support, and the idea of developing a common EU line on engagement with Islamists ended up on the backburner for the time being.

Commission and Council Secretariat staff report an 'emotionally charged debate' and 'a huge amount of ignorance and prejudices' both within the Commission and among member state representatives, many of whom have 'no differentiated views on Islamism' (with one of the newer member state representatives reportedly comparing the rise of Islamism at large with the totalitarian rules of Hitler and Stalin). Some advocates of the common approach felt they had 'hit a brick wall' in their efforts to lobby for a consensus on this matter. They also attribute this failure to the EU's stance on Hamas after the Palestinian elections, which has 'strongly reinforced sensitivities' and 'paralysed the discussion on this issue'.

Among the opponents of the common approach, a Portuguese diplomat voiced the concern that regardless of the Islamist issue, there could be 'no general policy regulating opposition contacts that fits all'. A French representative stressed that it was not a question of creating special conditions for Islamists, but of including them 'just like all other representative societal groups', and therefore a particular 'Islamist strategy' was not only unnecessary, but would also lead to an unhealthy exposure of a particular group defined by a religious reference. Moreover, the whole initiative had been inspired partly by 'pressure from the US government', which had 'always wanted us to engage with the Muslim Brotherhood'. According to a Swedish diplomat, Swedish scepticism is rooted in the conviction that 'all that is not forbidden should be allowed', and that common principles on an EU level would create unnecessary additional self-restricting regulations to the detriment of diplomatic flexibility. Moreover, the scope and depth of engagement also depends on the priorities and financial resources of each member state. A German diplomat explained that the idea of adopting common principles on how to approach Islamists was, from the German point of view, 'completely beside the point', as dealing with these issues on a bilateral level was both diplomatically safer and more efficient. Moreover, any common EU initiative was likely to appear as an 'attempt to bring the good to the Islamic world', and would be 'a sure way of immediately turning all the governments of the region against us'.

As far as EU technical and financial cooperation with Islamist organisations is concerned, Commission staff assure that there is no explicit EU provision that prohibited channelling aid to Islamist groups. Islamist civil society funding is said to be determined according to 'their interest with us'. In practice, however, while working-level contacts are reported to be frequent, parties and civil society organisations with an Islamist leaning are *de facto* mostly excluded from formalised involvement in EU aid and cooperation programmes.[15] On the whole, neither the Barcelona Process nor the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) have been advancing engagement with moderate Islamists. This is not expected to change under the forthcoming Union for the Mediterranean.

The European Parliament (EP) has always had quite a different approach. As it is subject to less scrutiny from both the EU and MENA governments' sensitivities, the EP has a long history of direct engagement with

15 Boubekeur, Amel, and Amghar, Samir, 'Islamist Parties in the Maghreb and their Links with the EU: Mutual Influences and the Dynamics of Democratisation', *EuroMeSCo paper* 55, October 2006, p. 21.

Islamist political actors. Parliamentary delegations meet Islamist parliamentarians in inter-parliamentary exchange and visiting programmes across the region, and EP resolutions explicitly advocate a proactive, open engagement with MENA opposition, including moderate Islamists. Similar ties also exist with a number of national European parliaments (such as the German-Egyptian parliamentary group). Unfortunately, the EP's more pro-active approach towards and experience with Islamist political actors goes relatively unnoticed and has so far failed to influence European governments' policies meaningfully.

Member states: Political constraints

European governments' fundamental policy dilemma in the MENA is the widespread perception of a permanent contradiction between the long-term development agenda, on the one hand, and the short-term security and trade agendas, on the other. Including all relevant societal actors for the sake of broad participation and de-radicalisation, and maintaining smooth relations with MENA governments, are two lines of action EU governments are having trouble reconciling. The European public and even government institutions are also severely split over the issue. Several civil servants point to the 'unpopularity' of advocating engagement with Islamists in their ministries. A Dutch diplomat remarked that by engaging with Islamists 'you don't get popular', and where engagement was not officially forbidden, it was 'definitely not encouraged'. Diplomats from several member states pointed to substantial internal obstacles and even feared personal career disadvantages. Internal sensitivities in European ministries are largely ascribed to undifferentiated views on Islamism and the fear of harsh reactions on the part of domestic constituencies. One diplomat noted that 'rationality has nothing to do with it', and concluded that the entire political environment in Europe was 'not conducive to such a dialogue'.

It is therefore not surprising that during interviews, most European government interlocutors ask not to be quoted on a personally attributable basis, and often display reluctance and insecurity regarding the information they are allowed to reveal. In addition to fear of career disadvantages, lack of capacities, as well as an inability to communicate fluently in Arabic, are also mentioned as common thresholds inhibiting diplomats from pro-actively seeking dialogue with Islamists. On several occasions, diplomats (including French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner) sought to relativise engagement with controversial groups through apologetic remarks ('we are not the only ones'). Insecurity and controversy within ministries, and even within the very units dealing with engagement, is at times considerable. One European diplomat working on dialogue with the Islamic world stated that he saw 'no need for a position like mine' as dialogue was 'dangerous' and 'leading nowhere', and that he was therefore 'trying to self-destroy my function'.

In a few instances, diplomats deliberately leaked information about confidential policy shifts towards certain Islamist groups in an attempt to prevent their government from taking actions that they personally disapproved of. In 2005–6, a British Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) official leaked to the press a number of secret internal memos that advocated stronger UK engagement with the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood – a policy shift reportedly approved by then foreign secretary Jack Straw. The leaks led to a number of very critical articles in the *New Statesman* and the *Observer*, and a controversial debate about 'the British state's flirtation with radical Islamism'.[16] The FCO whistleblower later claimed he had leaked the documents in order to 'expose dangerous government policy', and that his own unease was shared by many others in the FCO.

16 Bright, Martin, 'When Progressives Treat with Reactionaries: the British State's flirtation with radical Islamism', *Policy Exchange*, July 2006.

European officials also emphasise the role of Muslim immigrant communities in Europe as a major factor linking engagement with Islamists abroad to the domestic context. A French representative even identified the different immigrant communities in EU member states as the one main factor conditioning the way each EU member state dealt with Islamist movements abroad. Surely, France, the UK and Germany, the EU states with the largest MENA immigrant communities, are also among the countries that most pro-actively approach the issue of engagement.

The aftermath of 9/11, and the 2004 Madrid and 2005 London bombings, have seen several European governments set up specific units/posts with proper human and/or financial resources in their foreign or development ministries and embassies. Those new units were aimed at enhancing dialogue and cooperation between the West and the Islamic or Arab world, with varying scope, approaches and priorities. Institutions included a division for 'Dialogue with the Predominantly Islamic World' in the German Foreign Office (since 2002); an Adviser for the Relations with the Islamic World at the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2002); an Ambassador-at-Large for Relations with the Islamic World at the Spanish Ministry for Foreign Affairs and Cooperation (2006); and a unit for 'Engaging with the Muslim World' in the UK (that was tellingly merged into the anti-terrorism department in 2007). Moreover, specific 'Islam Observers' were placed at 25 German embassies around the world (2002); and regional public diplomacy officers for the Arab World/MENA were located at the Dutch (2008) and British Embassies in Cairo, respectively. In addition to specific institutions, a number of special policy initiatives aimed at enhancing dialogue and understanding, as well as political cooperation and cultural/social exchange between Europe and the Muslim world, were set up (including the Alliance of Civilisations initiated by Spain, and the Swiss-led Montreux Initiative).

The French Ministry of Foreign Affairs does not have a specific unit for engaging with Islamists, but staff of the Quai d'Orsay's semi-independent policy planning unit are reported to have a greater margin of manoeuvre with regard to contacts. Notably, unlike similar posts in other member states, the mandate of the French *Conseiller pour les Affaires Religieuses* is strictly limited to religious affairs and clearly separated from political dialogue activities with Islamists. The UK, eager to prevent radicalisation against the background of its military engagement in Iraq, is the European country that most systematically links external and internal dimensions of engaging with Islamists via an integrated inter-ministerial approach with a clear security/anti-terrorism focus. The UK model is widely seen by other member states as a good example institutionally, as its integrated inter-ministerial approach is seen to maximise synergies between the internal and external dimensions of political Islam. At the same time, the British unequivocal security/anti-terror focus is also criticised for reinforcing simplistic perceptions equalling Islamism with terrorism. While the security dimension is decisive in all national policies, some European countries approach the issue from a more openly displayed security focus that directly links Islam or Islamism with anti-terrorism measures (UK, Switzerland). Others set a stronger focus on inter-civilisational dialogue in a broader sense, including from a long-term democratic development angle, and draw clearer institutional lines between security and inter-civilisational dialogue units (Germany, Spain). Yet others do not appear to engage much at all (smaller and Eastern European member states). Sweden and Norway consider themselves particularly suited to engaging in dialogue activities owing to their lack of negative historic baggage in the region.

An overarching theme affecting Europe's relations with Islamists is the former's prevailing religious and/or culturalist perceptions of Islamism. European political activities, institutions and policy documents aimed at engaging with Islamist political actors are often undertaken under the heading of interfaith, inter-civilisational or intercultural dialogue. France, with its distinctive laic heritage, is a notable exception in this

regard. Germany, by contrast, has a unit for 'Dialogue with the Islamic World' in the German Foreign Office financed by the Ministry's culture budget line, even though – as German diplomats admit – the unit's activities and objectives are of a political rather than cultural nature. Several European diplomats in charge of dialogue urged that the decidedly political engagement issue should not be mistaken for a religious matter ('we are not here to bring rabbis, monks and imams together'). This concern is widely shared by moderate Islamist politicians who complain about being invited to talk about Islam instead of pressing societal problems in the MENA.

There are some concerns among EU diplomats that the current engagement debate is directed towards 'engagement for its own sake'. Many emphasise that dialogue with Islamists is not a goal in itself, but must be a means to achieve clear strategic objectives. Another common notion across European ministries and EU institutions is that the challenge is not engagement with Islamists as a specific target group, but rather their inclusion in dialogue activities and civil society initiatives as currently undertaken with secular societal groups. They stress the need to 'de-essentialise Islamism', that is, not to replace negative discrimination by positive discrimination or exposure, but to include all representative groups in regular activities, regardless of their religious or secular references. Even those who are critical of enhanced direct engagement stress the need for the EU to 'actively demonstrate that there is no rejection of any political actors'.

Trial and error in a diplomatic grey zone

Among European governments, clear criteria for the choice of permissive interlocutors are rare. Beyond the limits of the EU terror list as the only set criteria, there is agreement that engagement with groups or individuals that have not renounced violence as a means of action is taboo. However, there are differences as to whether that includes implicit endorsement of violence or armed resistance against foreign occupation. In a similar vein, groups linked to terrorist groups/activities are considered off-limit, although here again, individual member states are coming to very different conclusions as to what that means in practice. There is broad consensus that engagement with individuals in an important public office, especially elected MPs, is permissible and desirable, even though not all EU member states take advantage of this.

There is no general consensus on engagement with moderate Islamist actors who do not hold a public office, in particular with representatives of outlawed parties and organisations. All interlocutors emphasise the difficulties in engaging with outlawed groups. While the criterion of legality is mentioned by some member states as a precondition for engagement, for others this does not constitute an obstacle *per se*, but rather reduces the number of channels through which engagement can take place.

Formal political contacts with opposition Islamist movements and individuals at ministry- or ambassador-level are rare exceptions. The level at which contacts are deemed appropriate largely depends on the respective group's legal situation and its degree of integration into political institutions. The great majority of direct contacts between EU government representatives and moderate Islamists take place in the large diplomatic grey area of active and passive informal contacts. Indirect contacts via

intermediaries are unproblematic and frequent in most settings, but lack the advantages of first-hand engagement. Striking the balance between first-hand insights and diplomatic provocation is a challenging tightrope walk for diplomats, at times entailing substantial diplomatic and personal risk. Maintaining engagement on a low profile is widely considered not only as a matter of precaution but also of efficiency, as the success of engagement with many groups depends heavily on discretion.

Engagement with Islamist parties in power largely follows the pre-defined channels and terms of international diplomacy (and is therefore not the focus of this document). When engaging with Islamists in opposition, the democratic legitimacy of an elected deputy provides foreign governments with a conveniently given channel for engagement, making it easier to justify contacts before the country's authorities. Moreover, elected MP's legitimacy and official policy-making role further raise the level of EU interest in engaging with them. But even in the case of elected parliamentarians, contacts are often not appreciated by the regime, so engagement must often take place above all informally and in the context of larger meetings involving other parties and factions as well. Several embassy staff expressed doubts that a limitation to contacts with parliamentarians was enough to provide a realistic picture of the internal developments of certain Islamist movements, as depending on the electoral framework, parliamentarians elected by their local constituencies are not necessarily key figures in the higher leadership of their party/movement.

The most politically delicate – and least assessed – cases are those where Islamists have no parliamentary representation, so there is no pre-defined formal channel for foreign diplomats to approach them. The legal status and, more importantly, the *de facto* quality of the group's relations with the regime, are decisive in determining the diplomatic risk entailed in engagement. In this context, EU diplomats typically stress the primacy of inter-governmental relations. Many officials claim that engagement with Islamist opposition is underscored by the same conditions and rules as engagement with other opposition groups. Evidence from the MENA region, however, shows that such claims are an expression of wishful thinking rather than a reflection of political realities.

With a few exceptions, most European capitals do not give any explicit written directives to their embassies as to which groups they are allowed to meet and under which conditions. In most cases this decision is left to the Ambassador and/or the personal discretion of the political embassy staff. Likewise, most dialogue staff at the foreign ministries in Europe do not have clearly outlined mandates or directives, leaving most activities to the 'common sense' and priorities of the diplomats in charge. The absence of too rigid, technocratic policy directives is widely seen as crucial to guarantee the necessary flexibility of action on the ground. However, the relative absence of clear directives from above on a matter as politically sensitive as engagement with Islamist organisations is a striking feature across many EU member states and institutions, often to the detriment of institutionalisation, policy coherence and the formation of strategic relationships.

In a few cases, European capitals gave direct instructions to embassies not to engage with a specific group or with Islamists in general. After creating a special division for dialogue with the Islamic world in Berlin in 2002, the German Foreign Office gave directions to the embassies not to enter into direct contact with Islamists under any circumstance. In the following years, German diplomats say, reports from the Embassies made clear to those in charge in Berlin that differentiated, reliable reporting about the political situation in the region was impossible without the option of entering into direct contact with all the important social and political actors. In consequence, the directive was loosened, allowing direct contact in principle but 'without shouting it from the rooftops'.

Embassy receptions and similar social occasions are often considered a convenient opportunity by both sides to meet under relatively low diplomatic risk. Embassy staff report how they are at times visiting

'otherwise uninteresting conferences' at which they know Islamists will be present, 'taking advantage of the coffee breaks' in order to meet members of outlawed groups in particular. However, not even these meetings are free of diplomatic risk, as demonstrated by a number of incidents.[17]

In order to evaluate the diplomatic risk involved in meeting a particular individual, diplomats stress the importance of labels. For example, parliamentarians can be met in their capacity as elected officials, but not necessarily as party representatives. While there is little objection to meeting elected Islamist parliamentarians even if their party in itself was banned, it is considered essential to meet individuals in their capacity as parliamentarians only. It is also considered important to avoid singling out their faction among other parliamentary factions when organising larger meetings or conferences. More broadly speaking, it is deemed preferable to approach selected individuals in their personal or professional capacity (such as judges, lawyers, bloggers, human rights activists), rather than the party/movement as an institution.

In some countries, meeting Islamists in their capacity as party representatives is not possible at all, while in others, it is only feasible in the context of conferences or other public meetings that equally involve representatives of other parties. Conversely, diplomats meeting with members of controversial Islamist groups often claim to have done so in a private or non-diplomatic professional capacity. Where bilateral meetings are agreed, embassies ensure that these take place at the lowest level of diplomatic hierarchy possible. Direct contacts on an ambassador level, even informal, are rare exceptions likely to lead to diplomatic difficulties following publication in the media.

In some delicate cases, EU governments sent (or did not object to) semi-official intermediaries/stooges to hold the talks. Most prominently, this happened in the Palestinian context when the EU saw itself deprived of its political role in the Arab-Israeli conflict after having barred itself from establishing political contacts with Hamas in 2006. Eventually, several European governments looked for ways to bypass the engagement ban without risking a political upsurge. Among EU member states, Sweden and the UK were reported to have been the first to resume talks *de facto* via intermediaries. France got in the headlines in spring 2008 when a retired French ambassador was reported to have had direct contact with leading Hamas officials, and *Le Figaro* headlined 'The French are talking to Hamas'. French Minister of Foreign Affairs Bernard Kouchner said in a somewhat ambiguous reaction that these had not been official political contacts, as the retired ambassador did not represent the French government. At the same time, he defended the step, saying the encounters were 'not relations; they are contacts', and that France 'must be able to talk if we want to play a role'.[18]

In many instances, European ministries (directly or indirectly via non-governmental intermediaries) invite Islamists to conferences, study tours or meetings in their European capitals. Several ministries organise seminars on or linked to the topic of moderate Islamism in their capitals, also inviting representatives of moderate Islamist parties as participants.[19] EU governments also frequently fund NGOs and political party foundations that engage directly with Islamists. On numerous occasions, European NGOs and think-tanks have organised seminars and other fora involving European MPs, government representatives and moderate Islamists, both in the MENA countries and in Europe. Indeed, some analysts recommend that the German party foundations, which tend to complement

17 On one occasion, the UK Deputy Head of Mission in Cairo invited Muslim Brotherhood parliamentarians among many other guests to a reception at his home, and the MB MPs themselves leaked this to the press, leading to frictions with the Egyptian authorities.

18 Erlanger, Steven, 'France Admits Contacts with Hamas', *New York Times*, 20 May 2008.

19 The Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs reportedly organised (via a US-based NGO) a series of closed dialogue meetings involving a set group of participants, including representatives of different Islamist groups, at The Hague. The meetings took place on a regular basis and were aimed at exchanging information and increasing mutual understanding. According to participants, eventually the dialogue meetings 'bled to death' when 'everything had been said', not least because some of the European funders pulled out, and US funds could not be used due to the moral objections of some group members.

the German authorities by engaging in more politically delicate fields, should play a key role in engaging Islamists in the MENA without risking major diplomatic trouble.[20]

Conclusion

Taking into account that there is limited value in discussing 'engagement with Islamists' on an abstract regional level, as well as the limited preparedness of European governments to provide information on this issue, a number of findings can be drawn out:

Consensus on principle, clash on terms and conditions. In spite of widespread reservations regarding the democratic bona fide of certain groups and the impact that is to be expected from engagement, there is a sense among EU member states that some form of greater strategic engagement with moderate Islamists in the MENA will be unavoidable. However, the how, when, with whom and why remain matters of great controversy unlikely to be solved in the near future. This controversy has led to a lowest-common-denominator policy at the EU level that touches on the region's hotspots and is likely to remain reactive rather than preventive. Such policies will lead to anything but de-radicalisation.

Inclusion remains theory. Despite frequent abstract declarations of intentions, a development of strategic ties with moderate Islamist groups in the MENA via systematic contacts has not yet taken place. Member states, keen to maintain full sovereignty on this issue, have largely been engaging in bilateral, informal low-key contacts on an *ad hoc* basis. Systematic and formal engagement is the exception rather than the rule, and there is hardly any evidence of open institutionalised partnerships, let alone funding. The timid trend towards an inclusion of all relevant societal actors at the discourse level has not yet found its way into policies and political practice.

Emotions replace expertise. While the substantial intellectual work and debate on political Islam helped to ease some of the prejudices and simplistic views on Islamist activism, the level of both expertise and rational debate on this issue is still frighteningly low, even in European government institutions. The lack of direct contacts and reliance on second-hand information go hand in hand with persistent monolithic views on Islamism. Many European high-level decision makers have never personally met and exchanged views with a representative of an Islamist party. Decisive for this are the strong repercussions that such actions would have among European electorates, themselves afflicted by the fear-factor of the post 9/11 era that still too often equates Islamism with terrorism.

Stigma of Hamas paralyses debate. The EU's clumsy response to the rise of Hamas in the Palestinian Territories has turned into a stigma of European governments' inability to respond adequately and coherently to the rise of Islamist political actors in the region.

Religious & culturalist perceptions of Islamism. Surprisingly, the EU – itself among the strongest advocates of secular politics – responds to the rise of faith-based politics in the MENA with an ill-defined blur of religion, culture and politics in institutions, policies, and discourse. Difficulties in formulating coherent policies are greatest where Islamism is understood as a religious rather than a political phenomenon. While in some instances the blur of religious, cultural and political notions may be designed purposefully to provide diplomatic cover, in many other cases it raises questions about the knowledge, political intentions and objectives underlying member states' policies, and substantially exacerbates a rational European debate about engagement.

Missing a window of opportunity? Moderate Islamists in the MENA will continue to be dangerously isolated and democracy support policies will carry on lacking

[20] But even the party foundations are not immune to political frictions. For example, a conference held by the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung in Beirut, organised in cooperation with a local think-tank associated with Hezbollah, and which included the participation of Hezbollah members, caused a major diplomatic uproar.

credibility as long as EU governments are not willing to stand up to their authoritarian MENA counterparts. If anything, peace and democratisation by engagement and integration have been a proven strength of EU foreign policy. It is very hard to understand why the EU fails to apply this strength in its relations with Islamist movements, whose peaceful, democratic development is so crucial for both the MENA's and the EU's future.

Contributing to re-radicalisation? European policies have been advocating the integration of Islamist movements into the political process as a means of moderation and de-radicalisation. But to the degree that political participation of Muslim democrats in set authoritarian frameworks does not pay off, the perceived uselessness of political contestation is likely to empower radical currents who advocate a reversal of the moderation of positions and strategies. Processes of re-radicalisation, it is widely argued, have already begun. The EU must shift its policy towards engaging with, encouraging and empowering moderate Islamists in order to prevent an undermining and reversal of the processes of moderation and political integration that it has itself been encouraging. If the EU fails to make the shift towards inclusion of all relevant actors, it will only reinforce the impression that its policies towards the MENA are actually about containing both Islamism and political change.

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Direct engagement with Islamist political movements in the Middle East and North Africa has typically been a no-go for European governments. In recent years, however, the limits of sole cooperation with authoritarian rulers in the region have become increasingly obvious. European policy-makers have started to realise that they must widen their spectrum of interlocutors if their policies are not to lose track of the realities on the ground. In spite of widespread reservations regarding the democratic credentials of certain groups, there is a sense among EU member states that the inclusion of all relevant societal actors, and especially some form of greater strategic engagement with moderate Islamists, will be unavoidable.

Non-violent, non-revolutionary Islamist parties that aspire to take power by means of a democratic process have often been portrayed as potential reform actors that carry the hopes of a volatile region for genuine democratic development and long-term stability. In spite of this changing perspective on moderate Islamists, the EU and most member states maintain their policy of excluding all organisations with an Islamist leaning from political dialogue, cooperation and funding activities. In the present study, a survey among EU government representatives and Islamist politicians on their ties and contacts to date comes to conclude that the how, when, with whom and why of engagement with Islamist actors in general remain matters of great controversy among EU governments. This controversy has led to a lowest-common-denominator policy on the EU level that touches on the region's hotspots and is likely to remain reactive rather than preventive.

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