

# EuroArab Forum

PROMOTING INNOVATIVE AND INVENTIVE IDEAS

## Event Report

### “Political parties in the Arab world: Clubs to preserve power or dynamic forces of change?”

Wednesday, October 28<sup>th</sup>, 2009, 20:00-21:30h  
Arthur's Restaurant (Rue de Trèves 26) – Brussels

#### Speakers:

*Yonnec Polet*, Foreign Policy Coordinator of the Party of European Socialists  
*Johan Vrints*, Co-Founder of the Euro-Arab Forum

#### Chair:

*Alex Geiger*, Co-Founder of the Euro-Arab Forum



## I. Prologue

Political parties in the Arab world seldom fit into the right-left scheme of Western political system. Rather than being perceived as interest groups that lobby for political change, they are often seen in the West as loyal blocks safeguarding the power of a political leader or a dynasty. But how do political parties (per)form in the Arab world? How can Western governments engage with them in ideological terms? What difficulties do European parties face in collaborating with Arab political parties?

To discuss these questions and to give an example of a political grouping's cooperation with Arab parties, the Euro-Arab Forum (EAF) was pleased to invite *Yonnec Polet*, Foreign Policy Coordinator of the Party of European Socialists (PES). Yonnec is a Belgian national who was elected twice (1999-2003) as Secretary General of ECOSY, the youth organization of the PES. He has been working at the PES for five years.

In order to set the stage and introduce the spectrum of Arab parties already existing in the Middle East, we also asked *Johan Vrints*, co-founder of the EuroArab Forum, to give an opening remark on parties in Jordan and Egypt. Johan holds an M.A. in Modern Middle Eastern History and Politics from KUL (Catholic University of Leuven). He studied Arabic language and Middle Eastern history in several universities in Jordan and Egypt and works now for the Belgian NGO "Kerkwerk Multicultureel Samenleven".

## II. Introduction

Setting the frame in which to discuss the topic, Johan grouped Arab political systems into three categories: a) countries where political parties are forbidden/ with no political parties; b) countries with a single party system; and c) countries with a ruling party and several small opposition parties. Jordan and Egypt, to which applies the third category, are not only interesting because of their comparatively dynamic system of "emerging" political parties, but also because they both have signed peace agreements with Israel and have been active participants in the 'Euro-Med Club' since 1995 through the EMP, the ENP and most recently the UfM. They are thus involved in several networks where they regularly deal with European partners.

While most Arab countries are still stuck in the 1960s when it comes to political parties, we see

more and more opposition groups forming, however with varying degrees of acceptance and efficiency. Though a limited number of opposition parties does exist, it is still difficult for them to get recognition by the governments or to convince people that the government will not bother them if they join.

In Egypt, for instance, where most political power still emanates from the ruling class and business people, opposition voices have been heard all throughout the modern history of the country. At first, there were the old liberal parties like *Wafd* which tried to challenge both the king and the British mandate in the 20s and 30s of last century. Then there was the *Nassirist* party, which emerged in the era of Arab nationalism in the 60s. In recent years, due to U.S. pressure for reform, we saw reformist parties arise like *al-Ghad* and *Karama*. As the last group, there are a number of other opposition groups, which still do not have the ability to form a party (because of legal restrictions). The main example of opposition politics is the Islamic Brotherhood which originates in Egypt since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. They have to field candidates as independents since they are not allowed to organize themselves as an official party.

In Jordan there exists the Islamic brotherhood as well. It performed relatively well in parliamentary elections despite all oppressive regulations put against it. However, the King remains the final decision-maker.

So even when opposition parties exist, they never can effectively challenge the ruling class.

## III. Keynote speech

Yonnec started by expressing his regret for the fact that in the past decade Euro-Arab dialogue has actually collapsed at the highest levels. Nevertheless, realising the importance of dialogue with parliamentarians and parties in the Arab world, the PES has since a few years been building up relations with parties in the Arab world. The PES intends to influence EU politics in the Middle East and gathers PES ministers, parliamentarians and party representatives for meetings and conferences. In line with these efforts the PES, while working within the general framework of socialist parties, has developed bilateral relations with socialist Arab parties to cooperate with them on numerous issues. They also organise conferences, delegations and policy papers at the multilateral level.

Our speaker listed the Socialist International member parties the MENA region: the USFP in Morocco; FFS in Algeria; FTDL and RCD in Tunisia; the NDP in Egypt; the PSP in Lebanon; and Fatah and Al-Mubadara in the Palestinian Territories. PES is thus focussing on socialist and social democratic parties.

International Liberal got very few members and International Democratic Union (conservatives) none in the region!

We must keep in mind the Arab world is neither one piece nor homogeneous, and there are many specificities spanning the region. Also political regimes are different in each country. There are democracies or facade-democracies, authoritarian, totalitarian and theocratic regimes. In seven Arab countries there are no parties allowed: in Libya, Syria, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait, Oman and Somalia. Also, in some countries religiously inspired parties are forbidden (like the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and Syria).

Yonnec was careful not to generalise certain patterns, but from his point of view opposition parties in the Arab world face two overwhelming challenges: the implementation of democracy and a proper agenda with which they can influence the ruling parties. So far, ruling parties govern according to the three "rs": rents (i.e. buying loyalty), repression and nationalist rhetoric.

There are of course progressive forces in the Arab world, but most of them are weak or with limited powers, like in Morocco where the King has the final say. These parties also have difficulties in becoming mass parties (e.g. in Algeria, Tunisia and Lebanon). They usually face crises and abstentions during elections as they suffer from how to deal with the ruling authority; they do not know whether they should reform, open up to dialogue or totally boycott the ruling regime. They also seem not able to tap into the voter discontents and the consequent high rates of abstention during elections in their home countries to find new voters. There are also problematic issues, e.g. where parties lack internal democratic structures or show a transparency deficit. Of course their biggest problem relate to the lack of democratic institutions and openness of the political game in their country.

Even more problematic for these progressive parties are the 9/11 terrorist attacks and the rise of Islamist parties. Religious parties since then have gained more popular support. In response,

ruling parties (silently backed by Western governments) have hampered the reform and democratisation processes that probably would have brought Islamist governments to power. This put the opposition secular parties between the fronts. On the one hand, they are fighting the ruling parties, but on the other hand, they are struggling against popular religious conservative parties.

To conclude his presentation, our speaker laid out for us some of his reflections on how the EU should deal with democracy and support of parties in the Arab world:

1. The EU should insist on protecting political freedoms, civil liberties and human rights of all the citizens of these countries. There can be no real democracy without political parties. The EU should help these parties in building a sustainable political agenda, in order to make them competitive for running in elections.
2. Furthermore, the political spectrum in the MENA region must open up and include religious conservative parties in the political game. Exclusion will make those parties only stronger.
3. The EU should oppose any forms of forced regime change in the Arab world.
4. Instead of only dealing on a bilateral level with Arab countries (such as Association Agreements), the EU should rather focus on of the multilateral frameworks and the implementation of international agreements (ILO Core Labour Standards, International Criminal Court, United Nations International Covenant On Civil And Political Rights, International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights – i.e Women's rights) and engage in dialogue at all levels.
5. Finally, the EU has to be patient. It should invest in change, but it must realise that partners need to change themselves on their own pace, to develop in a way that fits with their culture. The EU can support transition, but it is up to the countries in the region to find the right path to development.

#### IV. Discussion and Q&A

*First round:*

Q1. Concerning women, do they have a bigger role to play within opposition parties? And has their status progressed over the past years?

Q2. Did the economic crisis affect the democratisation process in the Arab world?

Q3. You mentioned the EU can pressure Arab countries to allow opposition parties, but some of these countries have energy resources that the EU needs. Can the EU still exert pressure when it is actually dependent on these resources?

Q4. How much can the socialists influence the EP in supporting Arab parties?

Q5. Is there a control or sanction mechanism that PES can use to pressure parties that get its support? How do you deal on the ground with some parties in the Arab world that seek your help but have a disparity between what they say and what they actually do?

Q6. Would EU financing of Arab parties not discredit these parties at home, based on the argument that they would now answer to their financial supporter's agenda more than to their constituency?

*Answers*

On the question about women, Yonnec replied that he cannot speak for other political families but for the Socialist International (SI) the question of women is an important one. But this unfortunately does not mean that women are holding leading positions. They have several political functions and there are special branches for women. However, women who are elected in the Arab world are very few.

On the economic crisis he said that it of course affected the Arab world (beside the few oil rich countries). But economic disparities have been hitting the Arab world before, during and will probably after the economic crisis. There was and is an income gap. The problem is that there is no redistribution of wealth. This has nothing to do with the crisis, but has more to do with the existing power structures in these countries.

On the third question our speaker agreed that Europe was sometimes reluctant to be openly critical because of its energy policy. Regarding

demographic, economic and political problems that need to be dealt with, the EU needs to choose between external social unrest and internal energy flow. At some point it probably has to show more courage, put more pressure and strike a balance between its values and interests.

The socialists, of course, try to influence the EP and the EU, but they are not the majority in the Council, EP or Commission. So, "yes we can" is to a certain extent always a compromise with the majority parties in the EU and its member states. Where socialists are in power in national governments and are then holding the EU presidency (e.g. In Spain during first half of 2010), should serve as a big opportunity to set the EU agenda according to socialist priorities and values (which includes also the Arab world).

The SI recently created an Ethic Committee. This committee monitors the member parties of the SI. And where it finds that parties do not work (also concerning their internal structure and procedures) according to socialist "ethics" and values, the committee has the right to put sanctions or take even tougher measures.

Responding to the last question of this round, Yonnec agreed that EU financing might create credibility problems for these parties at home. It could be a problem for the socialist parties that could be pictured as the voices of the west. But the EU should find ways to support political parties. There is no viable democracy without political parties.

There are a lot of people that choose to be active in NGOs rather than in political parties. These are engaged people that are missing in the parties. NGOs can contribute to make political life more democratic and support political parties.

Johan added that more and more women are finding their way into higher education in the Arab world. This is not exclusive to secular party supporters, but also to women within Islamic parties. In fact, this is very often used as kind of a prove to show that Islamists are not conservative.

One guest in the audience added that party politics in Lebanon is a way to hide clan-like political structures; therefore, women elected are usually relatives of political leaders. In a sad way, they are there but yet absent. During the last Lebanese election campaign, he said, the slogan used to encourage women voting was "sois belle et vote" (be beautiful and vote), which is based on

the offensive 50's film title "sois belle et tais-toi" (be beautiful and shut up).

*Second round:*

Q1. What is the top priority on the socialists' agenda? And what is their stance on the democratisation agenda?

Q2. What is the "marge de manoeuvre" of the PES in dealing with parties like Hizbollah and Hamas?

Q3. Arab parties are having difficulties motivating people to vote. Are young people in the Arab world getting involved in party politics or not?

Q4. You suggested the use of multilateral instead of relying on bilateral frameworks for engagement between the EU and the Arab world. Do you think the newly launched UfM would be more successful in that sense than the ENP?

*Answers*

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is top priority for Europe when dealing with the Arab world. It has far-reaching implications on the entire region and beyond. The Socialists clearly favour the "two-state solution". Concerning the democratisation process, the EU is supporting it but cannot rush it. It needs an holistic approach. You need to build democratic cultures and to engage in more democratic platforms and dialogues. Quite often the problem is that the EU's interaction is based on exchange only with the governments and some other elite groups, but that it is not reaching out to a broader set of actors.

Regarding religious conservative parties, as PES we do not have contacts with them, since we mainly deal with SI member parties. We meet people who could deliver our messages to them. They are also active on the ground, with social services, but we do not feel something in common just because of these facts. Often this is based on charity, which Christian Democrats could also promote, but that does not make them socialist. And they provide these services to get popular support as well, which differs from our reasoning. The EU should re-think its approach. I believe the EU should engage with them because of their political influence.

Furthermore, Yonnec said that bilateral agreements should be associated with other multilateral forums. The EU should have multilateral, bilateral and other relationships, like for instance with the Arab League. This could help

the EU exert pressure on these countries, preventing them to play the Israeli card. The Arab League could assure their participation in Euro-Med summits without holding hostage multilateral dialogue.

Johan added that there were plenty of negotiations needed to get a deal done. In Egypt, Europe has been dealing with opposition parties for a long time already. But even in restrictive systems there is space for manoeuvre. In Kuwait, for instance, educated and independent women starting to become active in politics, managed to get the right to vote and be represented in parliament and were finally elected themselves into parliament. And all this while the regime remains in control.

*Third round:*

Q1. Would you put conditions and benchmarks on the funding of parties in the Arab world?

Q2. How does PES decide on establishing contacts with different parties?

Q3. Do parties in Turkey play a role in developing parties in Arab countries?

*Answers*

Yonnec answered that so far neither the PES nor the EU fund political parties in the Arab world. But if they were to do so in the future, surely there will be specific criteria catered to those who provide the funding.

Replying to the second question he explained that the PES had different bodies. The Presidency, which meets four times per year, discusses the EU's foreign policy and PES' relations with parties all around the world. It would here be decided with whom to start or deepen relations. It will be based on political and ideological criteria.

Elaborating on the final question, Yonnec stressed that Turkey was really important for the moment. It can have an influence and can act as a model for many parties in the Mediterranean region. AKP is a role model for Islamist parties in the Arab world. If adopted, it could "kill the idea that Islam is not compatible with democracy" as it has already proven the contrary. It is indeed paving the way for other parties in the region. Turkey also wants to be more involved in Arab countries and the MENA region, and the AKP has already invited Hamas to Turkey or tried to mediate between Israel and Syria. So far, the AKP contributed the

most to progress in Turkey's in preparation for EU accession. Other political parties in Turkey – the CHP (former ruling party of Ataturk) and DTP (representing Kurdish minority) – are PES referent. The PES has a high-level group on Turkey and the aim is to go there and exchange information and to observe how the accession process is developing. To see if criteria are being fulfilled (e.g. Art. 301 concerning Kurdish and Armenians rights, workers' rights and trade union's rights).

Johan called the 1990s "a political mess" in Turkey, which only changed in 2002. For Europe was in the 60s used to similar broad majorities as the AK Party got in the 2002 election. Different values in Turkey are clashing at the moment between religious laws, introduced by the government, and the constitutional courts that would block them. But the real risk lies not in losing Turkey to the East, rather having it turning its back on Europe and 'losing' it for example to Russia, which would make Russia a harder actor to deal with and the energy security of Europe more difficult. The attractive part of this scenario for Turkey would be an increase in negotiation power in its dealing with the EU.

A Turkish guest in the audience explained that for ten years now there was a one-party rule, which many consider as authoritarian. However, this is still moderate Islamic. Turkey is in between two contradictory positions, all democratic acts have been implemented by this government but the majority of the people are getting scared of Turkey becoming more Islamic and Turks are talking about the threat of an Islamic revolution (using the Iranian revolution as an example). Concerning the EU's membership process, though it is not on the current agenda, it is indirectly related because Turkey is becoming more active in the region since it is losing the EU 'hope', or more accurate 'dream'. The idea of an EU membership helped a lot to change regulations and reform, but the loss of hope in the accession process is putting Turkey more in the bridge position. Time will tell if the AKP would be more active in Middle East politics. Although the democratisation process would be good for the near-future of Turkey, it also carries more disadvantages for internal democracy in the long-run if it means a strengthening of Islamists parties.

Another guest added that the Turkey-Arab relation is high on the regional agenda. In a course that he followed in Syria, the Turkish example was a recurring theme. The Muslim Brotherhood, which

is forbidden in Syria, is quick to reference the AKP as an example of a viable Islamic modern democracy in order to give some credibility and respectability to themselves.

## V. Conclusion by the Euro-Arab Forum

When the Euro-Arab Forum first decided to put this topic to the discussion table, we were personally curious to understand whether Arab political parties follow the socialist-conservative or left-right divide that we have grown accustomed to in Europe, or whether they exist merely to serve a political leader, clan or religious ideology; and hence are divided according to different criteria. Once we started to grasp the complexity and tension that exists between these parties' loyalties and interests, we were eager to know how parties within the EU interact with Arab parties, on which dividing lines they draw their commonalities. Luckily, we had two speakers who were willing to share their knowledge and thoughts with us and shed some light on this issue for us and our guests.

Through the presentation and the discussion that followed we reaffirmed our intuitions that every Arab country has its own specificities, which need to be dealt with individually. A two-tire system of dealing with Arab parties, multilaterally and bilaterally is better than choosing one or the other. Arab parties still lag behind in lobbying for interests apart from old clan-like loyalties, but there are signs of progress. The EU should take advantage and build upon any reformist buds in the Arab region by engaging in diplomatic dialogues at all levels. Words alone though are not enough, and concert actions can only be materialized if Europe puts its money where its mouth is. Lastly, change needs to come from within but Europe can still push for change through incentives and benchmarks. For an optimal result a combination of a top-down and bottom-up approach is needed to drive the reform process forward in the region. Will reform and democracy bring stability to the Arab world? That might not be the case in the short-term but in the long-run definitely. So the defining question is: Is the West ready to deal with the devil that is in the transition?

At the end we like to thank our speakers and guests for their participation and valuable input.

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