

EuroArab Forum

PROMOTING INNOVATIVE AND INVENTIVE IDEAS

Event Report

“EuroArab relations: Why do political institutions matter?”

Date: Thursday, February 25th, 2010, 19:00-21:00h

Location: Le Cercle des Voyageurs (18, rue des Grands Carmes) – Brussels

Panelists:

For the Arab perspective: **Sayed Torbey**, Deputy Head of the Permanent Mission of the League of Arab States in Brussels

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For the European perspective: **Eberhard Rhein**, former Director for the Mediterranean, Near & Middle East, DG RELEX, EU Commission

Chair:

Olaf Deussen, founder of the EuroArab Forum



I. Prologue

If the pure number of initiatives and institutions was a proper indicator for success of international relations, Euro-Arab relations could be considered as a model for other regional exchanges. However, a closer look reveals a more pessimistic evaluation. The recent history of Euro-Arab relations brought to life several institutions and institutional settings for dialogue. Some survived, others did not. The Euro-Arab Dialogue, the Barcelona Process and the Union for the Mediterranean, the EMPA or bilateral meetings are all manifestations of a "culture of institutions". But which are the political institutions that matter most for Euro-Arab relations and why do they matter? What is the role of the League of Arab States, the European institutions, joint EU-Arab states meetings or the late Union for the Mediterranean? When and why are political institutions promoting or hindering EuroArab relations? Finally, how will the future of EuroArab relations look like? Is there room for new political institutions and how should they look like?

In order to discuss these questions, and to hear directly from experts who are involved in Euro-Arab political institutions and relations, the EuroArab Forum (EAF) was honoured to invite two distinguished speakers representing an Arab and a European perspective on the issues. Our first speaker, **Sayed Torbey**, is the Deputy Head of the Permanent Mission of the League of Arab States in Brussels. Our second speaker, **Eberhard Rhein**, is a former Director for the Mediterranean, Near & Middle East, DG RELEX, EU Commission.

II. Keynote speech by Mr. Torbey

Torbey expressed his excitement about this new form of dialogue between Euro-Arab youth, and posited that it was needed in order to compliment the traditional governmental-level dialogue with a societal one.

We are starting a new decade, he said. After the 9/11 attacks and the negative light they shed on our relations, and after the successive aggressions on Lebanon and Gaza, we need to open a new page of Euro-Arab relations.

It is vital to keep in mind that Europe and the Arab world are neighbours with institutions that exist in order to foster cooperation between us, based on different legal, political and economic instruments

through various multilateral and bilateral agreements.

These institutions started with the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (1995) at the multilateral level, boosting the idea of free-trade and dialogue between the two regions; accompanied by the European Neighbourhood Policy (2004), which added a bilateral dimension to our relations; followed by the Union for the Mediterranean (mid-2008), focusing on specific joint projects to build progressively upon. That is not all. We also have other institutions such as the Euro-Mediterranean Parliamentary Assembly (2003), the UfM General Secretariat in Barcelona - to start effectively soon, as well as the Arab League (with 22 Arab states) and the European institutions (with its 27 member states), to name just a few.

Enhancing the Euro-Arab dialogue has been a constant demand by us, and has been derived by the European Parliament - through recommendation put forward in 2007 - and thanks to the Maltese initiative. This dialogue tackles not only political and economic aspects but is also linked to migration and cultural projects, such as the People to People programme. Thus, the Euro-Arab relations are multi-faceted.

That being said, we still need to work harder to overcome the setbacks and the dark legacies of the past. Hence, we need to develop common links and interests. We believe that is possible, based on the successful experience of Europe in overcoming its divisions and devastations. The key to Europe's success was its ability to maintain each state's sovereignty and dignity. Today many European troops are implicated through different frameworks (e.g. NATO, EU and UN missions) in the Arab world - from Kuwait to Lebanon to the Palestinian Territory.

When it comes to security, the Arab states are building their own institutions, such as the Arab Council for Security and Peace, though it still lacks forces and it remains limited to early warnings and preventative diplomacy. As far as trade, there is progress to the advantage of the Arab world, but 75% of imports in the Arab world come from the EU, while 3% of EU's importation comes from the Arab region. The EU is the biggest trading partner with the Arab world, even before the US and Japan. Concerning the human dimension millions of Arab live and work in Europe and the numbers are on the rise, causing the Arab world a "brain drain" problem. According to a UNESCO report, 50% of physicians in the UK are of Arab origins. On the negative side as far as immigration goes,

Arabs are facing racial profiling, racism, and identity issues. As for the Arab society there is an improvement in inter-Arab trade and relations but there is still a way to go when it comes to building confidence. In a Tunis summit (2004), there were initiatives set to establish an Arab parliament that is expected to deal with such problems as unemployment, and development of small and medium business enterprises. These ideas are embedded in a regional prospect that includes the EU, African Union, Russia, India, and Turkey.

Nevertheless, the Arab world is facing great challenges that would require them to reform their structures: be it environmental, legal, social, or economic. The region is facing imminent deterioration in the form of poverty, unemployment, water scarcity, malnutrition, as well as the lack of social allegiance to the state due to the limitations put on political participation.

As Euro-Arab institutions we need to modify and mitigate this situation by basing our relations on sincerity and not only on interests. Therefore, dialogue between cultures, religions and people is necessary not only as an instrument used for political purposes - which is often amplified by the mass media - but as a tool creating a more open and objective public opinion on both the European and Arab side. We need to think about the outcomes of our policies and dialogue as the question put by the EAF tonight intends to do.

As the Arab League we have seen a welcome participation during the launching the Euro-MED University in Slovenia. But we wonder how far a cultural dialogue can advance our relations in the economic field without finding a solution to the thorny political problem of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The fact that Israel is a partner in a union while it is still occupying territory of other members of that union (e.g. Syria, Lebanon and Palestinian Territories) is a paradox to us.

The notion of "fortress Europe" and tariffs on trade between the two regions need to, and will hopefully, disappear. But we, as Arabs, should also rely on ourselves to rid ourselves of the occupation and other destabilising factors in our region. Europeans can only have a supporting function but not solve the destabilising factors. In doing so, we surely need to rely on our friends and neighbours to help us overcome together these challenges.

III. Keynote speech by Mr. Rhein

Rhein also praising the EAF for providing a forum for the young to find answers to tough questions that boggle the minds of European and Arab

diplomats on how to deal with the challenges facing their relations, when after years of governmental-level dialoguing much of the Arab world is still unknown to Europeans.

He started his refreshingly candid argument from the premises of comparing Egypt and South Korea, as examples. Years ago, he argues, both were at the same level of economic development and both have received the same level of US economic aid, yet years later, we see that South Korea has developed into a big industrial power while Egypt is lagging much behind. The speaker attributes their difference in development to the difference of their societies and cultures. From there he generalises that the societies in the Arab world are not as involved in their development process, as other societies in Asia and Europe might be.

From here he reaches the conclusion that "institutions do not matter", though they might help at the final stages in providing the framework between society and leadership. For instance EU institutions matter in so far as they can provide legal and political frameworks for the 500 million residents who live in Europe. But Rhein does not believe that outside actors can have influence on what goes on inside other countries in the long term. Another example he sites is the sub-Saharan regions, despite all the efforts of the EU, real progress is not visible. In his opinion outside actors deal only with the outer skin/layer of society, diplomats meet with other diplomats who are there to promote their national interests.

This brings us to the other problem he identifies, which is that we believe too much in the power of diplomacy. Diplomacy "means nothing but to speak in double voices", Rhein argues. They are not politicians; they are only there to present the best image of the countries that sent them.

Moreover, he does not believe in the effectiveness of summit meetings, since beyond the regional level, these meeting become less effective. He cites the Doha and the climate change meetings as such examples of failed summits. These big summits, he says, have not achieved anything in solving Euro-Arab issues.

When we try to look at these issues in Euro-Arab world terms we are failing because "there is no such thing as the Arab world, but only Arab countries that are not even friendly as European countries are to each other, and some are even at war with each other". The mentality and culture of the Arab world maybe stops where the gulf is. We see no homogeneity or commonality of interests,

which makes it hard for them to agree on common policies that could become operational.

He goes on saying, "I don't believe in putting different cloths on the same thing", so the so called Union for the Mediterranean (UfM) is not different than its failed predecessor: the EMP. Diplomats attending these, insisting on reviving these failed institutions are not going to the substance of the problem. In order to reach that substance he thinks that Europe should sit down with people and sociologists in the various Arab countries and ask them directly what their problems are. Because as groups they need to help themselves resolve their own problems.

As for the future he sees three major issues confronting the Arab world:

1. Demographic and employment problem. In 15 years the population will consist mostly of young Arabs below 30 and there will be a population growth to about 200 million young people. How will it be possible for Arab countries to create jobs for these people without better education that is not only higher education but also good technical skills? Immigration, in this case can be one answer (not the problem), although it will be impossible for Europe to sustain huge waves of immigrations.
2. Food security problem: the Arab world is less and less able to feed itself with its production growth and because of climate change and agriculture land scarcity. You can do without food production but then you need to produce services or develop a manufacturing industry. Here the gap with Asia is big, as the Arab world has a problem integrating in the global market.
3. Energy security problem: not an issue for big oil reserve countries, but others who will have to pay higher prices in the future. Luckily, the Arab world has solar energy. They must capitalise on solar electricity in the next 30 years, and build good networks to supply energy to other countries. There should be a link between wind energy from the North with solar energy from the south.

His final advice to the Arab world is to try to act more in concrete terms to solve these imminent threats than to merely talk about them in summits.

IV. Discussion and Q&A

Q1. Directed at Rhein, your presentation was pessimistic yet realistic which is good, but I did

not notice the parameter of power in your remarks, why? Also you said the Arab world does not share much in common, but I disagree since there is a cultural sense of belonging which is common to that region. While the EU has stronger political and economic integration, the Arab world has a stronger cultural integration, would not you agree?

A. Rhein: Yes, the language is the same and the Arabs understand each other, but that is not enough to have mutual interests. We should not apply the power concept to Euro-Arab relations. This concept does not help us to advance our relations and it has a lot of limits. Europe for example is powerful but at the same time cannot force peace between Israelis and Palestinians.

Torbey: the Arab feeling you speak of is there and it is necessary. How the Europeans see the Arab society is indeed an important but a difficult dialogue to have. When you speak of Arab unity or lack of, you have to look at the European responsibility. Look at the cold war reality, that period was interesting as it has laid down the strategic interests in the region. Also the historical perspective is important and the EU was in a very bad situation after WWII, but now it managed to overcome its divisions. We Arabs are aware of the difficulties and the fact that we need to rely on ourselves, but we have a brain drain from the Arab world to the West, which does not help the region develop.

Q2. Europeans speak of cooperation with Arabic countries but only as ideas because in reality the implementation is difficult and there is a lack of real cooperation. For example, in Switzerland through the referendum on the Minarets we see that our relations with the Arabic (Muslim) world did not improve much. Also the Palestinian question is not yet solved, and the EU does not take a real position on the gulf area and human rights. In the EU there is real problem of Islamophobia. We as Europeans need to improve our pluralism and accept to "contaminate our culture with other cultures". We as EU need to improve our level of cooperation with the Arab world, and we need to provide a solution and a state to the Palestinians. As for the Arabic unity (even between Mashreq and Maghreb) is not real because they have different religions and cultures.

A. Torbey: the political problem is indeed very important and we "have to give the Palestinian

people their state” and they also need to “obtain that state”.

Rhein: to solve the political problems institutions have proven ineffective. That matter is discreet and secret diplomacy at smaller scale meetings, not institutions and big summits to solve the political problems.

Q3. Comment: If we want to build real bridges between European and the Arab world we first have to avoid confusions. Like the persistent confusions in the EU between Islam and Arab. We also should not jump to the Palestinian problem as if this is the only issue hindering progress. There is a great problem of inequality between Europe and the Arab world. The problem is that the EU insisted on building bilateral relations when the problem is regional. As Arabs we have our own institutions, for example the Arab League. We have also built our own multilateral structures for ourselves. So, we had the Arab League and there is the EU; hence, we could organise multilateral dialogue to build structural relations, but we did not. What happened? The EU fragmented the area geographically, by having the “Mediterranean area” and “the others”. They asked the gulf area to just “pay and do not talk”. What we ask for is to organise structurally the Arab region with positive relations with its neighbours. The bilateral relations were introduced not to solve the Palestinian problem, but to solve the EU-Israel question. Finally, the demographic issues in the Arab world have been exaggerated and it is not as bad as it was depicted.

Q4. What do you think of Berlusconi’s offer for Israel to join the EU?

A. Rhein: “Forget it”. Israel is not a European country and thus does not belong to Europe.

Torbey: Everyone is defending their own interests and perspective, but my position is to find some common ground and to practice “self-criticism”. It is our responsibility to defend our interest against the most powerful actors in the region, who is at the moment Israel. At the same time we have huge problems in the Arab world, and yes we acknowledge that.

Q5. Why is the EU involved in the Middle East? It is about trade, because economic exchanges are important, it is what motivates Europe relations with its southern neighbours. So, we

cannot say that institutions do not matter, some economic institutions are very important for these exchanges?

A. Rhein: yes maybe for economic reasons some institutions matter, but it is when actors deal at smaller meeting that agreements are achieved and not at the multilateral, huge summits.

Q6. How much can these institutions carry the changes intended? What is different about the UfM? To Torbey: we have seen that Arabs gave up the building of institutions, but we know that institutions matter before development, although the EU keeps telling the Arab world to develop first and then all will follow. How can we be competent in the future without institutions? Would changing ourselves to appease the Europeans by developing, get us the institutions promised?

A. Rhein: what has changed is that the parties met together in the UfM and I see it as an obstacle, which was not a good idea and brought upon a strange co-presidency. And now we have a “Euro-Arab joint liaison office in Malta as I just learned”.

Torbey: On the Arab League, I must agree when it comes to oil production and human rights we are lagging behind in coordinated work, but it is a process and there is a growing human rights sector.

Q7. How could we blame societies in the Arab world for the lack of progress, when these societies are unable of influencing the structures they are in that are controlled by authoritarian regimes? And does not the EU bear some of the responsibility for enabling these authoritarian regimes by not putting tougher human rights conditions for further cooperation? Also, if societies are to blame, is this not a deterministic approach, saying that change is not possible, when indeed EU’s history demonstrated to us that cultural changes are possible with the help of external actors, as was the case after WWII when the US helped Europe and especially Germany to rebuild their political, economic, legal as well as cultural structures?

A. Rhein: No, I am not saying the cultures are not possible to change but change is from within. Of course democracy is a problem and societies

that are not operating in democratic settings cannot be judged to the same standards as one that are enjoying democratic governments. But even without democracy some societies are more productive. This is not to say they are better just different. Just as Arab societies are more hospitable than Asian societies, the Asian ones are more productive. The situation in Europe and Germany is very different that the Arab world because Germany was defeated at the time.

Torbey: I do not agree with this socialist approach for society to change. Arab societies have to rely on themselves and not the EU to help us build our structures like the case was in Europe post WWII, because we don't have an ideal world.

Q8. Comment: A dialogue of people and society not just governments is necessary. Also there should not be a hierarchy in dialogue, where the Europeans dictate terms of this dialogue with the Arabs. The interest should be in the exchanges per se. Moreover, there are no difference and conflicts in the Arab world at the societal level. If there are conflicts it is between the governments that are often not representing the people. But it is at the government level that institutions exist, so if we rely on these institutions we will never dialogue effectively.

Q9. I am not surprised that grand summits do not always succeed, because the populations of the countries involved in these summits are often against them and their neo-liberal premises. How is this with people in Arab countries, do they criticise globalisations for its non-sustainability?

A. Torbey: There is a growing Arab civil society, but in the face of neo-liberalism and globalisation the governments and their populations are united together because they are afraid of the changes.

Q10. I agree with the speakers that among all the institutions we have, the Barcelona process could have been the most successful, not the UfM. But I don't see contradictions between policy and institutions. Do you see a trade off here? And concerning external action services what is going to happen between the EU and the Arab world with the new constitutional setting?

A. Rhein: we increased the number of institutions but not their effectiveness. The only positive aspect is that in the future we will have EU ambassadors in all Arab countries. This will probably make us more influential in third countries. But it is still not clear how the new EU design will affect our Euro-Arab relations. Still you cannot have policies with more than 40 countries on the table as the case in the UfM. I still see bilateral policies possible, but not in the UfM.

Torbey: As for the Barcelona process I do not see an added value in changing only the names, but maybe the Barcelona process is more policy oriented than the UfM. I think at first the Barcelona process was an ambitious project, but we have followed it because it was designed to create space for stability and peace. This charter for peace and stability was put aside, while for the economic basket very little was given.

Q11. If you look at the majority of the population that live in the Arab world, they have suffered from colonialism. When you look at the sub-Saharan case you see that this colonial legacy and especially the way they ended and were handed over played a negative role. How much does the switch from colonialism play a role in today's problems in the Arab world?

A. Torbey: there is responsibility on Europe. This transition period was crucial for the problem of today. There are implications for both external and internal actors. What kind of society can you impose and also the game between East and West, are affected by these transitions.

Rhein: The situation in the Arab world was better than the one in sub-Saharan Africa.

Q12. Do you think the EU is more interested in Central and Eastern Europe and enlargement than the Mediterranean region?

A. The interest is of course important. It is a matter of how much money can we put in the Mediterranean. But it is not the worst problem we had in EU-Arab relations, there are other factors playing a more significant role than money and enlargement.

Q13. You mentioned there are millions of Arab immigrants living in Europe; do these immigrants have a responsibility in Euro-Arab dialogue?

A. Rhein: This will have an impact on European domestic politics, as 2nd generation immigrants will be in European parliament soon which should be a positive development for Euro-Med relations.

Torbey: Arabs living in Europe also have responsibility and a role in improving Euro-Arab relations. But we must keep in mind that we have different sorts of Arab migrants, who immigrated for different reasons. I think it is a chance for Europe and the Arab world to enrich their understanding of each other through these immigrant communities.

Q14. How do you see the challenges of Euro-Arab relations without oil and water?

A. Rhein: There will be some oil in the gulf region but the rest will have to resort to wind and solar energy (as in Spain and now Morocco). But I am optimistic on the water issue that with solar energy these states can purify the water they need as the gulf area does. The UAE is already advancing technologically, for instance, they are now at the point of building the only existing city that will function without oil (fully ecological). And the well-known center for renewable energy, IRENA, is looking ahead in Abu Dhabi for ways to reduce the consumption of oil.

Torbey: Some say oil was simultaneously a blessing and a curse for the Arab world. It is a gift with both negative and positive consequences. When oil dries up then Arabs will have to rely on other sources, mainly human resources, and they will have to diversify their economy.

V. Conclusion by the EuroArab Forum

An analysis of the institutional system in the Arab world appears particularly interesting as many of these countries have gone through significant, though not sufficient, institutional changes aimed at improving economic prosperity and political stability. The launch of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP) in 1995, along with the planned creation of a free-trade zone and dialogue, have had some positive effects on the economic situation in the area and on opening a window for cultural exchanges.

However, to date, external and internal barriers still exist despite the plethora of Euro-Arab institutions in place, which hinders substantive improvement in

relations between the two neighbouring regions. On the European side, barriers in the form of trade-tariffs, bureaucratic hurdles, or cultural and strategic misperceptions remain insurmountable obstacles facing a genuine Euro-Arab interaction. Likewise, on the Arab side the persistent inability of Arab societies to push for changes from within remains the decisive factor in the lack of progress as well as the European misperceptions which mistakes what authoritarian governments do for what their unrepresented societies actually want.

Therefore, fifteen years after the EMP we find ourselves pessimistically asking ourselves about the role of institutions, wondering if they were of any significance in this atmosphere that is dogged by a lack of political-will, or common interests to act collectively upon. It is in the views of the EAF that institutions do in fact matter in so far as they provide the framework through which structural changes at the legal, political, economic and cultural levels can take place. For a group such as ours, which emphasises building community links through open exchanges of ideas between European and Arab societies, we believe that innovative cultural institutions do also matter. In other words, formal as well as informal institutions have a role to play in positively constructing not only economic and political relations, but also cultural ones between the two regions. After all, perceptions are the underpinning factor in diverging or converging interests.

***Report by the EAF Team
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