



Statement by a Delegation of Arab CSOs

After an Advocacy Visit to the European Union

Brussels, On November 8, 2013,

A delegation of the Arab NGO Network for Development (ANND) visited Brussels between the 4th and the 8th of November 2013, where it met with officials at the European Commission, the European Parliament, the Euro-Med Parliamentary Assembly and the European civil society. The delegation focused on five key issues during the meetings, as well as hearings at the European Parliament and deliberations at the forum it organized during the visit with the participation of European CSOs and representatives of the European Commission and the European Investment Bank (EIB). These issues are:

- 1) Euro-Arab political relations, especially regarding the challenges of democratic transition, faced by some of the region's states and peoples, particularly Egypt and Syria,
- 2) Euro-Arab economic relations, with a focus on trade relations and ongoing negotiations with Morocco to reach in-depth and comprehensive free trade agreements,
- 3) The European policy on foreign aid and the relationship with civil society,
- 4) Issues related to security and peace in the region, and
- 5) Immigration and the movement of citizens between both sides of the Mediterranean.

At the end of the visit, the delegation issued the following statement:

First: The European Union's Response to Democratic Transformations in the Arab Region

In the context of its interaction with the changes taking place in the Arab region, the European Union (EU) reassessed its previous policies, which turned a blind eye to dealings with authoritarian and repressive regimes and sacrificed the values of freedom and democracy in order to

maintain security and stability and energy resources. It already launched a set of initiatives to support the transitions, but did not establish a new strategic vision that would reshape its relations with Arab countries, especially those that have passed and are still passing through revolutionary transformations. In countries that did not witness popular upheavals, cooperation went on with the same forms and mechanisms.

This lack of a harmonious and comprehensive vision was reflected in the EU's slow response to the events and rapid shifts in Egypt. This led to a state of indecision in developing a position based on human rights and best democratic principles, and providing support for a comprehensive national dialogue vis-à-vis the country's deep divisions.

The weakness of the European Union was also apparent in its inability to achieve a political settlement in Syria after two years of escalating violence and serious Human Rights violations by both the regime and some armed groups renowned for their extremism.

Second: Regarding Economic Policies and the Development Model Offered to Arab Countries

Arab revolutions showed that the economic models used in Arab countries and supported by the EU failed to achieve developmental objectives and promote economic and social rights. In spite of EU's awareness on this matter, their policies embedded in the Deauville partnership are similar to those of International Financial Institutions (IFIs). Indeed, they promote further liberalization of trade and finance, privatization and attraction of foreign direct investment, as well as state budget austerity

The European Union began calling for deep and comprehensive free trade agreements (DCFTAs) as a tool for economic growth and investment attraction, without carrying out a real or complete evaluation of the developmental impact of previous trade agreements. There are also warnings about the sectors whose liberalization is being negotiated. Liberalization of services may constitute a danger to citizens' right to access basic services like education, healthcare or water. Also, the liberalization of public procurement constitutes a competition for national production in this vital sector in the Arab countries.

The protection of foreign investors in accordance with generally accepted conditions would undermine the political space available to governments to steer investments to serve the interests of national productive sectors. Despite these caveats, the EU carries out sustainability impact assessments hastily, using quantitative and partial criteria for measuring and evaluating impact without extensive consultations with stakeholders. To accelerate the implementation of the European trade agenda, the European Union uses financial institutions and aid to pressure governments to agree to the offered package of aid and trade agreements, thus undermining governments' ability to negotiate and uphold their national economic priorities.

In the same context, EU policies tend to support the private sector and provide it with protection on the grounds that it is the main lever for growth and job creation. This can be seen clearly through the projects of European banks, which concentrate most of their investments on public and private partnerships that impose future debts on national budgets. The European Commission is working with financial institutions to promote blending mechanisms between development aid and private investment, but such process may not have a positive impact on development. It also undermines the national ownership of developing countries. This factor is a prerequisite in any development effort to secure priorities at the national level.

Third: Regarding the Relationship with Civil Society

Despite the European Commission's positive steps to expand civil society's participation in the formulation of policies and in consultations for the development of Euro-Med relations, a lot of efforts are still needed in order to activate and develop this participation. Multiplicity of mechanisms does not necessarily imply more effectiveness; it could, on the contrary, lead to the dispersion of efforts and capabilities. Also, selection mechanisms are still very biased. They choose from a pool of organizations that are close to European Union or to Arab governments. Relations are not expanded to include more independent organizations.

The mechanisms of access to finance are still complicated and not available to organizations capable of dealing with the proposed administrative and logistical challenges. Finally, the consultations are limited to interactions with the European Commission's bureaucratic mechanisms devoid of the ability to reach real decision makers at a ministerial and political level

Civil society's participation contributes to the enactment of mechanisms that guarantee a democratic transition that is less expensive and more in line with human rights values. Building bridges with civil society organizations in the Arab region, especially in so-called "Arab Spring" countries, is also important in providing the appropriate environment for the political transition and straightening relations to ensure the interests of various parties and avoid repeating the past mistakes. The most flagrant mistake was the European Union's exclusive focus on consultation and cooperation with government agencies and its reluctance to interact with independent organizations and social movements. This situation has changed significantly after civil society imposed itself, and it is no longer possible to ignore this vital component.

Fourth: Regarding Immigration and Movement of Citizens

The issue of the movement of people and immigration in various forms still suffers from many problems that hinder the ability to move between the two sides of the Mediterranean. Recent events such as the drowning of tens of immigrants from North Africa and the countries experiencing armed conflict, especially Syria, who were seeking a safe shelter, emphasize the seriousness of this issue in Euro-Arab relations

One should also stress out the fact that the security approach to this issue does not redress the challenges; it only increases its complexity. Southern Partner countries cannot become guards of the European borders. This challenge must be approached from a human rights perspective; an integral human rights approach in the political, economic, cultural, social and environmental fields would contribute to the treatment of this great imbalance in Euro-Arab relations. Living with dignity where rights to active political participation, decent jobs and equality are protected, would reduce the desire to immigrate to the north. The fact that most European countries face financial and economic crises and a sharp decline in employment makes matters worse, and makes it more urgent to look for alternative policies and urgent action.

On the other hand, it is necessary that European countries look into facilitating the issuance of work, study and cultural exchange visas. Also, a reduction of visa costs would contribute to stronger relations and partnership, and contribute to the alleviation of the challenges that mar European-Arab relations.

Fifth: The Arab-Israeli Conflict

The European Union adopted positive steps in terms of recognizing continued Israeli violations, as well as the non-recognition of the occupation of Palestinian territories behind the 1967 borders. It issued guidelines to implement the Council of European Foreign Ministers' decision to boycott goods and commodities from "existing frameworks" beyond 1967 boundaries. This step must be complemented by positive work to end the occupation, lift the unjust siege on the Gaza Strip, stop settlement and the Judaization of Jerusalem, and respect the legitimate rights of the Palestinian people, especially the right to self-determination.

Just, comprehensive and sustainable peace cannot be based on anything other than the respect of human rights and an end to the occupation. Thus, the European Union, which establishes its principles and policies according to democracy, justice and rights, and according to the 1995 Barcelona Declaration on the establishment of the Euro-Med zone where security and peace reign, should work on the implementation of the recommendations issued by the European Parliament to freeze the partnership with Israel unless it abides by human rights, international resolutions and international law.