Reform in the Arab world: what strategy should the EU follow?

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The committee adopted its own-initiative report by Michel ROCARD (PES, FR) on reforms in the Arab world and what strategy the European Union should adopt. The report called for a substantial improvement in the relationship between the EU and the Arab world and for more reforms in sectors such as economics, politics and human rights in the Arab countries.

The committee began by stating its belief that "the feeling of impotence which underlies the 'Arab malaise' can be overcome through a renewed partnership based on understanding, mutual confidence, respect for social and cultural practices and credibility". It emphasised that the Westernisation of Arab societies "is not the most appropriate route to this end". MEPs welcomed the Commission's 2006 communication on strengthening the European Neighbourhood Policy, which they saw as a crucial tool in promoting reform in the EU's southern and Eastern neighbours. The partnership between the EU and the Arab world as a whole should be given a fresh boost, "while targeting very specific cooperation sectors and acting in tandem with existing political structures such as the Arab League and the Gulf Cooperation Council".

Stressing that the weakness of the reform process in the Arab world was also due to the difficulties and controversies between some of the Arab countries, the report called on the EU to make every effort to facilitate the political and economic integration of these countries. It stresed that, "in order to be really influential, the EU should not demonstrate any feeling of superiority or the impression of giving lessons, but should rather make the Euro-Arab dialogue a true dialogue between equals".

The Arab countries, for their part, were urged to combat impunity wherever it occurs, to set up mechanisms of transitional justice and to ensure that the victims of serious human rights violations receive justice and that those responsible are held to account. MEPs also said that efforts to open fresh negotiations with the Arab world should not include persons, organisations and states which condone terrorist activities and deny the State of Israel's legal right to exist. However, they noted that Europe is often viewed as being partisan in the Israeli-Arab conflict, and that any deepening of Euro-Arab relations would depend on "the energy and talent which Europe brings to bear in reconciling its historic duties and responsibilities towards the State of Israel and the Jewish people with its responsibilities to play a more active and effective role by guaranteeing greater respect for international and humanitarian law, so as to achieve a lasting settlement of the conflict, in particular by creating a Palestinian state existing side by side, in peace and security, with the State of Israel".

In view of the poor democratic, economic and social performance of certain Arab governments, the report called for Europe to give "visible political support" to the actors in civil society, in associations and in religious life, and in particular to those political organisations which promote democracy by non-violent means, excluding sectarian forces but including where appropriate moderate Islamist and secular actors whom Europe has encouraged to participate in the democratic process, "thus striking a balance between culture-based perceptions and political pragmatism".

MEPs noted, however, that with regard to political reforms and the progress of democracy, the situations in the Arab world are very diverse and that "it is therefore not appropriate to establish uniform models". They stressed that supporting the development of civil society and respect for fundamental rights, particularly those relating to freedom of expression and religion, must not be confused with the choice of

regime nor with the procedures for choosing leaders. And they noted that "the will of the people, in its various forms, may differ from what is accepted in Europe" and that any attempt to align it with European models by force may accordingly prove counterproductive.

Among its other recommendations, the committee called on the Commission to give more encouragement in the Arab world to respect for the principle of the rule of law and the legal reform movement, "which should be undertaken with due regard for the values deriving from the universal system of human rights". Lastly, while acknowledging that the fight against terrorism was an important aspect of the Euro-Arab relationship, the report stressed that it was vital that this should not "overshadow or hold back a host of other topics of common interest". The Commission was therefore urged to promote exchanges of students, teachers, academics and researches between European and Arab countries and to facilitate such exchanges through an adapted and more flexible visa regime.