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

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The European Parliament adopted a resolution based on the own-initiative report drafted by Michel **ROCARD** (PES, FR) on reforms in the Arab world and what strategy the European Union should adopt. Parliament stated its conviction that Arab identity was by no means incompatible with the notion of modernity or with the initiation of serious reforms. It considered that the feeling of impotence which underlaythe "Arab malaise" could be overcome through a renewed partnership based on understanding, mutual confidence, respect for social and cultural practices and credibility. The westernisation of Arab societies was not the most appropriate route to this end and t the notions of democracy, human rights and the rule of law were fundamental and universal values which innumerable Muslim authorities and governments had declared to be compatible with Islam. Parliament welcomed the Commission's 2006 communication on strengthening the European Neighbourhood Policy, which it regarded as a crucial tool in promoting reform in the EU's southern and eastern neighbours. However, it expressed disappointment at the proposed amount of the Governance Facility, which should be increased in size in order to ensure effectiveness.

In view of the inherent limitations of the bilateral, ad hoc strategies pursued by the EU towards its partner countries over the last few decades, Parliament felt that a fresh boost should be given to the partnership between the EU and its Member States and the Arab world as a whole, while acting in tandem with existing political structures such as the League of Arab States and the Gulf Cooperation Council. Engagement with civil society organisations and reform movements at the regional level should be part of this effort, as well as specific cooperation with those political organisations which promote democracy by non-violent means.

Parliament stressed that the weakness of the reform process in the Arab world was also due to the difficulties and the controversies between some of the Arab countries. The EU should make every effort to facilitate the political and economic integration of the Arab countries. 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.

Parliament called on Arab countries to combat impunity wherever it occurred and to set up mechanisms of transitional justice in order to ensure that the victims of serious human rights violations receive justice. It called on the EU and its Member States to develop balanced relations with the countries in the region, pointing out that unilaterally supporting and condemning certain states more than others could result in polarisation and risked further complicating the already very complicated situation in the Arab world. 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.

Any deepening of Euro-Arab relations would depend on the energy and talent which Europe brought to bear in reconciling its historic duties towards the State of Israel and the Jewish people with its responsibilities to play a more active role by guaranteeing greater respect for international law, so as to achieve a lasting settlement of the conflict, in particular by creating a democratic Palestinian state existing side by side, in peace and security, with the State of Israel. Parliament welcomed the Saudi peace initiative unanimously approved on 28 March 2007 at the League of Arab States summit in Riyadh.

Europe must 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,

including secular actors and moderate Islamists- in particular secular Islamists, whom Europe has encouraged to participate in the democratic process, "thus striking a balance between culture-based perceptions and political pragmatism". With regard to political reforms and the progress of democracy, the situations in the Arab world were very diverse and it was therefore not appropriate to establish uniform models.

Parliament went on to stress that respect for fundamental rights, particularly those relating to freedom of expression and religion, must not be confused with the choice of regime or with the procedures for choosing leaders. It noted that the will of the people, in its various forms, might differ from what is accepted in Europe, and that any attempt to align it with European models by force might accordingly prove counter-productive. In order for change to be legitimate, it must be adopted by the peoples concerned. The Commission was asked to give more encouragement in the Arab world to respect for the principle of the rule of law and the legal reform movement. This should involve a political reform which seeks to legalise the action of opposition movements on the basis of the existing institutions in line with the action plans under the European Neighbourhood Policy and the decisions taken in the context of the Barcelona Process.

Parliament noted the importance of new media in the dissemination of democratic values in the Arab world and emphasised the need to start broadcasting Euronews programmes in Arabic and Farsi. It called for encouraging exchanges of students, teachers, academics and researchers between the EU and Arab countries, and the establishment of research centres in the EU for the purposes of cultural exchange and comparative studies between Arab and European countries. The Commission should use all means to encourage an ambitious publishing policy with a view to developing the publication and translation of scientific and literary works at prices that are accessible to everyone.