

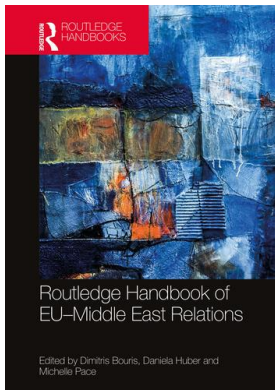
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23

ON EU-ARAB
DEMOCRATISATION*

Towards a democratic “learning loop”

*Larbi Sadiki and Layla Saleh***Introduction: EU democracy promotion from Barcelona
to the Arab Spring**

Students of democratisation have long debated the impact and effectiveness of international actors. Our point of departure assumes the significance of international actors and institutions to processes of democratisation (Whitehead, 2001). International security and alliance factors partly shape localised, contextualised adaptations of the otherwise universal principles and aspirations of “ambidextrous” democratisation (Schmitter, 2012: 1–3). Some policymakers advocated a more prominent role by the UN in encouraging democratisation (Boutros-Ghali, 1996). A contrasting view holds that democracy within states is an “obligation” mandated by international law (Ehm, 2016). More recent considerations of “digital global governance” contend that international institutions can safeguard the democratic functioning of states, protecting citizen rights and dignity from the dangers of “big data” (Benvenisti, 2018).

The European Union’s (EU) “democracy promotion” in the “Southern Mediterranean” Arab neighbourhood has garnered extensive scholarly interest and critique. Its tepid inception can be traced to the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP, Barcelona Process) in 1995, first signed by Tunisia (Dandashly, 2015: 11). Since then, EU agreements with third parties have featured references to democracy and human rights, until the 2004 European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) explicitly outlined democracy promotion as a goal (Wetzel et al., 2015: 25). The EMP, the European Initiative (turned “Instrument” in 2007) for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR), and the ENP have comprised the instruments of EU democracy assistance funding administrative, judicial, policing and electoral capacity programs (Huber, 2008: 52–53). Migration, energy, trade and – particularly after the 9/11 attacks – security, alongside counter-terrorism concerns (with the US) have made the Southern Mediterranean strategically relevant to the EU (Yacoubian, 2004: 3). EU democracy promotion has been critiqued for its “democracy-as-security” approach (Youngs, 2006: 1–2). EU states have been particularly suspect to MENA’s authoritarian ruling elites leveraging their “strategic advantages” of resources,

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population control and containing “radical Islamism” (Pace et al., 2009: 7) to secure funding while flouting human rights and democracy standards (ibid.: 4). Refusing to recognise Hamas’s 2006 electoral legitimacy in Gaza, the EU contributed to a view among Arabs of a “permanent double reasoning” that excludes Islamists (Pace, 2009: 47). Democracy promotion remains faulty so far as it is secondary to an EU more interested in “stability and security”, paradoxically neglecting the Arab-Israeli conflict (Pace, 2009: 45).

Rosier accounts of the EU’s role in international politics highlight its “normative power” (Manners, 2002). The EU’s five “core norms” of peace, liberty, democracy, rule of law and human rights (Manners, 2002: 242) are variously “diffused”, making Europe a force for (non-)military positive change. Some have questioned the presumably self-evident clarity of Manners’ “Normative Power Europe”. Bicchi (2006) notes that the exercise of “normative power” should entail both inclusiveness and reflexivity; otherwise “civilising power Europe” is more apt – as applied to the EU’s MENA policies. Others suggest that foreign policy impact cannot be reduced *only* to norms; security threat perceptions condition and constrain its “democratic role identity” with respect to democracy promotion (Huber, 2015).

The Arab Spring uprisings that erupted in December 2010 in Tunisia spurred revisions of the EU’s democracy promotion. The European Neighbourhood Policy was reviewed in 2011, emphasising the main goals of “democracy, stability, and prosperity in the region”, while the 2015 review stressed security, stability and attention to vulnerable groups (Dandashly, 2018: 65). Positive developments include openness to dealing with some Islamist parties (Tunisia’s Ennahda) and more interface with civil society, without dislodging the EU’s security filter (Dandashly, 2018). New instruments (its Strategic Guidelines on Human Rights of 2012, national Action Plans and the European Endowment for Democracy) included an influx of cash, which was not necessarily more “effective” (Balfour et al., 2016: 3). Initial increases in funding towards democracy promotion are increasingly being diverted to humanitarian assistance, refugee aid and curbing migration flows (ibid.: 6). Further, the EU has not been averse to continuing partnerships with counter-revolutionary, authoritarian regimes (Egypt’s Sisi) (ibid.). The sway of specific Member States (e.g. France and Spain) has been particularly acute in the EU’s continued support to the Moroccan monarchy and its superficial, top-down, carefully managed “reforms”, including hasty constitution-making (Colombo and Voltolini, 2014). The gap between official EU discourse and its practice was, according to many critics, cemented after the Arab Spring. A cacophony of new institutions and instruments has fomented fragmentation in EU policy, leading to “less of the same” towards Arab states and societies (Bicchi, 2014). Some have welcomed the flexibility of a “resilience turn” signalled by the EU Global Strategy of 2016. Yet by seeking to promote the resilience (capacity to adapt to external shocks) of individuals, societies and states simultaneously, it is undergirded by possibly irreconcilable tensions: authoritarian states challenged by popular mobilisation (Colombo and Ntousas, 2017: 21). The remainder of the chapter critically assesses EU democracy promotion before and after the Arab uprisings. It then proposes an alternative democratic “learning curve” approach emphasising possible exchange of values, resources and know-how as pertains to shared democratic learning. Placing trust and social capital front and centre, the chapter closes with a consideration of how mutual learning can be enhanced and activated through a “didactic democratic loop”.

Rethinking EU “normative power” (and legitimacy)

Problematising the EU as a normative power need not disregard the value-laden discourse inherent to its democratic identity. Simply put, the EU is not the only norm-maker or norm-practitioner in town. Norms and their attendant identities matter (Wendt, 1999). If in the

systemic, statist world of international politics “anarchy is what states make of it” (Wendt, 1999: 312–315), it is not too far-fetched to suggest that “democratisation is what the EU [or other international democracy promoters] makes of it”. In the Barcelona Process and since, we have seen several versions of democratisation in the Arab world. There has been democratisation by “association”: drawing Arab countries into the orbit of the EU through trade relations, very selective conditionality and elite socialisation (Powel and Sadiki, 2010). Sometimes simultaneous to this version has been democratisation as authoritarian stabilisation, with a focus on counter-terrorism and (dependency-inducing) IMF liberalisation programs (Zardo, 2019: 45–50; Youngs, 2015).

The latest version of democratisation, since 2016, has been “resilience”, not uncontested (Huber et al., 2017). A more contextualised move away from the damning “stability” discourse (Juncos, 2017: 12) may do little to solve the inherent contradictions in EU policies. In implementing resilience programming, the EU interfaces directly with states, despite emphasising civil society and the “local” (Juncos, 2017: 8). Those few civil society organisations drawing the EU’s interest tend to be already internationally well-connected NGOs (Huber and Paciello, 2019: 7). This may be an unresolvable tension, given the state-society cat-and-mouse dynamics that have come to a head in the Arab *hirak*. Yet the normative imperative still looms large in polities where cries for freedom, dignity and social justice are renewed again and again despite descent into violence (Libya, Syria, Yemen, Iraq), supposed monarchical untouchability (Jordan and Morocco), authoritarian resurgence (Egypt), deepening marginalisation (Tunisia) and delayed revolutionary rupture (Algeria and Sudan). On the one hand, the EU’s focus on adaptive “resilience” as learning is commendable. Yet a pledge to support “learning” requires some sort of moral core. This need not come from “outside” (the West): the Arab Spring has debunked that notion once and for all. Without remaining rooted in normative principles committed to human rights, political equality and participation, the rule of law, and fairer socioeconomic distribution, the resilience turn may teeter towards favouring the state over society, and authoritarian predictability and pliability over (civil) society’s less containable spontaneity and unruliness. Seeking to buttress states at the expense of society is a problematic position for the EU to take. It threatens to pull the EU into “transnational uncivil society” whereby kleptocratic ruling elites lean on international governance institutions, including their democracy promotion programs, which duly polish reputations in service of money laundering schemes (Cooley et al., 2018: 40).

Still, it is not enough to simply critique the EU’s democracy promotion policies. The tenor of our intervention is thus Habermasian (2006). We do not argue that the EU’s policy interest in Arab democratisation is an exercise in futility. Instead, we seek to examine “indicators of contingent constraints that deserve serious inquiry” to unpack “specific causes for existing lacks of legitimacy” (Habermas, 2006: 420). This call for investigating democratic learning must be independent of improvised crisis management (e.g. refugees) as the EU faces ongoing crises of its own democratic legitimacy (The Guardian, 2019). The remainder of the chapter situates the discussion within the framework of democratic knowledge and social capital, next moving to an analysis of the EU–Arab “learning curve”. Upon engagement, inputs of norms and procedures (on both sides) yield an output of “learning outcomes”, tied together through a “didactic loop”.

The democratic “learning curve”?

The didactic language of learning has been used with reference to US democracy promotion (Carothers, 1999) and autocratic adaptation (Dobson, 2012). In this section, we move beyond existing assessments and critiques, to consider the EU’s democracy promotion efforts since the 2011 Arab uprisings as part of the story of “democratic knowledge” (Sadiki, 2015).

The Arab *hirak* – the groundswell of popular mobilisation against authoritarianism in both its ruly (civil) and unruly (violent) permutations – inaugurated by the 2011 uprisings (Sadiki, 2019) has permanently transformed the region’s politics. Examining the democratisation pathways and potential with attention to the state–society, local–universal, national–international, regional–regional dynamism of this agential “peoplehood” thus requires a robust, wide-ranging conceptualisation. In its embrace of a constructivist, “learning” perspective on bottom-up political change, the concept of “democratic knowledge” and its accumulation by publics engaging with various other actors and imaginaries (Sadiki, 2015) is apropos. Democratic knowledge speaks to the build-up of democratic knowledge, the “intellectual and practical capacities, skills [and] ethics” conducive to “civic habituation and socialisation” in an “open-ended, constructivist, interactive, cross-cultural but also reflective process” (Sadiki, 2015: 5).

The “local” at the front and centre of “decolonised” explorations and conceptions of Arab democratic knowledge does not “exclud[e] global adaptations” from either the Arab *makhzum* (repertoire of local knowledge) or *mikhyal* (collective social imaginary) (Sadiki, 2015: 5). Encounters with the West, from the violence of European colonialism to globalisation, distinguish this conceptualisation from both proceduralist, institution-obsessed “transitology” and culturalist perspectives. Instead, democratic learning is a didactic process noteworthy for potential “collaboration” rather than competition between masses and elites (Sadiki, 2015: 5). Open-ended, contingent and contextualised processes of democratic learning allow for Arab–European exchange of ideas, expertise and resources, without bypassing the colonial legacies of historical and contemporary encounters. This approach opens a window for rethinking and reconfiguring the one-way flow of European “democracy promotion” programs, instead veering to self-empowerment, without precluding engagement with the West (Sadiki, 2011). Investigations of democratic learning can lend themselves to Fisher Onar and Nicolaidis’s call to “decenter” Europe, towards the EU’s internal norm of “mutual recognition” (2013: 294).

Trust, social capital and EU–Arab relations

Normative elements (the interplay of ideas, values and identities) form the foundation of our examination of shared Arab–EU “democratic learning.” A prime indicator of the normative underpinnings of the joint “learning curve” in EU democracy promotion since the 2011 uprisings concerns values on the one hand, and interactions on the other. Putnam’s social capital, the “networks, norms and trust that enable participants to act together more effectively to pursue shared objectives” (1995: 664–665) is worth exploring here. Interpersonal trust and voluntary activism in the protest politics of the last few decades, may both be tied up in the generation of social capital, as Pippa Norris concludes (2002: 159–168). Trust is an important component of various political conundrums. In our examination of EU–Arab exchange, Tilly’s conceptualisation of trust as a “relationship” in which actors “plac[e] valued outcomes at the risk to others’ malfeasance” (2004: 4) is useful. Arab–EU democratisation raises a question of shared values, not only of how Arab citizens/actors relate to one another – but also about how Arab actors relate to EU institutions supposedly geared to mediating democratisation. Is there shared social capital between “democratisers” (the EU) and “democratisees” (Arab polities)? The question of “actorness” (Bretherton and Vogler, 2006), with respect to international actors other than nation–states, typically attached to the EU but amenable to expansion and further sophistication (Drieskens, 2017), is at play here. The task may not be to identify the behaviour of the variable, multi-stranded, multivocal tangle of the *hirak* as a single, internationally recognised, autonomous actor. Rather, it is to stress the importance of both analytical and policy attention to the

Table 23.1 EU–Arab orientations and attitudes

	EU		Arab (<i>Hirak</i>)	
Orientation to Status Quo	Ambivalence		Radical Change	
	Safeguarding (Stability)	Change (Democratisation)		
Support for Democracy	High		High	
Content of Democracy	Procedural/Institutional		Political + socio-economic	
View towards “Other”	Ambivalence		Ambivalence	
	Keeping migrants out	“Association” (EU funding + Programs)	Scepticism towards EU interventions	Openness to funding, training, education

bottom-up socio-political force(s) of the *hirak* proving and re-proving consequential to Arab politics since 2011. To this end, we preliminarily compare official EU and Arab (public and *hirak*) orientations towards change (safeguarding or radically changing the status quo), as well as relevant attitudes to democracy and to one another, as highlighted in Table 23.1.

Orientations to change

The 2011 uprisings punctuated whatever “stability” had existed within Arab political systems. Whether or not EU policies attempt to reinforce or resist the wave of transformation is key to EU–Arab relations, and the social capital therein. The re-revised 2015 ENP, for instance, “promotes the basic principles of dignity and equality, human rights, and social and economic justice”. These principles are to be institutionalised and protected within “democratic legal systems and the rule of law, guaranteed by independent courts” (EEAS, 2016a). The ENP also highlights “increased cooperation on security matters” with its Southern Mediterranean neighbours. In this way, its domain of “good governance” sits (perhaps uncomfortably) alongside “economic development for stabilisation”, security, and migration and mobility (EEAS, 2016a). Strategic Dialogues on both Mobility and Security (not democracy or human rights) are noteworthy. Even the EED founded in 2013 explicitly to support democracy, operates on this declared logic of stability. Aside from being “core values” of the EU, democracy and human rights are “vital elements for ensuring long-term stability both inside and outside its borders” (EED, 2019). The “resilience” frame (state, society and individuals) exhibits ambivalence, in its apparent orientation towards the status quo. As outlined in its EU Global Strategy, for Eastern and Southern neighbours, “a resilient state is a secure state, and security is key for prosperity and democracy” (EEAS, 2016b: 23). At the same time, it stresses that a “resilient society featuring democracy, trust in institutions, and sustainable development lies at the heart of a resilient state” (ibid.: 24).

The potential irreconcilability of these two types of resilience, state and society, is perhaps most evident in the Egyptian case. The European Planning Instrument’s 2017–2020 plan for Egypt highlights the resurgent ambivalence and the tension between “stability” and “democratisation”. While it decries the country’s emergency law and human rights violations and the country’s “restrictive” NGO law, it commends the 2014 Constitution (EEAS,

2017: 2). Here it claims a role for “support[ing] the country’s democratic consolidation as well as sustainable and inclusive development” (EEAS, 2017: 3). How Sisi’s two elections and constitution-making (see Table 23.1) after his 2013 coup (not clearly labelled a coup by the EU) can be construed as indicative of “democratic consolidation” in the country is a bewildering question. Is the EU, through its roughly €400–500 million ENI funding to an Egyptian state governed by a repressive military that overthrew a popularly elected leader (who then languished and died in prison in 2019), supporting authoritarianism or democratisation? Can state “stability” or “resilience” and democratisation and society’s “resilience” go hand-in-hand? The cross-national 2011 *hirak*, on the other hand, is “driven by the desire to transform Arab Spring states” to undo decades of social, political and economic asymmetries and inequalities (Sadiki, 2019: 340). This bottom-up popular mobilisation is transitory in nature, seeking to challenge the status quo in a wide-ranging, fragmented panoply of both civic (protestors, unions, opposition parties) but also violent (ISIS, militias, warring tribes) elements/participants (ibid.: 353).

The attitudinal take

Attitudinal data on the *what* of democracy and associated values is indicative of a general convergence between Mediterranean Arabs and Europeans. By a wide margin in the wake of the Arab uprisings, freedom and freedom of speech overtake institutions (elections, the rule of law) in popular understandings of democracy in Morocco, Jordan, Tunisia and Egypt (Sadiki, 2014a: 50–51). Broad agreement exists between European and Southern Mediterranean countries on the need for cultural, political and religious tolerance (59% and 48% respectively), as well as progress in the role of women (Sadiki, 2014a: 51). Results from the World Values Survey in the Arab-Islamic world confirm support for democracy on par with that in Western countries (Inglehart, 2017: 15). Positive attitudes towards gender equality and tolerance of homosexuality are lower in Arab-Islamic than Western countries, although Inglehart notes the beginnings of an “intergenerational shift” in those overlooking the Mediterranean with “relatively strong exchanges with Europe” (ibid.: 18), particularly the Arab Spring countries (ibid.: 22). Quantitative indicators also point to the primacy of economic demands and dissatisfaction with corruption (64% in total, over overtly political demands (37%) among Egyptian, Libyan, Moroccan, Iraqi and Tunisians (Abbott et al., 2018: 13). Clear majorities continue to favour democracy (ibid.: 15). Yet the analytical dichotomisation of political and economic rights may not hold. A more limited country sample demonstrates a “thick” popular conception of democracy as guarantor of socio-economic (58%), as opposed to simply civic or political (68%), rights (Arab-Trans, 2016: 5).

Relational attitudes (views of the “other”) seem to point to a trust deficit between Arab publics and the EU. Only 41% of those surveyed view the EU as a force for stability in the region, while the remainder is either neutral or considers it a force of instability (31%) (ibid.: 6). Only a third consider the EU to positively impact democratic development in their respective countries (ibid.: 6). About a third in Morocco, Jordan, Tunisia and Egypt viewed the EU as positively affecting democratisation via civic participation (Sadiki, 2014a: 52). On the other hand, 20% prefer the EU not to be involved, 43% look to the EU for economic support, and 16% for democratic support (ArabTrans, 2016: 7). Publics on both sides of the Mediterranean, however, have not closed the door on positive exchange. Education and training seemed to be the topmost expectation of Euro-Med cooperation, among both SEM (57% definitely, 31% maybe) and European countries: 53% and 31% respectively (De Keulenaer and Pauwels, 2018: 33). Publics were less sure about individual freedom and the rule of law (43% in SEM, 47% in

Europe), and support for NGOs and civil society: 36% in SEM, with a slightly higher percentage in Europe, respectively (De Keulenaer and Pauwels, 2018: 33).

Processes of exchange?

By definition, “democracy promotion” entails a type of exchange between the promoter (EU) and the presumed recipient (Arab). The relevant concern in the age of the Arab Spring is how the norms discussed earlier translate into processes of exchange on both sides. The European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights, Support to Partnership, Reform and Inclusive Growth (SPRING) program since 2011, the Social and Civil Affairs programming of the Union of the Mediterranean, and the European Endowment for Democracy are all EU instruments geared at such exchange. While the hundreds of millions of euros earmarked for democracy, human rights and civil society programming in the Southern Neighbourhood may be impressive, they are dwarfed by EU funding on security and migrant related programs. The total EIDHR funding for 2014–2020 was 1332.75 million euros (European Parliament 2015), only about 56% of the budget for the Instrument Contributing to Stability and Peace for the same period: 2338.719 million euros (European Commission, 2019a, 2019b). Twinning is one area where exchanges not just of funds but also face-to-face expertise and training, take place. These capacity-building programs are in public administration areas of water, environment, health, education and vocational training, albeit with a neoliberal bent (Isleyen, 2015) and a uni-directional flow (EU to Arab).

Since the 2011 uprisings, constitution-making, transitional justice and elections are specific content areas of exchange that draw on a combination of funding instruments. In drafting the 2014 Constitution, Tunisia’s National Constituent Assembly, for instance, engaged with civil society *and* the expertise and opinions of external actors including the UNDP and EU (Carter Center, 2014: 10). This “ethos of exchange” is also evident at the level of institutional models (Sadiki, 2014b). Even with its neglect of socio-economic transgressions, the EU’s Framework on Support to Transitional Justice has been the framework for exchange between local activists and civil society and formal institutions (including bodies such as Tunisia’s Truth and Dignity Commission) (Ketelaars, 2018: 248–250). Less formally as Aboueldahab (2018) recounts, Syrian activists and lawyers in the Violence Documentation Centre and the Syrian Network for Human Rights continue to persistently document Assad’s (and others’) war crimes as they interface with international transitional justice bodies, learning international law and accountability protocols. This activism doubles as advocacy, in pursuit of transitional justice even in the absence of operating formal instruments, as through bringing individual cases against regime perpetrators in European courts (Aboueldahab, 2018: 21). Elections comprise another substantive area of exchange: EU technical assistance, civil society support, training for local election observers and election monitoring (EC, 2013). Some evidence from the 2014 election in Tunisia suggests that local (Arab League) monitors are viewed as more credible by Arab voters than EU counterparts (Bush and Prather, 2018). Such a finding hints at an EU–Arab trust deficit likely hindering productive democratic exchange.

Towards an incomplete didactic loop?

As this chapter has shown exchange (ideational, financial and technical) *as such* is not enough to be conducive to shared democratic learning, in this case between the EU and Arab countries. A learning, didactic loop is conceptualised here as mediating multi-nodal and multi-directional feedback among equal stakeholders. Thus, the flow of information is never in one direction,

top-down and from without. Its utility lies in resulting feedback yielding multi-nodal learning. Moreover, a didactic loop can be expected to be:

- 1 Normative (democratic norms as standards for political thinking, acting in governance);
- 2 Communicative/deliberative/interactive (Habermas);
- 3 Collaborative/inclusive (shared ownership of knowledge and mutually agreed knowing, instruments and goals); and
- 4 Active/reflective/corrective (with feedback that revisits alignment between stocks of values and practices of democratisation, minimising trends of detachment from local reality. That is, especially when donors engineer democratisation according to their perceptions not local preferences, knowing and joint ownership).

In EU–Arab democratisation, augmenting quality along any of these four dimensions can potentially deliver more inclusive and interactive processes of democratisation. These, in turn, can translate into equal exchanges of experiences, ideas and corrective feedback, to sustain durability of democratic reform and quality of democracy (avoiding democratic hype and “bubbles”, such as in Palestine in 2006, and in Egypt in 2013). However, key to the didactic loop is feeding learnt lessons in a fashion that keeps it alive. As a circular model, a learning loop is assumed here to deny hierarchical power relations. Stakeholders may be situated at different points specific to their own position (i.e. their local learning loop too), reality, specificity, actors and mechanisms of engineering democratisation.

Normatively, it is important for the EU to sustain a declared commitment to human rights and democracy. Evading its initial commitment to “deep democracy” (EC, 2011) is counterproductive in this regard. A shared normative platform would reverberate with the *hirak*’s cries for dignity, freedom and social justice – not silenced by time, as periodically re-erupting protests in Tunisia and fall 2019 protests in Egypt attest. *Communicative deliberation and interaction* can move normative convergence beyond official statements, in the style of EU experts’ interactions with Tunisia’s constitution drafters. Algerian protestors’ rejection not only of *ancien régime* elites but also external intervention (e.g. France) (Bashoush, 2019) is telling. It may bespeak popular wariness of decades of postcolonial European meddling that bolstered authoritarianism and corruption. This stance may also indicate an emerging sophistication of mobilised Algerians who have learned painful lessons from sister *hirak* movements that sought out external intervention (e.g. Libya and Syria).

A *collaborative/inclusive* stance requires more than nominal inclusion of civil society. Trade unionists’ and labour activists’ scepticism towards the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) (Dandashly, 2018: 68), for instance, should be heeded in the spirit of even-handed deliberation. Will the DCFTA address regional inequality and chronic youth unemployment in Tunisia or Morocco? The view of Arab civil society as a “service provider to the EU” (Huber and Paciello, 2019: 8) is troubling. What mechanisms are in place for bi-directional “mutual accountability”? Needs assessments by local actors for the “alphabet soup” of EU programming would go a long way towards reciprocal knowledge generation and joint problem-solving.

On some levels, the EU has shown itself to be *reflective*. The European Endowment for Democracy admits the EU was unprepared for the Arab Spring: It “recognised” that “existing EU mechanisms for delivering support to emerging pro-democracy actors were too rigid and too slow” (EED, 2018: 8). Its announcement of an “open[ness] to new and innovative ideas” (ibid.: 24) is promising. So is the differentiation between “transitional” (Tunisia), “repressive” (Morocco), “authoritarian” (Egypt) and “conflict” (Syria) contexts (ibid.). Yet the European Endowment for Democracy’s budget over five years (2013–2018) was a meagre €49 million for

Southern and Eastern Mediterranean neighbours (EED, 2019). Still, the language of learning abounds in the discourse of the EED: “adaptive approach”, “learning-by-doing”, “flexibility” (EED, 2018: 54). “Action Plans” for the ENI feature explorations of “lessons learnt” from past project design, implementation, partnerships and coordination (for instance European Parliament, 2012). As a deliberative body, the European Parliament is a platform for self-review. One proposed Parliamentary resolution acknowledges that the EU lags in addressing the unmet demands for democracy, human rights and socio-economic justice by the Arab Spring. The EU’s policies have funnelled money to authoritarian governments and failed to avert or mitigate violent conflicts, rendering EU foreign policy one of dubious “migration management”, to the “dissatisfaction” of civil society and youth (European Parliament, 2018). To confront the challenges of democratisation, economic marginalisation, migration, radicalisation and terrorism, and the trenchant question of occupied Palestine, EU–Arab relations must be injected with a dosage of trust, lubricated by social capital.

Conclusion

This chapter has explored EU democracy promotion efforts in the Arab world before and since the Arab uprisings, interrogating their contribution to democratic learning through the (potential) accumulation of EU–Arab social capital. The “didactic loop” outlined here can be fruitful for lingering, looming policy and analysis that humbly approach the region’s problems from the vantage point of shared democratic learning. It is part of a progression that facilitates an adaptive (open-ended) approach to the question of democratisation. For, the 2011 uprisings and their turbulent aftershocks have cemented the *hirak* in all its fragmented, chaotic glory, as an agential, normative societal impulse. Such a conglomeration of bottom-up political actors, and a quasi-Arab public opinion cannot be bypassed, by either Arab regimes or international powers such as the EU. “The people” have not gone home.

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