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Principled Pragmatism ...a pursuit for security?

By Nouran Hassan

Changing Times ...

In what seems like a recalibration of its foreign policy, the EU has recently joined the inaugural of what observers describe as '[ceremonial and insignificant](#)' summit with Arab countries in late February 2019. The summit was designed to tighten the bonds on fighting terrorism and illegal migration and represented a milestone in EU Arab relationships since the igniting of 2011 uprisings widely known as the 'Arab Spring'. Fueled by geographical proximity and a long history of colonial relationship, European countries pursued traditional political, economic, and security interests as China and Russia strive to fill a [power vacuum](#) in the region. However, internal conflicts and feuds over who should take responsibility of migrants, although their record is a seven-years low in 2019, reduced the event to a symbolic sweetener to Egypt's strongman Ex-General Sisi to convince him tackling the issue on their behalf. This came after Egypt has turned down two proposals by the neighboring continent to establish Egyptian coast guards entitled to pick up rescued migrants and take them in to ensure they do not become Europe's responsibility. The diplomatic aspect of the event, i.e., showing that Arab leaders are valued partners for the EU, came with mixed blessings.

A consequential vein ...

The EU discourse on human rights and democracy in the Middle East have been widely compromised by security and stability interests. From the 'Barcelona Process' in mid-1990s, the 'Association Agreement' between EU and Egypt in 2001, and the 'European Neighborhood Policy' launched in 2004¹, inconsistency has been a persistent concern. For instance, the ENP was launched to meet a set of targets that included "promoting regional democracy, enhancing regional economic and

¹ Isa, Felipe Gomes 'EU Promotion of Deep Democracy in Egypt After the Arab Spring: A Missed Opportunity', Web Publication, accessed 22 May 2019, URL: [link](#)

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political stability, addressing problematic immigration, improving security, managing conflict, and efficiently addressing interdependencies related to energy, labor and education²” However, flirtation with authoritarian leaders for short-term migration and economic interests urged the EU offer an initial €50m for Libya whose leader, then Gaddafi, had demanded €5bn. Likewise, Syria’s brutal despot Assad was awarded the Légion d’Honneur by France despite his shadowed HR account. The 2011 uprising inaugurated revisions³ into EU policies in support of Mubarak regime, leading to the introduction of ‘deep sustainable democracy’ concept, which denoted “political reform, elections, institution building, fight against corruption, independent judiciary and support to civil society”, but was totally neglected in the ‘Strategic Framework’ adopted only one year later, in 2012, to guide EU policies on human rights and democracy.

On a structural level, poor delineation of concepts, the different endorsements of liberalism in Europe’s experience, and the ‘technocratic’ depoliticized approach to democracy have rendered advocacy and promotion discourse to a ‘mere technical rather than ideological endeavor’⁴. In Egypt, decades of imposed neoliberal open market policies have increased inequality and mass impoverishment while serving large funds to the authoritarian political elite and their private business circles. This had eventually led to increased socio-political grievance instead of supporting democracy and human rights. The ‘technical’ definition of democracy and HR as nickname to the EU’s economic agenda being an ‘agent of globalization’ has all led to massive influx of protests in the Middle East which in turn fueled political instability, global terrorism, and mass migration waves.

Instead of putting popular needs before economic interests and half-eyed ideological concerns, the bloc started to move beyond its discursive preoccupation with democracy and human rights after

² Cited in Aydin, Sare. 2012. ‘European Neighborhood Policy: The Case of Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Occupied Palestine, and Tunisia’ The Journal of International Social Research, vol.5, no 22. p.235.

³ Virgili, Tommaso. 2014. ‘ The Arab Spring and the EU’s ‘Democracy Promotion’ in Egypt: A Missed Appointment? *Perspective on Federalism*. Accessed 29/05/2019. URL [link](#)

⁴ Ibid, p.4

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2011 by seeing the region through a prism of migration and so-called ‘secure governments’ that would ensure ‘stability’. Even traditional calls for Women and children’s rights that were least controversial compared to civil and political freedoms, that used to raise rejection from developing countries, have been ceded to authoritarian regimes who detain and torture vulnerable groups and ban NGOs activity whether identified with opposition, foreign, or even pro-government groups (e.g., Resala Association). Hence, indifference to regime assaults on women and female children have persisted across years. In 2011, the security apparatus killed 23 women and 7 children during the 18-days protests; the SCAF which ruled Egypt between 2011-2012 was responsible for killing two children and eight women; figures increased substantively with the arrival of ex-General Sisi to power through a military coup; 72 women and 12 children lost their lives to state-violence in the first year of his rule⁵. It might seem shocking but eventually the only denounced form of HR violation in Egypt is that related to societal, mainly traditional Islamic, practices regarding women and female children, e.g., FGM and early marriage in Upper Egypt. Else, state violation of women, men, and children rights are negligible under the EU’s ‘principled pragmatism’⁶.

A step-back on Human Rights

The EU-LAS summit represented a move from bilateral relationships with Middle East countries under the “European Neighborhood Policy’ to a [collective bargaining](#) model to assert the continent’s sphere of influence against regional competitors. Knowing the fine balance between both sides, ex-general Sisi posed assertive remarks about the bloc’s long-standing allegations on human rights. He also felt immune from criticism for hanging [9 young men](#) only days before the event amid international outcry condemning capital punishment and deeply flawed trials that based were on confessions extracted under torture. Hence, charges have preceded and followed this collective move by the EU, but

⁵ Personal communication with an activist in ‘We Protect’ Human Rights Initiative. 23 May 2019.

⁶ Kaldor, Mary. 12/12/2017. ‘Principled Pragmatism: Defending Normative Europe’ *Open Democracy*. Accessed 28/05/2019 URL: [link](#)



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neither sides seemed apologetic. The final declaration⁷ and news conference offered careful reference to HR: *'we acknowledged that peace and security, human rights and economic and social development are mutually reinforcing (...) We condemned all acts of terrorism and human rights violations committed against the Syrian people'*.

Meanwhile, accounts regarding private discussions on HR appeared contradicting. The Arab League Secretary General Ahmed Aboul Gheit asserted that 'no criticism' or dissatisfaction were expressed about 'practices of any specific nation', including Egypt abuses of human rights, while the European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker was giving a contrasting response confirming that HR were discussed 'behind closed doors in bilateral meetings between leaders". Officially, only the Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has voiced dissent against the event by drawing reference to Egypt's execution of 42 people since 2013 and the EU's official ban of capital punishment. In response, Egypt foreign ministry exchanged accusation of [hypocrisy](#) citing allegations of HR abuses in Turkey. The situation was obviously strenuous when Ex-General Sisi received a question of whether he was checked for his HR account. The response was historical in many aspects.

Justifying collective arbitrary punishment: *"When a human being is killed in a terrorist act, the families tell me that we want the right of our children and their blood (.....) This culture exists in the region and that right must be given through the law"*.

In 2001, Bush administration launched the 'War on Terrorism' targeting Afghanistan when Taliban sought compromise and inquired about the evidence of Bin Laden's involvement in 9/11 attacks. Bush [answered](#): *"There is no need to discuss innocence or guilt, we know he is guilty"* . The war represented intentional collateral punishment that brought about countless humanitarian casualties- estimates show 104,000 killed of whom 31,000 were innocent civilians- and left a whole nation in

⁷ European Council. 25/02/2019. 'Sharm El-Sheikh Summit Declaration: Investing in Stability'. Accessed on 25/05/2019
URL: [link](#)

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deprivation, malnutrition, poor sanitation, poverty, and lack of health care. Lest, terrorism continued to challenge USA and its regional allies for two decades afterwards.

In the same line of practice, ex-General Sisi regime has professed collateral punishment of the Muslim Brotherhood who won legitimate fair and free elections in 2012 on allegations of terrorism and threatening national interests. Shortly after, ISIS took hold of northern Sinai and capitalized on growing popular grievance towards the regime's bloodbath of peaceful protestors in Rab'a and Al Nahda squares in 2013. To avenge itself for continued assaults by ISIS militias in Sinai, tens of thousands were detained, forcefully disappeared, and killed either through capital punishment on faked allegations or extra-judicial killing by security forces. In Sinai, more than 100,000 households were deported and a shameful record of 76 women and 33 children killed, 149 women and 88 children injured, and 59 women and 1 child detained, taint the ugly face of authoritarianism in Egypt. Having turned Sinai to a battlefield under the so-called 'Comprehensive Operation', only more violence and counter-terrorism has been on rise⁸.

The EU's silent approval on revenge as a governmental tool to eradicate ideological and sub-national group differences, punishing broad segments of societies for violence or illegal acts by some members, however explainable by state-run violence, represents a major transformation in the restitution logic of modern societies and lays ground for justifiable long-term conflict between the state and sub-groups. In modern sociology, punishment is meant for rehabilitation of defiant members and is guided by rational manners to achieve productive outcomes. The EU's silent confirmation on Sisi's barbaric assault on peaceful protestors, his identification of broad societal groups with treason, terrorism, and extremism, his deportation of tens of thousands from northern Sinai, appropriating private properties and professing wide-scale killing, detention, and torture of

⁸After four months of unofficial ending of the 'Comprehensive Operation', last April 11 soldiers and 1 tribal-affiliate militia member were killed and five soldiers injured. See the full report by Goneim, Haitham 'The Sinai Scene in April 2019', 14/05/2019, EIPSS, accessed 24/05/2019 URL: [link](#)



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innocents and under-age citizens, all reflect a punitive collateral punishment that amounts to crimes against humanity⁹.

Denouncing HR universalism: *"I say this with frankness: you will not dictate what our humanity should be like...."*

Referring to a core value in modern world system and EU rationale since the Second World War, ex-General Sisi was pardoned to attack a universal methodic and systematic enforcement of laws, norms, and values, as announced in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948. His words represented clear deviance from the Summit declaration which confirms 'the upholding of all aspects of international human rights law'¹⁰. Sisi defended capital punishment through mass death sentences, that often follow dubious charges and flawed court proceedings, and extra judicial killing that collected lives of 239 citizens between January and May 2019¹¹. The Times has recently issued an article documenting that more than 2,440 people have been put on the death row since ex-General Sisi started his crack down on opposition after seizing power six year ago. Figures provide some shocking realities. Reprieve, a human rights initiative, documented that:

"...between January 2014 and February 2018, courts recommended death sentences for at least 2,159 individuals, and the state carried out at least 83 executions. Since December 2017, Egypt has executed 28 people, including a mass execution of 15 people at the same time on December 26th. Courts recommend mass death sentences for 100 defendants at once (and in) March 2014 (.....) a court in (..._ Minya recommended death sentences for 529 defendants at the same time." ¹² Even

⁹ Human Rights Watch. May 2019. 'If You Are Afraid for Your Lives, Leave Sinai!' URL:

<https://www.hrw.org/report/2019/05/28/if-you-are-afraid-your-lives-leave-sinai/egyptian-security-forces-and-isis>

¹⁰ European Council. Ibid. Article 3.

¹¹ Ghoneim, Haytham

¹² Reprieve. 2019. 'Mass Trials and the Death Penalty in Egypt' Accessed 29 May 2019. URL: [link](#)

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worse, five trials ended with 75 people sentenced to death at the same time, including at least ten minors¹³.

In previous decades, human rights violations used to take place under the table. In ‘the Strongmen Strike Back’, Robert Kegan narrates that right-wing authoritarian regimes that depended on the USA for money, arms, or protection were asked to pay lip service to human rights principles and norms. Elections were held under pressures, tolerance to ‘moderate’ opponents and international NGOs, election monitoring and training of political parties, all were required, to a degree, to avoid fatal socio-economic consequences¹⁴. The article refers to Yong Deng and Fei-Ling Wang who noted that after the Tiananmen Square massacre, Chinese leaders lived in ‘constant fear of being signaled out and targeted’ by the ‘international hierarchy dominated by the United States and its liberal allies’. Time has come to witness Sisi massacring thousands in the open and justify his deeds before a silent world.

What is awkward in the summit was the outspoken challenge to the EU’s long-standing external policy priorities that focus on the ban of death penalty. The EU ‘Strategic Framework and Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy’ emphasizes that “Capital punishment is inhumane, degrading and unnecessary¹⁵. Its top priorities include “ Promoting universality of human rights by achieving universal adherence through (a) Intensify the promotion of ratification and effective implementation of key international human rights treaties, including regional human rights instruments.¹⁶ (b) Encourage third countries to fully cooperate with UN Special Rapporteurs and Independent Experts on human rights, including through issuing standing invitations and receiving such experts.” The plan

¹⁴ Kegan, Robert 14/03/2019, ‘The Strongmen Strike Back’ Washington Post. URL: [link](#)

¹⁵ International Cooperation and Development. No Date. ‘Fight Against Death Penalty’. European Council. Accessed 25/05/2019 URL: [link](#)

¹⁶ Council of the European Union. 25/06/2012. ‘EU Strategic Framework and Acton Plan on Human Rights and Democracy’ Luxembourg. Accessed 25/05/2019. URL: [link](#)

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highlights that: “death penalty and torture constitute serious violations of human rights and human dignity. Encouraged by the growing momentum towards abolition of the death penalty worldwide, the EU will continue its long-standing campaign against the death penalty. The EU will continue to campaign vigorously against torture and cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment¹⁷.

After ex-General Sisi had seized power in a coup d'état 2013, the EU Foreign Affairs Council's 'Action Plan' for 2015-2019 has reaffirmed the bloc's plans to achieve 'Elaborate a coherent approach addressing the links between death penalty, torture and cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment, extra judicial summary or arbitrary executions, enforced disappearances and arbitrary arrest and detention' by 2017¹⁸.

Instead of realizing its pre-set goal, the EU flips eyes on mass violations in Egypt under the current regime. Facing condemnation on lending legitimacy to the brutal regime in Egypt, [response](#) from EU officials described the 'no other way around' concept - e.g., Mark Rutte the Dutch prime minister says :*“sometimes you have to dance with whoever's on the dance floor. We don't always have a choice.”*. Another EU official says: *“Having to deal with autocrats is going to be daily bread and butter (...). Then you have a choice. Do you not deal with them?”*

Conclusion

EU officials' late apologies will probably fail to avert the moral blow to its internal democratic system, as well as the bloc's political constituency as a universal 'promotor' of democracy and human rights. For decades, primary membership conditions in the EU included deep commitment to democracy¹⁹; the emergence of autocratic member states inside the bloc over the course of recent years and the

¹⁷ Ibid, P.3

¹⁸ EU Foreign Affairs Council, 20/07/2015 'Council Conclusions on the Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy 2015-2019' accessed 25/05/2019 URL: [link](#)

¹⁹ Kelemen, R. Daniel. 2019. 'The European Union's Authoritarian Equilibrium' Stanford University. Accessed 26/05/2019 URL: [link](#)

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retreat from its transformative mission worldwide, all reflect what Natalie Tocci names 'principled pragmatism'²⁰ In her book, Tocci defines the term as 'guidance by clear principles that stem from a realistic assessment of the strategic environment and an idealistic aspiration to advance a better world'²¹. In other words, the EU is acting upon universal values but follows a pragmatic approach that denies the moral imperatives of these universal values. In the case of Egypt, the strategy helps encouraging a perpetuated violence that would set the bloc far from safety and stability on the long term.



20 Tocci, Natalie. 2017. *'Framing the EU Global Strategy: A Stronger Europe in a Fragile World'* Palgrave Macmillan. UK.

²¹ Ibid P.64.