

Political Islam in Syria

CEPS Working Document No. 270/June 2007

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Abstract

Syria is almost unique among Arab states in that the only variant of political Islam to be found here is state-sanctioned. This paper observes how the trends, tendencies and central figures of political Islam in Syria have positioned themselves with regard to relations with Europe, the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership and European Neighbourhood Policy. Based on a series of (anonymous) interviews with both 'independent' and more government-linked sources, Salam Kawakibi traces the evolution of political Islam in Syria, the growth of civil society agitation and the revival of practices of faith in this country. No party, no organisation and no individual within the country can claim to be both a representative of political Islam and independent, states this author in exile.

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ISBN-13: 978-92-9079-723-4

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POLITICAL ISLAM IN SYRIA

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This paper observes how the trends, tendencies and central figures of political Islam in Syria have positioned themselves with regard to relations with Europe, the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership and European Neighbourhood Policy. Interviews were conducted with a range of individuals representative of different currents of thought, including both independent and more government-linked figures. The majority of those interviewed live in Syria and preferred to remain anonymous. However, certain quotations come from political texts published abroad. Compared to some other countries studied in this volume, a complicating factor with Syria is that the only variant of political Islam to be found within this country is the one sanctioned by political authorities. The only comparable case in the Arab world is that of Tunisia. No party, no organisation and no individual within the country can claim to be both a representative of political Islam and independent.

The evolution of Syrian political Islam

When Bashar al-Assad became Head of State on 17 July 2000, reformers' hopes were high. The President's own team put forward a policy of development and modernisation which, at first, sought to introduce simple economic liberalisation following the Chinese model of reform. This was a failure, however, and in a second stage the same team turned to administrative reform, drawing on the expertise of the French *Ecole Nationale d'Administration* and of the *Conseil de l'Etat*. A committee of technocrats and economists close to power proposed a programme of economic reform. Though the programme recognised the close links between the different fields which were to be reformed – economic, administrative and political – it prioritised the economic aspects, emphasising that political reform could always follow later.

The summer of 2000 saw the beginning of the so-called 'Damascus Spring'. Reformers issued a declaration demanding greater freedoms of association. The state-controlled media was quick to criticise these demands for reform, accusing activists of 'spying' on behalf of Western ambassadors. Debating forums were established in Damascus and other large towns. A new declaration was published, signed this time by 99 intellectuals, demanding the release of all political prisoners, freedom of speech and an end to the state of emergency.

More than 600 political prisoners were released on 17 October 2000. New private press publications appeared. Similarly, the authorities allowed parties participating in the *Front National Progressiste* to publish and distribute their own newspapers. At the same time, the *Association Syrienne des Droits de l'Homme* was founded and the *Comités de Défense des Droits de l'Homme* were re-established. Though their activities remained under heavy surveillance, they were not prohibited.

The opponents of reform felt threatened by the agitation of civil society and the resonance of its actions and positions within the wider public. They were especially scared by the sympathy which the young President and his close associates seemed to have for the legitimate demands of civil society. From February 2001 onwards, this led to a series of meetings in large towns, organised by the regional Baath party committees. Opposing them was a heterogeneous group of conservatives, including the military and security autocracy, and a business class which owed

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its creation to economic and political emergency measures backed by institutional corruption. The retaliation of the authorities was brutal. The ‘Damascus Spring’ found its days shortened and its ambitions in tatters, with the detention of activists beginning in March 2001. However, the activists of the emerging civil society did not disarm. Despite the obstacles, they stuck to their cause, backed by their ever growing credibility.

Against this political background, Syria was also caught up in the general trend witnessed across the Middle East of a rise in religious practice and ‘re-Islamisation’ of both private and public space. The Islamist question and its political implications for Syria have become especially prominent since the fall of Baghdad, and the suspected participation of Syrian ‘mujahideens’ in the urban violence engulfing Iraq.

Syrian conservatism has its roots in the traditions both of the country and of the region as a whole. However, ever since the modern state was created and with it a socio-political system drawing on diverse Western ideologies, Syria has moved towards secular reform with interpretations that were able to influence a particularly religious society. Consequently, one saw in the political sphere both the creation of secular parties and the development of a ‘purified’ spirituality-independent of this political sphere. The political and cultural changes of the 1940s and 1950s took place outside though they never sought to undermine religion itself.

These developments allowed for the creation of a national platform which brought together secularists and conservatives. Despite the authoritarian nature of the political system, progressive and liberal ideologies had a profound influence on society during the 1960s and 1970s. The development of all kinds of literary and artistic production during this period, free from almost any religious censorship, was not coincidental. At this time political Islam in Syria was incarnated in the Muslim Brotherhood which, in the 1950s, sat in the country’s democratically elected parliament – a rare occurrence in the history of modern day Syria. However violent clashes ended this ‘cohabitation’ and the Muslim Brotherhood became the sworn enemy of the political authorities. The violent confrontations between them and the authorities reached their climax with a law making mere membership of the group an offence punishable by death. As a result the authorities won this particular trial of strength at great cost, and those sympathetic to political Islam scattered themselves into exile in the West or in other Arab countries.

However, when it later became apparent that both Marxist and Arab Nationalist ideologies had failed, the ‘palace strategists’ sought to re-appropriate religion and manipulate it to its own ends. This plan did not take into account the failed and bloody efforts of other authoritarian regimes that sought to manipulate Islam as a bulwark against a ‘red revolution’, as in the case of Anwar Sadat in Egypt. The Syrian authorities began to introduce religious vocabulary into political discourse and socio-cultural activities. The state’s implication in this religious resurgence was helped by ‘reformed’ former Muslim Brothers. The building of places of worship peaked in the 1980s and 1990s with the creation of well-controlled religious training schools. The aim was to achieve a monopoly of influence over a population which was becoming increasingly conservative.

Secularism began to take a back seat with the re-Islamisation of society and culture, as indicated by the high percentage of women wearing the veil, the dissemination of religious texts which increasingly filled library shelves, the Islamisation of higher education, especially in the human sciences, and the reframing of all scientific, social and cultural phenomenon almost mechanically within religious references.

Notwithstanding these trends, intellectuals such as Burhan Ghalioun¹ do not believe that Islamists would dominate the political system if democratic reform were forthcoming. Such a scenario is only likely “if Islamic-Arabic public opinion were by nature violent”, which he rejects. This might happen as a result only of a specific conjunction of social, economic and political conditions. Michel Kilo² agrees with this analysis and remarks that, with the exception of a small minority, Syrian Muslims do not favour violence and would be able to participate in a future democracy.

However, one still observes a strong revival of assertive practices of faith. Syria has experienced a somewhat violent escalation of religious expression in both the cultural and social spheres. This had led Syrian Christians to fear for their rights, long protected by an enforced secularism and strong central power. Nor does the current Iraqi experience help the situation, taking place so close to Syria. The state, despite its symbolic strength and theoretical monopoly over the tools to influence public opinion, is for some the big absentee. In practice new religious authorities have begun to wield the most influence over public opinion.

The evidence suggests that the regime is looking for legitimacy in letting these developments evolve. The danger would be if the authorities lost control of the phenomenon which they have been trying to harness. Priests are under surveillance, but small mosques escape this. Some Islamic classes for women have become brainwashing sessions, notably pushing for the wearing of the veil. In a cafe in Aleppo, a leaflet was handed out saying, “*Become Muslim and you will have peace.*” Increasingly, restaurants advise at the entrance that “*we do not sell alcoholic beverages.*” During the Ramadan of 2004 a judge sentenced a Syrian man for smoking in front of his shop during the fast. That was a new development, since failure to respect the fast in public places had previously been universally tolerated. Artistic production has also been affected, and intellectuals increasingly witness state censorship authorities adopting and enforcing commands made by religious leaders.

While Islamists’ rhetoric often cites human rights as being the casualty of a repressive system, they highlight only those aspects which help their cause. Their positions are in some respects hesitant, rejecting other rights, especially in the social and cultural domains. The defenders of human rights do not exclude the possibility that they themselves could become the victims of political Islam if the latter gained power. However, such a premonition does not stop them from still considering Islamic rights to be in all cases indistinguishable from the rights of other political tendencies.

As for the Islamists, their rhetoric changes according to the circumstances. They consider themselves to be the most active on the issue of human rights. Haythal al-Maleh, President of the Syrian Organisation for Human Rights for many years, and a lawyer and former political prisoner, was associated with Islamic movements. He is considered by militants, activists and opponents to be a person of great humanity. However, that did not stop him, at a meeting in Berlin in 2003,³ from stating that he considered the death sentence as prescribed in the Koran to be acceptable, that homosexuals are sick, and that Islam grants women the all rights that they need.

In short, Islamists consider themselves to be best placed to speak about, defend and promote human rights, but often speak of the danger of introducing certain values. They consider these values to be Trojan Horses which will destroy traditional conservative society. It is true that

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² Syrian writer detained in prison since May 2006.

³ Organised in his honour by Amnesty International, October 2003.

with time their position changes, but one must be aware of their selective conception of human rights, a conception which is shared by others.

The Muslim Brotherhood

Founded in the 1920s, the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) soon became active in the cultural and social spheres. However, it did not participate in the political fight against French proxy rule. After independence in 1946, its role was a discrete one, despite the democratic nature of the government. From the 1950s the MB began to work within the framework of the constitution, supporting free elections and the democratic transfer of power.

Although the Muslim Brotherhood was repressed under the United Arab Republic with Egypt (1958-61), there were no major clashes with the state. Tensions rose however following the *coup d'état* of 1963, during which the Baath party took power. In 1964 clashes took place around the Sultan mosque in Hama, and were followed by dozens of arrests. In 1967 the MB organised demonstrations, following the publication of an article in an army journal that it considered to be blasphemous. At the beginning of 1973, the Brothers also showed their discontent with the newly-published constitution which made no reference to Islam; following this wave of unrest, a reference was duly introduced.

It was only at the beginning of 1979 that events turned violent, with the assassination of intellectuals and figures of authority, especially those belonging to the Alawite community. The ensuing repression was brutal with widespread imprisonment and hundreds of killings. It was then that the effort to eradicate the MB began. An armed conflict was to last for three years, leading hundreds of members into self-imposed exile. While the law of 1980 making membership of the Muslim Brotherhood a crime subject to capital punishment has not been repealed, in 1993 and again in 2001 there were amnesties for prisoners sympathising with the Muslim Brotherhood, such that today there are few political prisoners in this category.

Within Syria itself the Muslim Brotherhood has ceased to exist as an organisation. However it exists in exile, led from London by Ali Sadr al-Din Bayanouni. In May 2001, the Muslim Brotherhood in exile announced their “national charter for political action,” in which they rejected violence and called for the upholding of human rights. They saluted the modern state with its institutions, rule of law and separation of powers. They made reference to pluralism - political, ethnic and religious. According to the same document civil society was to play an important role in upholding democracy. The Muslim Brotherhood signed the *Déclaration de Damas pour le changement démocratique* and formed, with the former Vice-President Abdulhalim Khaddam,⁴ the *Front de l'Action National*.

The ‘independent’⁵ deputy Mohammad Habach,⁶ who has Islamic leanings, does not see the need to create an Islamic Party. However, “if the day comes when Syria is a genuine democracy, I do not see what the danger is of having an Islamic State.”⁷ Paradoxically the

⁴ Minister for Foreign Affairs before becoming Vice-President of the Republic, a post which he held until 2003. Both he and his family were implicated in high-level corruption scandals. He was also one of the most dogged opponents of the democratisation of Syrian political life.

⁵ Since 1990 independent deputies have sat in the Syrian parliament but they are always linked, in one way or another, to the authorities.

⁶ Director of Damascus’ Centre for Islamic Studies.

⁷ See www.syria-news.com from 16 June 2006.

Muslim Brotherhood – the only religious party in Syria⁸ and, at that, illegal⁹ – declares that it asks not for the creation not of religious authority, but only a civil authority which respects both plurality and change.

The Islamists and European democracy

The Muslim Brotherhood ‘guide’ in Syria recently declared that, ‘we reject foreign intervention, but we don’t reject having contacts, whether direct or indirect, with the outside world. Since the publication of our programme, we have had lots of contact with European countries (...). What I regret is the fact that not all foreign pressure on Damascus is related to human rights: Europe even signed a cooperation treaty with Syria despite the fact that its jails are full (...). Arab regimes describe us as barbarians, but the majority of Islamic movements are seeking modernity. The persistence of some countries in not entering into dialogue with us will serve to strengthen the extremists who consider us to be atheists and put us in the same bag as Westerners.’¹⁰

This is a résumé of the Muslim Brotherhood’s position in relation to opening up towards the West in general and Europe in particular. Though not the only example, and not necessarily even the best reference, Europe serves as an effective model for the democratic hopes of many Syrians. This is for many reasons: the quality of democracy which prevails in most countries of the European Union; the obligation placed on candidates to improve their democracy before applying for membership; the secularism that accommodates differences of all kinds; the freedom of expression enjoyed by European citizens. Europe is seen by Islamists as a reference point for democracy,¹¹ even though “we know that a price will have to be paid [by Europe in distancing itself from the regime in power], but it’s a good investment in the medium and long term.”¹² The changing of power at the highest levels in Europe is often signalled admiringly by Islamists when talking of the European experience.

On the other hand, this does not stop Islamists from criticising what they consider to be Europe’s moral laxity (homosexuality, sexual liberty...). Moreover, Europe’s engagement with democratic reform in the Arab world is questioned. A large section of the public¹³ limits the role of Europe in the region to the simple one of backing authoritarian regimes. The same public perceives that Europe’s main aim is to force the regimes to become more politically and economically dependent on the West. This fear strips references to European democracy of all popularity, and leads to rejection. It also creates within the public, especially those with Islamic leanings, a negative view of their fellow citizens who do hold such ideas. Thus is it possible for these to be considered as ‘traitors’.¹⁴

As a result, maintaining relations with European non-governmental organisations is more attractive to the Islamists. They find that Europe, in spite of its colonial past, has been able to

⁸ Another party which has begun to preoccupy the security services, *Parti du Liberalisme Islamiste*, is a dissident faction of the *Muslim Brotherhood*.

⁹ Law No. 49 of 1980 all members of the party to death.

¹⁰ Ali Sadr al-Din Bayanoui, the guide of the *Muslim Brotherhood* in Syria in an interview with the French newspaper *Libération*, 20 May 2006.

¹¹ Enlightened journalist and writer with Islamic leanings.

¹² *Idem*.

¹³ Both secular and Muslim.

¹⁴ Fortunately this happens to only a minority, but it does happen.

develop non-governmental action which is genuinely independent from state interference. On the other hand they reject any collaboration with the United States, be it with the government or with NGOs. The reason for this is, according to them, “its colonial present and its blind support for the Israeli occupation.”¹⁵ Exchanges with Europe are encouraged and the Islamists “must make the most of this privilege by making real friends and allies by accepting their visions of democracy.”¹⁶

A distinction is made, therefore, between the behaviour of European governments on the one hand, and that of the NGOs and European research centres on the other. With regards to the question of democracy, one contact speaks of a German politician who underlined the extremely democratic nature of Hamas’ election in Palestine in January 2005. Yet his country, i.e. Germany, refuses to recognise this democratically elected government. An observation often repeated in conversations with Islamic-leaning intellectuals and with politicians and political activists is that, “European governments do not respect the will of the Palestine people, contrary to what they pretend.”

Unfortunately, a growing number of Syrians, amongst them some Islamists, consider Europe’s image to have changed as a result of some of its actions. Examples include its perceived refusal to let in Turkey essentially, it is judged, because it is not Christian; its refusal to recognise and support an Islamic government in Palestine despite it having been democratically elected; and its lack of commitment to defending democratic values in Syria. This has led a leading left-wing intellectual and democrat to claim that, “it is not only authoritarian regimes who point to the Muslim threat so as to protect their own power, but also the Western powers who look to avoid exerting too much effective pressure so as not to impose or inspire democracy. To their minds, the big danger is that of leaving the stage free for radical Islamic politics.”

Notwithstanding this, views on European democracy compare favourably with those on American democracy. With American intervention in the region in its current state, few intellectuals have the courage to welcome the principles upon which the US has built itself. At this level, any comparison inevitably turns in favour of Europe. However, Europe too is seen to have its failings and its blind conformity in following the US on issues as sensitive as the fight against terrorism, for example, or the right to resistance, draws considerable criticism.

Conservative Islamists think in terms of a stereotype which links Western democracy to the loss of moral values. For the extremists, such democracy has but one objective: “the dismantling of the societies and people who adopt it”. It is not, then, a system involving pluralism, alternating governments and the separation of powers. This impression has been spread within extremist circles and to change it would require huge efforts. The authoritarian regime propagates this false idea either directly or indirectly, so as to strengthen itself against demands for democratic reform.

Muslim minorities in Europe

Syrian Islamists have no single interpretation of the situation of Muslim minorities in Europe. The most open, enlightened and moderate go so far as to believe that Europe offers a free and hopeful environment for the development of Islam. At the other end of the scale, radicals believe that as long as Muslims are not granted the right, by the countries in which they live, to practice their religion exactly as they wish to then they are “persecuted”. Between these two

¹⁵ Moderate Islamic intellectual.

¹⁶ Idem.

poles, all sorts of intermediary positions exist. While for a number of Muslims the issue of Muslim minorities in Europe is of legitimate concern, it cannot be isolated from their individual position with regards to democracy. In general, the more democratic are more understanding, though they might not be entirely approving, of certain measures imposed in Europe; the less democratic are more critical. Syrian authorities exploit the imperfect situation of the minorities in Europe, using this as a pretext to reject democracy at home.

Views depend mainly on the scientific, cultural and social awareness of the individual Islamist figure being interviewed. It should be noted that a large part of the elite with Islamic leanings was educated in Europe, especially in Germany, France and the UK. This elite is steeped in Western values, without necessarily having adopted them, but knowing how to exploit them for their own purposes. For that reason, the way in which the Muslim situation in Europe is assessed varies. Any judgement is often based on concrete issues, such as the banning of the Muslim veil in schools or discrimination in the labour market.

Similarly, the question of the integration of Muslims into European society, especially after 11 September 2001, has become an important issue for a minority of the Islamic elite. There is a body of analytical writing which examines reactions to this integration, and assesses its impact on European Muslims. These studies denounce both the generalised incrimination of a whole community and the way in which different concepts are confused: Islam, Islamism, Islamist, fundamentalist, integrationist and terrorist.

For some, Muslims in Europe are citizens like any other. They enjoy the same rights as everyone else and should be content, given that their country of origin would not grant them these. For others, Muslims in Europe are second or even third class citizens. They compare the treatment of Muslims with that of the Jewish community and find a large divide between the two: “Our beliefs are not respected as much as Jewish ones” is a common refrain. However, only extremists make violent calls for “revenge.” These views may not be immediately evident, but become recognisable as soon as the tone of the conversation becomes heated: “in any case, the number of believers in their house is rising and sooner or later we will have our revenge and the position in society we deserve”.

Europe’s Foreign Policy

In general terms, the Islamists interpret European foreign policy in the Mediterranean in the same way as other Syrians. Some, reacting as Arab nationalists would, denounce any intervention as neo-colonialist or with the term ‘crusade’. But more generally they have difficulty understanding Europe’s interest in the region. One interlocutor explains this as characteristic of Islamist thought, which distances its followers from international politics. They pay greater attention to domestic politics and its compatibility with the ways of Islam. When they speak of European policy in the Mediterranean, they point first and foremost to the case of the Palestinian elections.

With regards to the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership two currents of thought exist. The first, which is the more dominant, rejects the partnership outright if it does not go hand in hand with political change in Syria at the highest level. This view holds that the Barcelona Process simply supports and even profits from corruption within the Syrian regime. As such, any partnership formed in the current climate will aggravate still more this deplorable institutional situation. The partnership must, in Islamists’ opinion, impose conditions demanding a fundamental reform of the mechanisms of power, a state of law and of good governance. “That has to be the basis of any partnership if it is to be a stable relationship supported by the population.”

A second view, prevailing especially among those with weaker education and less access to information, sees all rapprochement with the West as being part of a neo-colonialist strategy,

seeking to “rob the country of its experts, of its riches and to stop the growth of Islam in the region”. Paradoxically, this extreme view is shared by certain members of the Baath party who are in power.

For Syrian public opinion in general, including the Islamists, European policy in the Mediterranean basin represents a counter-weight capable of balancing unfair and biased American policy in the Israeli-Arab conflict. However, the partnership is for most Syrians, and especially for the Islamists, a peripheral subject, while the image of Europe’s colonial heritage is still important for some. There is also a distinction between the positions adopted by different European countries – those of France and the UK for example. Islamists interviewed for this chapter evoked common traits such as the hesitation, instability and apprehension of European foreign policy in the Middle East. They remarked on the danger of such shortcomings and of their possible repercussions within Europe. “Social unrest will affect Europe if we do not resolve the economic, social and political problems in our own region,” concludes a moderate Islamist. He attributes the region’s problems to the “despotic and corrupt” regimes supported by Western policy, and to the West’s “blind” support for Israel, which in turn causes unrest in the Muslim communities across Europe. Some see Europe as the “source of all our ills”, having been responsible for the creation of the state of Israel.

A problem often raised is that Europe deals only with those in power, not with the people. Europeans “believe that these regimes are immortal and that they have to deal with them. They avoid change in the region for fear of the unknown.” Europe must “change its policies and again try what it managed to do well in Eastern Europe. Their Arab neighbours cannot continue to be poor and repressed, while receiving aid which does nothing to change their sad reality.”

For Islamists residing in Syria, “the Europeans should and must use the means at their disposal to put pressure on regimes by first unifying their policies in the region and by then supporting opposition movements and not just Islamist ones.” European participation in reconstructing the region’s civil society is much sought after by activist of all kinds. Amongst these the Islamists are particularly enthusiastic.

For certain extremists, or those known in Syrian local jargon as ‘obscurantists’, all that comes from the West is nothing but a manifestation of the ‘devil’ and must be cursed. Europe upholds atheist regimes with the aim of destroying the “Muslim nation’s moral references”. Such views are not widely held, at least openly. Facing down demands for democracy which refer to the universal concept of human rights, the political authorities often promote this same worldview. In this way authoritarian regimes stress that all that the West seeks to export, in the field of law as well as others, is in reality nothing more than a neo-colonialist effort seeking to destroy Arab countries’ culture and spread discord between the components within those societies. Thus, one witnesses an alignment between the ‘obscurantists’ and the political authorities when it comes to debate about reforming society and the political system.

Interestingly, a cooperative attitude can be detected, especially amongst those of the movement who live in exile. Years spent in the West have been an enriching process, giving their views a democratic dimension. Interviewees consulted for this chapter emphasise the importance of Syria having close economic relations with Europe after power has eventually changed hands. This does not mean that “our movement will necessarily be in power, but that at least we will be recognised as an independent political entity on Syria’s political scene.” The Islamists would adopt more or less the same system of economic liberalism, in the Western sense of the term, as Turkey. As a result, any rapprochement with Europe, at least on an economic level, would be warmly welcomed by them. As their ideological conception of the economy is close to capitalism, they would be able to deal with European investors and companies without hindrance. As it is, they believe that “we would be better placed to establish transparent and

legal economic relations than those corrupt regimes who close the borders in order to create a parallel economy of which they are the principal beneficiaries”.

Conclusions

Studying Islamic movements in the Arab countries seems, for both local and foreign researchers, to be richly rewarding. But in some countries this area of research is still a minefield. Syria is one of them. For example, in considering the inspiration, motivation and policies of political Islam, one can hardly make comparisons between such countries as Morocco and Syria.

Syrian society exhibits a simple indifference towards the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership or the European Neighbourhood Policy,. This is explained by the difficulties of everyday life, the economic crisis, day-to-day needs and the strict control exercised over political life. But in addition it is important to emphasise the informational gap due to the lack of any form of communication policy, either by the European institutions or their representatives in Syria. As regards the Partnership, the local press, which expresses the official view, often mentions it; the Neighbourhood policy is completely absent from public debate. When questioning even senior members of Syria’s politically engaged class, this author had to explain in very basic terms what the European Neighbourhood Policy actually consisted of.

For Islamist intellectuals, Europe is relevant only through its policies in Palestine and Iraq, and its treatment of its Muslim minorities in Europe. The Partnership becomes a significant subject only when dealing with the economic liberalisation that it promotes, or the human rights issues raised. There is a lot of enthusiasm with regards to the economic side, but a lot of doubt, to say the very least, when it comes to the question of whether the EU is really serious about the promotion of democracy.

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