



The EU and the Arab Spring

Some 18 months following the start of the Arab Spring, there is still widespread turmoil in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). The revolutions and conflicts have taken the lives of over 35,000 people, cost well in excess of \$50 billion, and displaced countless thousands of individuals who form part of the 16% rise in those trying to claim asylum in the EU in 2011.¹ The continued instability in the region is a barrier to economic growth, which in turn is a barrier to stability in politics and society. The collapse of well-armed security apparatuses across MENA has resulted in a glut of small arms flowing onto the black market, making the situation in each of these countries even more dangerous. For the EU, a political, social and economic implosion of this sort has a deep impact on the underlying trends concerning migration, counterterrorism policy, economic growth, and societal stability. The Arab Spring and its consequences are therefore vital interests of the EU.

This briefing explores why the Arab Spring is so important to the EU and how it has responded to it. The briefing also examines why the Arab Spring came as surprise to European politicians and their officials. The main argument in this paper is that the EU has responded reasonably well to the crisis (although it had failed to predict it entirely), and while the on-going tensions in the region present some very serious threats for the EU, there is a great opportunity for the EU to shape a positive future for the MENA and for itself in international affairs.

Why the Arab Spring matters to the EU

The Arab Spring poses two different sets of problems for Europe. It increases the pressure for migration and it lowers the obstacles to the spread of Al-Qaeda-like organizations across the Southern Mediterranean region. These were already significant problems beforehand; now they are worse.

Migration

The MENA region already accounts for 44% of migration attempts into the EU through the central Mediterranean area, and attempts through this route increased fifteen fold between 2010 and 2011, according to the EU Borders Agency, FRONTEX. As such, migration from the MENA region into the EU via this busy corridor represents a challenge to the EU in terms of absolute numbers (cutting across issues of homeland security, community cohesion, and pressure on domestic labor markets) and also in terms of where the attempts to land are made, putting additional pressure on the financially pressed countries of the EU, who shoulder a disproportionate burden for migration: namely, Greece, Italy, and Spain. While the EU is

commonly criticized for not having a common political view on migration, it has acquired the mechanisms for common border control: the Schengen Information System (I &II), which will come on stream in 2013, and the Visa Information System, among others. The latter gives a pan-European view and common access across enforcement agencies, and is reasonably close to the American approach to border control, but with the implementation being vested in member states rather than being held federally. The main medium term issues arising from migration from MENA into the EU are centered on the protection of domestic labor markets, community cohesion (which is particularly acute in times of economic distress), and homeland security, which follows in the next section. The EU has a very real and pressing interest in the restoration of stability to the MENA region, so as not to import instability into EU territories.

Security

The increasing threat of terrorism is not solely or even primarily the result of democratization in the Arab world. The Arab awakening only made it easier for terrorist groups to infiltrate and establish themselves across the region. The drive to do so came because these groups were pushed out of other places. One of the successes of the Afghan campaign has been to restrict the ability of Al-Qaeda and its affiliates to train recruits within Afghanistan (and the peripheral parts of Pakistan) and to prevent activists from basing themselves there too. While a large number of the core of Al-Qaeda have been captured or killed in the Afghanistan and Pakistan region, this had the effect of pushing surviving affiliates into Yemen, Somalia, Nigeria, and Libya, and creating new affiliates too. Libya, for example, was one of the primary sources of jihadist terrorists during the 2000s, all of which had left Libya as Gadhafi's intelligence agencies made it impossible for them to remain there. With the political turmoil in the region and the lack of certainty around governance and security, there has been a large influx into the region of European jihadists seeking training and opportunities to fight, who, it is then anticipated, will return to European destinations seeking to perpetrate atrocities against European populations and key infrastructure.

Since April 2011, the MENA training area for jihadists has spread from Somalia and Yemen to include Libya and Egypt. It is estimated by the British intelligence community that some 100 Jihadists received operational level training in Somalia alone in 2011, and they anticipate that similar numbers will be trained in Libya and Egypt during 2012 as well. Worse still, these groups are now said to be in receipt of Iranian money, as the Revolutionary Guard in Iran seeks to destabilize Europe and thus deflect some of the attention being placed on the Iranian nuclear weapons program (see accompanying brief). The Director of the British Security Service also raised the prospect of this Iranian funding resulting in the transfer of nuclear materials to terrorists groups to facilitate the creation of a 'dirty bomb'. Such a magnification of the threat from jihadists, following a successful counterterrorism campaign in Afghanistan, would represent a serious step-back in the long war against Jihadism. It also adds a great deal of importance to the task of stabilizing the MENA, and encouraging the imposition of the rule of law, appropriate standards of behavior, and a publicly accountable structure of intelligence and policing. Of course the same levels of sensitivity would have to

be applied here too – European intelligence agencies are closely linked to the intelligence services of the overthrown regimes, and they need not to be too closely related to the re-branded intelligence agencies for the good of all concerned.

The Arab Spring did a great deal of damage to the well-established networks of intelligence liaisons between European and ‘Arab’ countries that had grown closer in the first decade of the new century as part of a need to counter the rise of jihadist terrorists. The collapse of these regimes (and their intelligence apparatuses) ended the flow of intelligence on persons of concern, ended the flow of useful information about those moving into positions of authority in the transitional governments, and also revealed the extent to which European governments had assisted in the curtailment of dissident activity in Libya, for example. What this has resulted in, largely, is a security community flying blind in trying to pick the winners in the current rounds of the political transformations, and hoping that these winners are politically palatable.

Why the Arab Spring came as a surprise

The key reasons the Arab Spring came as a surprise to analysts and policy makers were partly that they drew their local intelligence from regime insiders (who were also caught looking the wrong way), and partly because they were wedded to mainstream accounts suggesting that the Arab Spring was caused by the popular and suppressed discontent of the populations that were given vent through a single set of events in Tunisia in December 2010. The combination of the ‘wikileaks’ cables² confirming the US view that the Tunisian President Ben Ali presided over a fundamentally corrupt regime, and the immolation of the street trader Mohamed Bouazizi following the confiscation of his market cart by security forces gave a trigger to the discontent, something further assisted by the speed at which Ben Ali and his regime gave up political control of Tunisia.

In line with the policy preferences of EU institutions, member governments, and the US, this account of the Arab Spring locates centers on the empowerment that comes from representative democracy. What then followed was a wave of protests and riots – that were unthinkable only 12 months previously - all over North Africa and the Middle East, which resulted in the toppling of well-established dictators (President Ben Ali in Tunisia, President Mubarak in Egypt), the forced toppling of the Gaddafi regime in Libya (via armed rebels and an intervention by western military powers), and substantial unrest in Syria that now amounts to a civil war. There have also been reports of serious (regime-threatening) protests in Bahrain and Yemen, important governments in the US’ network of counterterrorism partners, and less violent uprisings in Jordan, Algeria, and Morocco, all of which appear to have dissipated.

The key question for the EU, as an important part of a network of states and intergovernmental organizations who see it as their role to try and ensure regional stability, is to identify the key factors that caused this wave of revolutions, and then try to ensure sustainable and modern governance in those countries for the future. There are good reasons

for the European powers to want to help facilitate security in the long term over the Middle East and North Africa:

- regional instability threatens core commodity prices;
- fluctuating oil price affects fragile European economies;
- instability and armed struggle in MENA is renewing militant jihadist groups who had been on the wane following the Afghan war;
- instability provides a fertile training ground for European dissidents to be trained in terror tactics; and
- the instability is increasing the numbers of migrants heading for key European peripheral nations like Italy, Greece and Spain.

The alternative reading of the Arab Spring is around the failure to understand the particular mix of underlying conditions of instability within the countries and how these were then catalyzed into dissent (i.e. the creation of loosely configured movements) and triggered into political action. That is not to say that the underlying factors were obscured to analysts and policy makers in the west: they had just failed to understand how these factors were operating in unison. The storm clouds were gathering, but the analysts were not predicting rain.

Using the example of Tunisia, it is possible to see how these factors conspired in the Arab Spring. The underlying issues in Tunisia included the clustering of poverty into rural areas, and the fact that the jobs that had been created were only temporary in nature, such as in tourism. More problematic was the systemic inequality contained within the distribution of income: the top 20% earned 47.9% of the country's total income, while the bottom 20% earned only 5.7%.³ The catalyzing factors within Tunisia were – somewhat unfortunately for progressive governments in the region – the improvements to the numbers attending university (standing at 31% in 2010), which produced an educated and aware class of young adults, of whom 50% were still unemployed 12 months after graduation. This created a vocal group of aggrieved individuals who had expected better outcomes from this improved access to higher education.⁴ For the protest movement, it then became important that not only were they literate but that they could easily communicate and organize – the 33% of the population who had regular access to the internet (again, progressive for the region) and the 24% who were members of Facebook, meant that when the trigger of Bouazizi's self-immolation and the wikileaks documents pointing towards systemic government corruption occurred, they were able to organize themselves very effectively.⁵ The Facebook messages that circulated quickly about Bouazizi pointed to his university education and his origin from a region in Tunisia that had the peculiarly high unemployment rate of some 35%; a clear reference back to the underlying sources of tension. The analysis and anger at what was contained within the so-called *Cablegate* documents was also catalyzed by the increased number of people able to cross-compare what they read with what they understood of standards in the western world.

So, the lesson from Tunisia for the international community, and particularly the EU, is about improving their respective analytical functions to incorporate an understanding of a greater number of localized factors which – in these cases - would have allowed them to predict and

proactively respond to the catalysts before they became violent political actions. In Egypt this may have meant the US, in particular, stepping in to assist the Mubarak regime, while in Libya there is a case to be made that British intelligence would have at least made a move to secure papers that implicated them in collusion with Libyan intelligence, while the wider international community may have used the predictions to accelerate the downfall of Gadhafi. In general, however, an improved ability to predict these strategic shocks would have greatly assisted the EU and its allies in preparing, and dealing with the aftermath.

What the EU did and what it can do

There is a clear difference between what the individual European powers did in response to the Arab Spring, and what the EU did. The focus of attention on European powers has been around the initiative taken by the British and French governments in finding international support for their UN Resolution (1973) and their lead in the air action against the Gaddafi regime in Libya (see accompanying brief on defense capabilities). The focus of this briefing is on the EU level response, which throws much light on the way the European Union responds to international crises and the opportunities open to the EU's External Action Service (EEAS) at this time.

The much criticized EU foreign and security policy, and the equally well criticized High Representative/Vice-President, Baroness Catherine Ashton and her fully fledged diplomatic apparatus, the EU External Action Service has a golden opportunity to find a role for itself in helping to shape the future of the MENA countries currently in transition. The violent political upheaval of the Arab Spring removes some of the historic blockages that would have prevented the EU becoming more involved in this transition period. These blockages normally revolve around various member governments' strategic or historic interests in a third country, but with the overturn of embedded dictators, such niceties no longer apply, certainly not in the short-term. This permissive environment, for example, allowed the EEAS to establish an office in the bitterly fought-over city of Benghazi in May 2011, long before the situation could have been seen to stabilize, and also to directly pump in €150 million worth of stabilization funding.

The EU tends to respond in the same way to all nations coming out of civil war and conflict: the emphasis is always on providing a large number of individual development projects and initiatives without the presence of an overarching strategy. Currently, the EU is repeating this pattern with the countries of the Arab Spring: evidence for this can be found – for example – in the EU task force for Tunisia and the list of projects it announced on 29 September 2011.⁶ The mainstay of the EU's approach typified by its '3 Ms' slogan (Money, Mobility and Markets) has focused on the need to help and promote the construction of what it terms 'deep democracy' in the MENA, by which it means the creation and sustainment of an independent judiciary, a free media, and a thriving and free civil society. It also wants to help forge sustainable economic growth, which it sees as a necessary platform for 'deep democracy' and which it is trying to deliver through mechanisms like the 'Deep and

Comprehensive Free Trade Areas (DCFTAs)' which it has with Morocco, Jordan, Egypt and Tunisia, but it recognizes that it will need to differentiate its approach to each country, while retaining these common threads.⁷ But really to take advantage of this opportunity the EU rapidly needs to develop a better understanding of its strategic approach to the Middle East, which is in turn based upon an understanding of how the Middle East impacts the prosperity and stability of the European Union.

It is important to note, however, that these uprisings have been about overthrowing established patterns of political control, and these include colonial (mostly European) and neo-colonial (mostly American) influence. Thus, whilst it is right that the EU asserts policies that fit within its core interests, it cannot be seen trying to govern the newly emerging governments in the Arab Spring countries. The delegations that have gone to MENA from the EU have focused their message on securing genuine partnerships with the new governments in MENA (the European Commission's SPRING program – Support for Partnership, Reform and Inclusive Growth which is funded to the tune of €350 million, is a good example of this), which reflect the preferences of local stakeholders and which are more relaxed about engaging with types of governance which would be alien in the west and political actors who would normally be seen to be antagonistic to European interests. By contrast the new regimes in MENA are interested in European development money and preferential trading terms, but not in the sort of all-encompassing partnerships and unions the EU talks about.⁸ Two such schemes that fit this bill are the SANAD (an investment scheme to facilitate the creation of small and medium size enterprises in the MENA), which was launched in August 2011 in conjunction with the German KfW bank (Kreditanstalt für Wiederaufbau) totaling some €20 million, and the "Investment Security" scheme for the Mediterranean, jointly with the Multilateral Investment Guarantee Agency, the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development and the Union for the Mediterranean. For the Europeans, therefore, there clearly is a very marginal balance which needs to be struck: between accepting local interests and the fluid patterns of political change in these countries and projecting European interests. In many senses, the EU 'cannot win' here: it will simultaneously be seen by different actors as an imperial re-tread or sympathizer with fledgling autocrats, whatever it does.

So, a sensible course for the European Union to plot is one in which it enables governance reforms but within clearly established lines – an Egypt under President Morsi that swings towards a strict interpretation of Sha'ria law, an allegiance with Iran, and the derogation of the rights of women (for example) should not be supported with European money. But finding those areas of policy and economics in which European support (in its many forms) has a positive impact for the local population and for the EU is where its efforts should be focused. The Egyptian Presidential elections in June 2012 are a fine demonstration of the potential 'dangers' in pro-democracy campaigning: namely, that the locals might vote for the 'wrong candidate.'

There are already mechanisms in place to facilitate European cooperation with the countries of the MENA. The European-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP) is a comprehensive range of tools that was meant to embed policy structures across the whole of the region.⁹ It has been

limited – mostly – by the restrictions that member states have wished to place upon it, but this mechanism will need to be substantially revised in the light of the Arab Spring and the predominant political feeling in those transition countries that less integration is preferable. A disengagement of EMP might also give the EU greater latitude to deal with these emerging governments in a more nimble fashion.

Conclusion

The Arab Spring presents a significant opportunity for the EU to advance an active foreign policy and shape the future governance and stability of the Middle East and North African region. The established pattern of post-colonial relations were effectively broken by the Arab Spring, as populations rejected their established leaderships and those outsiders whom they saw as having a disproportionate impact on their countries. The EU has tried to make the best use of its established tool box of policy mechanisms, including financial support and advice on appropriate forms of governance. Its attempts to forge formal partnerships have run into opposition with the new governments of MENA who are keen to forge autonomous paths, and in response to this the EU has emphasized the need for local control of political developments. However, the EU cannot afford to meekly sit back and observe developments in the countries affected by Arab Spring: for the medium term there are very heavy prices to be paid in terms of irregular migration into the EU, and in terms of the security impact renewed Jihadism in this region will have on the EU. The EU has begun its response to this unprecedented upheaval more brightly than it did in the Balkans, for example, but the possible costs for getting the policy towards the MENA region wrong are very large indeed.

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¹ The figure quoted by the European Commission was 302,000 (25 June 2012).

² These are still available at: <http://wikileaks.org/cablegate.html> but remain contentious, particularly in government circles.

³ The World Bank, "Poverty Analysis: Tunisia: Poverty Alleviation: Preserving Progress while Preparing for the Future", Available at

<http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/TOPICS/EXTPOVERTY/EXTPA/0,,contentMDK:20208640~menuPK:435735~pagePK:148956~piPK:216618~theSitePK:430367~isCURL:Y~isCURL:Y,00.html>

⁴ Klaus Schwab, The Global Competitiveness Report 2010 – 2011 (World Economic Forum: Geneva, 2010), p.328

⁵ Internet World Stats, "Usage and Population Statistics: Tunisia", available at <http://www.internetworldstats.com/africa.htm#tz>

⁶ EU/Tunisia Task Force agrees concrete assistance for Tunisia's transition, 29 September 2011:

<http://europa.eu/rapid/pressReleasesAction.do?reference=IP/11/1137>

⁷ The EU's Response to the Arab Spring, December 2011,

<http://europa.eu/rapid/pressReleasesAction.do?reference=MEMO/11/918>; and

<http://ec.europa.eu/trade/analysis/sustainability-impact-assessments/assessments/>

⁸ For example see, JOINT COMMUNICATION TO THE EUROPEAN COUNCIL, THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, THE COUNCIL, THE EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE AND THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS A PARTNERSHIP FOR DEMOCRACY AND SHARED PROSPERITY WITH THE SOUTHERN MEDITERRANEAN (8 March 2011), http://eeas.europa.eu/euromed/docs/com2011_200_en.pdf

⁹ For the institutional page see: http://eeas.europa.eu/euromed/index_en.htm 26 June 2012.