

Book Review: Transatlantic Trends in Democracy Promotion: Electoral Assistance in the Palestinian Territories

Blog Admin

*Why did the EU, the US, and Canada embark on assisting the elections in the Palestinian Territories, and what factors influenced their electoral assistance? In this systematic, comparative analysis of European, American and Canadian efforts to assist elections and transform governance in conflict zones, **Rouba Al-Fattal Eeckelaert** provides a thought provoking read for students of IR and democracy, writes **Richard Armstrong**.*



Transatlantic Trends in Democracy Promotion: Electoral Assistance in the Palestinian Territories. Rouba Al-Fattal Eeckelaert. Ashgate. January 2013.

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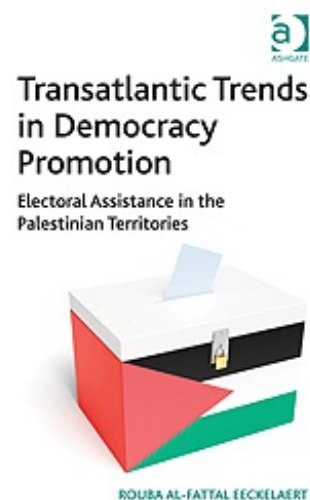
In 2006, Hamas won elections in the Palestinian Territories. Although the international community had pushed for and funded the elections, once Hamas won, the U.S and others refused to recognize the results. More recently in Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood was ousted in a coup, despite having won the election just a year ago. The United States barely said a word in protest.

Why does the West seem to support democracy in the Middle East, but quickly change its mind when elections bring Islamists to power? This is one of the questions [Rouba Al-Fattal Eeckelaert](#) looks at in this book on electoral assistance that the US, Canada and the EU give to the Palestinian Territories.

The book provides a thorough overview of how the three actors provided electoral assistance to the Palestinian Authorities and the reasons they all boycotted the results after Hamas's victory.

The author uses a quote from Anwar Sadat that "America holds 99 per cent of the cards for settling the Israeli-Arab conflict". Although he said this decades ago, it still holds true. America is the most important outside power in the Middle East, especially for the peace process where it has influence with both Israel and its neighbours. The US also influences its allies, which the book argues was a factor in all three transatlantic parties boycotting Hamas (though shared values and interests were also important).

One of Al-Fattal Eeckelaert's conclusions suggests a way forward for Western foreign policy. Rather than just assisting countries with elections, they should work more on creating the conditions that would make these states more democratic. In this vein she recommends increasing pluralism, most importantly by engaging with Islamist parties, as long as they renounce violence. The author is unable to reconcile this with Hamas, who all three transatlantic actors classify as a terrorist group. She cites a scholar who argued that Hamas was moving away from its belligerent charter, which she stretches to describe as "calming shifts", though acknowledges that this could merely be a cynical tactical move. But Hamas has not changed its rhetoric or its actions, continuing to fire rockets into Israel in recent years. The author also quotes Mahmoud Rahmani, an Secretary General of the Palestinian Legislative Council and member of Hamas, as saying that they "would not impose Islam by force" by proscribing women wear the veil and ban alcohol. The book argues that this was an effort by Hamas to gain approval from the international community and that it would have been worth taking a chance on Hamas. But now five years after the election we know that Hamas has been very aggressive in [forcing its religiosity on the Gaza strip](#).



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Celebrations as Muslim Brotherhood's Mohamed Morsi announced Egypt's president. Credit: [Jonathan Rashad](#) CC BY-NC-SA 2.0

crucial weaknesses of democracy promotion in the Middle East. So far, Islamist parties have shown little respect for pluralism and democracy once they gain power. In Egypt the Muslim Brotherhood showed a rank [unwillingness to consider other voices in governing](#), most noticeably in the writing of the constitution, something that should not have been a partisan exercise. The same has happened in Turkey where the mild Islamist AK Party has long ignored other voices, culminating in recent protests against the Prime Minister's heavy handedness.

The idea of increasing pluralism by including parties that don't respect pluralism is as big a contradiction as the one between normative and strategic interests. This perhaps makes it more understandable that that the US doesn't always follow through on its rhetoric. And Al-Fattal Eeckelaert is right that the US, EU and Canada should have been more clear about what kind of democracy they were seeking to cultivate. If they had been explicit that they wanted a liberal democracy (with human rights, respect for minorities etc.), instead of a majoritarian one, there would not have been the charges of hypocrisy that emerged after they boycotted the elections.

A recurring theme for all three parties is the conflict between normative and strategic goals. While democracy promotion has long been a component of US foreign policy, due to normative ideas like the democratic peace theory, in practice the idea of supporting democracy in the region can lead to parties coming to power that are inimical to America's interests. This has long been a problem, as the US supports sclerotic authoritarian regimes and doesn't push them to democratically reform, for fear of what would replace them. But since the Arab Spring and the fall of leaders including Hosni Mubarak, this idea has collapsed. The American response to the Muslim Brotherhood suggests that they have not learned any lessons from the Hamas case discussed in the book.

Al-Fattal Eeckelaert's argument that democracy should be seen as an end in and of itself is a just idea. However, states are *always* going to consider their own strategic interests, rather than their values. While this may be hard for us to swallow at times, it is only natural and in line with centuries of diplomacy.

Transatlantic Trends is a useful book that prompts the reader to think through how Western foreign policy should respond to the rise of democracy, or at least elections, in the Middle East. As this book was finished in 2010, it does not consider recent developments on the topic, and given the pace of events the example of the Palestinian elections feels somewhat outdated. This is not the fault of the author, and the book provides a very good introduction to electoral assistance to Middle East countries. I look forward to reading Al-Fattal Eeckelaert's future work, and hope she provides similar analysis on the western role in more recent Middle East elections. At this juncture, it does not seem as if Western policy has become any more coherent or effective since 2006.

Richard Armstrong is recent M.A. graduate from Seton Hall University's School of Diplomacy and International Relations in New Jersey. His research interests include international security, U.S. foreign policy and the Middle East. He was previously an Editorial Assistant at World Policy Journal in New York. [Read more reviews by Richard.](#)

