

**THE EU AND THE ARAB SPRING, ONE YEAR AFTER:  
A VIEW FROM THE SOUTH***Hanaa Ebeid\**

After years of stagnation, lightening fast changes in Arab countries are reshaping domestic politics, regional dynamics and international relations. Although political realities are still in the making, the evolving patterns are bound to influence the future of EU-Arab relations.

In most countries of the Arab Spring, Europe does not figure distinctively in political discourse.<sup>1</sup> The general tone since the onset of revolutionary waves has been one celebrating *home-grown* popular uprisings, and emphasising newly found dignity and independence, and thus is generally inclined towards autonomy from external actors.

Aside from this very broad inclination, relations with the EU are taking a back seat in most countries of the Arab Spring, with the exception of Libya, and to a lesser degree in Tunisia. Hence, amid the current state of flux, visions on relations with the EU are fuzzy and undifferentiated.

The EU, in its turn, is not providing a better perspective. Despite having traditionally been in the driving seat, setting the tone and charting paths for Euro-Mediterranean relations, the EU's reaction to the Arab revolutions is giving mixed signals and at times fails to give one at all.

In the early days of the Tunisian and Egyptian popular uprisings, the EU seemed overwhelmed by events and unable to formulate a response. Various Member States adopted a cautious wait-and-see approach, calling for an "end to violence" while the EU did not throw its "normative" plight behind democratic demands in either country until it was clear the ruling regimes would not survive.

Shortly afterwards, in March 2011, responses from the EU gave decidedly positive signals to countries of the region. In this respect, the European Commission and the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy presented "Partnership for Democracy and Shared

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1. Dima Tarhini, "Inside the Arab Bloggers' Minds: Europe, Democracy and Religion", SWP Working Paper, June 2011, [http://www.swp-berlin.org/fileadmin/contents/products/arbeitspapiere/WorkingPaperLTarhini\\_Dima.pdf](http://www.swp-berlin.org/fileadmin/contents/products/arbeitspapiere/WorkingPaperLTarhini_Dima.pdf) [last accessed 30 March 2012].

Prosperity”, which explicitly sided with the process of political change in the region, promising support for democratic transition, stronger engagement with civil society, and encouraging sustainable and inclusive growth.<sup>2</sup>

By the end of May, a joint communication of the EU High Representative and the European Commission entitled “A New Response to a Changing Neighbourhood: A Review of European Neighbourhood Policy” was providing an articulate stance, which fleshed out the aforementioned objectives of the Partnership, while explicitly mentioning conditionality as the organising policy mechanism.<sup>3</sup>

#### **New Approaches, Old Paradigms**

EU-Arab relations suffer an overflow of approaches rather than a scarcity in frameworks dealing with the region. On the positive side, the new EU Partnership Initiative and related position announcements reflect a better understanding of the region in the aftermath of revolutions. On a more sobering note, they tend to replicate some of the foundational flaws, which have inflicted the EU’s approach to the region.

In this regard, the new initiatives replicate an inherent imbalance in EU-Arab relations, which Mohamed El Sayed Salim refers to as a producer/consumer dichotomy, whereby Arab countries are bound to consume initiatives, ideas and institutional frameworks produced by the EU.<sup>4</sup> Thus, despite their positive nature and emphasis on the need for a “stronger partnership with people,” the new initiatives are guilty of the same old sin; being one-sided, purely European initiatives bestowed upon the region without prior dialogue. Although the proposed Neighbourhood NGOs’ facility promises improved representation of Southern Mediterranean countries, the *voice* of the South needs to be better embedded in policy formulations.

Moreover, one of the major flawed policy assumptions of Euromed cooperation frameworks which the new approach fails to escape is the *belief* that neoliberal economics is good for developing countries. Popular uprisings, especially in Tunisia and Egypt, brought in full force what the social cost of such policies could entail. Evident developments in the EU’s discourse over the past few months delving into new policies and activities of more salience to Southern Mediterranean countries’ development, including job creation, industrial cooperation, rural development and

2. [http://eeas.europa.eu/euromed/docs/com2011\\_200\\_en.pdf](http://eeas.europa.eu/euromed/docs/com2011_200_en.pdf).

3. [http://ec.europa.eu/world/enp/pdf/com\\_11\\_303\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/world/enp/pdf/com_11_303_en.pdf).

4. Mohamed El Sayed Selim, “How Arab-European Relations Could Be Reformed?”, *Al Houkoul*, 13 February 2010, <http://www.alhoukoul.com/node/3079>.

regional disparities, show that the outcry of southern societies for justice was heard. However, it is arguable that the neoliberal mindset and practices based on privatisation and free trade is deep-rooted and might prove difficult to shake. Given the previous experience of the difficulty of overhauling bureaucratic politics, the change of discourse adapted to the new revolutionary context might never materialise into changed policies on the ground.

Finally, “the more for more approach” entailing more EU assistance for more democratic and economic reforms is a mere eloquent rephrasing of the already in place “differentiated approach” of the European Neighbourhood Policy. Not only has the record of benchmarking and differentiation proved fuzzy and ineffective in practice,<sup>5</sup> but the new approach in the troubled revolutionary context could develop into an even more cautious EU stance leaving the Partnership hostage to fair weather! According to this principle, the EU could turn into a sheer bystander vis-à-vis developments in countries like Egypt if it is perceived that the positive conditions for EU engagements are lacking, which is arguably the current stance of the EU towards the turbulent transition in Egypt.

#### **Linkage, Leverage: Why Conditionality Cannot Work**

The Arab Spring has finally brought democracy to the forefront of EU-Arab relations. The widely held conviction that EU pro-democracy policies prior to the Arab Spring are questionable might be an answer to the wrong question. In this regard, questions arise as to whether the EU had a genuine *interest* in democracy promotion in the region and if the EU has sufficient *leverage* to effect democracy from the outside. Developments since the onset of the Spring indicate that on the level of interest in Arab democracy the EU is half-hearted, while on the ability to induce change, the EU's ability is questionable at best.

It is difficult to judge *intentions* and unprofessed apprehensions that democracy would bring unfriendly governments, or even worse chaos and political vacuum to the region. However, the implicit fear of the rise of Islamists and other security concerns cannot be dismissed as a latent tension which continues to cause EU ambivalence towards democratisation in the region.

Moreover, an untold dilemma is the limited EU potential to direct domestic changes in the region. If the EU managed to provide *direction* to Eastern European countries in transition through the combined influence of linkage and leverage according to Way and Levitsky,<sup>6</sup> this very experience

5. Raffaella A. Del Sarto and Tobias Schumacher, “From Brussels with Love: Leverage, Benchmarking and the Action Plans with Jordan and Tunisia in the EU's Democratization Policy”, *Democratization*, Vol. 18, No. 4, 2011.

6. Lucan A. Way and Steven Levitsky, “Linkage, Leverage and the Post-Communist Divide”, *East European Politics and Society*, Vol. 21, No. 1, 2007.

signifies that the EU's ability to influence democracy in the region is exaggerated. In this regard, the EU's reluctance to forge deeper linkage provides insufficient incentive for sustained political reform. The advanced status as the main *carrot* or reward for reform proves intriguing in terms of magnitude and has been provided to countries which are not scoring well on democratic benchmarks.

Moreover, despite possessing some pressure cards vis-à-vis countries of the region, especially aid allocations, the EU's leverage in the field of democracy promotion is arguably overrated. Most Arab countries are non-aid dependent and MENA countries maintain an overall aid level less than 1% of national income, making conditionality and the aid card in general less effective than in other cases.

The implication is that whereas conditionality comes in handy as the most "suitable" tool to promote democracy in the region, it might actually be the least effective, especially with the aforementioned inclination towards maintaining autonomy and independence, which is shared across the political spectrum in most countries of the Arab Spring. The recent saga of foreign-funded NGOs in Egypt signifies how little leverage conditionality by itself could have in the process of democratisation.

More significant alternatives lie in the less appreciated realm of normative power. Although it is difficult to formulate short- and medium-term policy goals based on making use of normative power, materialising the normative plight of the EU into pro-democracy momentum needs to be rooted in consistency and ties with youth and new social actors, among whom the EU's image is positive, should be extended.

### **Conclusion**

The new political dynamism in the region impacts EU-Arab relations in many ways. On the positive side, it has discredited the stereotypes and cultural judgements, which have influenced thinking about the region for a long time. Moreover, popular uprisings have brought the people back in. Considered as a geo-strategic or geo-economic space, people of the region tended to be overlooked in previous EU policies towards the region as a whole or its constituent countries. The new EU initiatives as well as the decision to side with the Libyan revolution exhibit better terms of engagement with the region, if still not strong enough to bring about the objectives of shared democracy and prosperity.

For the EU-Arab partnership to endure and better serve interests and values on both sides, some of the old spectres need to be addressed, most notably the need for a just settlement of the Palestinian cause.

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New challenges in the field of democracy promotion need novel and adaptive policies. The EU will have to walk a tightrope between non-interference in domestic political struggles and meddling in domestic politics. One area of intervention that should be avoided is the role of religion in politics, or siding with domestic political forces on the basis of their stance towards politics and religion.

Since economic challenges are dominating the scene in most transition countries, emphasis on just and sustainable development and socially sensible policies need to be vigorously pursued through a comprehensive and mutual assessment of the previous economic cooperation frameworks. Moreover, gestures of uncompromised siding with the “people” should, in terms of disclosure, freezing and retrieving of assets belonging to the ousted regimes, also build confidence and send a positive signal.

The path is not expected to be neat or predictable, and clashes of interests and perceptions are bound to arise. However, acting more in line with partnership than patronage and living up to its ethical plight is by far the most significant leverage the EU possesses towards the region.

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