

**THE EU AND THE ARAB SPRING, ONE YEAR AFTER:
A VIEW FROM THE NORTH**

*Pol Morillas**
*Eduard Soler i Lecha***

More than a year after the start of the Arab Spring, the EU still looks puzzled about its strategic response to the tectonic movements in its immediate neighbourhood. The demise of Arab dictators and the emergence of radically different political landscapes have shaken the grounds of EU relations with the Southern Mediterranean. A number of national and European statements and communications have captured the historical event that the Arab revolutions represent. But the EU has failed to strategically respond to the emergence of new trends in the Mediterranean, including increasingly diverse political systems, multipolar societies and the emergence of a wide range of influential external powers. Simultaneously, EU policies have been undermined by the repercussions of a series of internal crises in Europe, a trend towards re-nationalisation of continental politics and an irresponsive foreign policy system.

Mixing Up Instruments with Strategic Goals

Changes in the Arab world have shed light on the incapacity to reach the goals set by the EU and its Mediterranean partners since 1995. The Barcelona Process was aimed at creating a common area of peace, security and shared prosperity, to be underpinned by sustainable development, rule of law, democracy and human rights. This area was also aimed at establishing economic and financial partnerships to promote socioeconomic development and increasing exchanges among civil society in order to establish a social, cultural and human partnership.

These goals were largely overshadowed by the promotion of pragmatic relations both by EU Member States and EU institutions with authoritarian regimes, which promised tough control of illegal immigration, the fight against terrorism, containment of Islamist movements and the supply of energy resources to the European markets. In practice, the policies of the EU towards the Mediterranean were confronted with a trade-off between stability and democracy, in which EU policies towards the region turned a blind eye to human rights violations, political repression and poor socioeconomic conditions, particularly for youngsters, women and inhabitants of rural areas.

*Pol Morillas is Coordinator of Euromed Policies at the IEMed

**Eduard Soler i Lecha is Research Fellow at CIDOB (Barcelona Centre for International Affairs)

The current revision of EU policies towards the region has highlighted the need for “building deep democracy” and “ensuring inclusive and sustainable economic growth and development.” The European Commission and the High Representative have issued two communications: “A Partnership for Democracy and Shared Prosperity with the Southern Mediterranean” (March 2011) and “A New Response to a Changing Neighbourhood” (May 2011), the last one being a scheduled revision of the European Neighbourhood Policy well under way before the uprisings started.

Both communications are the backbone of the EU’s response to the Arab Spring. They outline a detailed set of instruments and programmes aimed at supporting democratic transition (for instance, via the European Endowment for Democracy), strengthening civil society (with the EU’s Civil Society Facility), encouraging sustainable economic development and growth (via the development of Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreements) and easier human mobility (through the negotiation of mobility partnerships including visa-facilitation mechanisms).

The emphasis by officials and experts on the review of the EU’s technical cooperation instruments has been at the expense of a more strategic response to the Arab Spring. Indeed, most of the speeches and analyses deal with the prospects for implementing the so-called “3 Ms” (money, market and mobility), the appropriateness of the more for more principle and the conditionality of EU programmes. Less has been said on the long-term goals and interests of the EU towards its southern neighbourhood. In a sense, EU responses hint at a mismatch between what EU foreign policy towards the region will look like and how its instruments (including its Neighbourhood Policy) will complement such a strategic vision.

This instrument-based response clashes with the emergence of a fragmented, multipolar and enlarged neighbourhood.

Firstly, the crises in Libya and Syria, the democratic reforms of Morocco and Jordan and the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions have created an increasingly fragmented region, with diverging prospects and speeds for the establishment of democratic systems. This should trigger in-depth debates in the EU about the adaptation of the Euro-Mediterranean project, including the Union for the Mediterranean and the bilateral policies to diverse national scenarios and emerging sub-regional dynamics.

Secondly, internal politics is back at the centre of North African and Middle Eastern dynamics. On a national level, the results of democratic elections in Tunisia, Egypt and Morocco have

brought Islamist parties to the forefront of Arab political systems. Ennahda, the Muslim Brotherhood's Freedom and Justice Party and the Justice and Development Party had too often been sidelined by EU officials and national diplomacies. The presence of Islamist parties, youth movements, old regime forces and powerful armies reflect the emergence of multipolar societies, in which interlocution with the EU will become increasingly complex.

Thirdly, the Mediterranean has ceased to be Europe's and the United States' *domaine réservé*. Other powers such as Turkey, the Gulf countries, Iran, China or Russia are struggling for reinforced influence and shaping an enlarged neighbourhood. The EU will need to upgrade its policies towards regional organisations, such as the Gulf Cooperation Council and the Arab League, and compete with funds, programmes and the diplomatic activity of emerging foreign policy actors. In addition, it will have to tackle possible spill-over effects of the Arab Spring to the Sahel region and potential destabilising scenarios, as the current crisis in Mali has revealed.

Foreign Policy-Making in the Midst of European Crises

The lack of EU strategic direction mirrors the institutional context of the EU and the current crisis of the European integration model, which has been aggravated by the economic and financial crises. The attention given to the Mediterranean has suffered from the weakening of Southern European countries, the focus on solving the Euro crisis and, consequently, the difficulties of convincing domestic actors to mobilise significant extra funding to cope with the Southern Mediterranean economic challenges.

In this adverse context, and in spite of the creation of the EEAS, the internal dynamics in the EU reveal an increased re-nationalisation of recent foreign policy initiatives. France and the United Kingdom took the driving seat of the military intervention in Libya, raising awareness of the responsibility to protect but also prioritise European national voices in the international scene. Meanwhile, Germany placed itself outside the EU and the Western mainstream and abstained in the UN Security Council resolution, which authorised the NATO operation. Some months later, these three countries voted in opposite directions regarding the admission of Palestine at UNESCO (France said Yes, the United Kingdom abstained and Germany voted against). In addition, EU Member States – the watchdogs of EU foreign policy formulation – have been less referential than EU institutions in providing strategic guidance to the Arab Spring.

Moreover, the EU foreign policy machinery created by the Lisbon Treaty in December 2009 was still at its testing phase when the revolutions unfolded. The first anniversary of the European External Action Service in December 2011 and the establishment of new working dynamics bet-

ween Member States and the High Representative reveal the existence of a very immature institutional framework.

The limited response of the EU might thus respond to a lack of delivering capacities of this new institutional architecture. A comprehensive new strategy towards the Mediterranean would require a series of institutional arrangements that the EU foreign policy machinery is still struggling to produce (for instance the creation of rapid and coherent response strategies when crisis arise, a common approach towards Islamist movements or the coordination by EU Delegations of the work of EU Member States in Southern Mediterranean countries). Therefore, it has been much easier to launch an instrument-based response in the framework of the revision of the European Neighbourhood Policy, created in 2004, and via Commission-led programmes.

While the EU has delivered reasonably well on money in a context of severe economic crisis and has created the figure of an EU Special Envoy for the Mediterranean, the commitments on markets and mobility require active commitments by EU Member States and are still work in progress. The same goes for a new strategic vision for the region, which requires a series of discussions between EU institutions and Member States yet to happen.

The approach of the EU to the Arab Spring thus recalls the foreign policy experience of the Union so far. The definition of the EU's global role has been the result of a progressive sedimentation of instruments and practices rather than the early adoption of strategic narratives. That is the case of soft power theories to define the EU's tackling approach of international challenges and the European Security Strategy of 2003, which only appeared when practice in the global stage via the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) and Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) was well under way.

Bringing this debate to the analysis of the EU's response to the Arab Spring suggests two critical questions: will an EU Strategy towards the Mediterranean follow suit once the EU policy instruments are fully operational? And, more crucially, how necessary is it for the EU to adopt a clear-cut strategy towards the Mediterranean at a time of internal institutional adjustments and when the region becomes increasingly fragmented, polarised and multipolar? An early evaluation of the response to the Arab Spring suggests that the EU has decided to play safe and follow the instrumental dynamics of EU foreign policy construction.

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