

## The EU in the Middle East and North Africa: helpless bystander rather than effective democracy promoter or stabilizing force

Asseburg, Muriel

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## The EU in the Middle East and North Africa

Helpless Bystander Rather Than Effective Democracy Promoter or Stabilizing Force

*Muriel Asseburg*

In 2011, European politicians, diplomats, media, and publics enthusiastically embraced the so-called Arab Spring. The EU pledged to generously support transformation processes initiated in the region with a “3 M” approach, which would combine monetary support, market access, and increased mobility, as well as through a reinvigorated European Neighborhood Policy (ENP). Yet, Europeans have not lived up to these promises. Against the backdrop of the Middle East and North Africa descending into ever greater levels of chaos and violence, the EU and its member states have been largely reduced to being bystanders, dealing with the symptoms of crises rather than impacting – let alone shaping – the path of developments. Yet, in view of an increasingly reluctant US government to provide regional stability, Europe has no choice but to address instability in its southern neighborhood. To be more effective actors, Europeans should revisit their priorities, underlying assumptions, policy frameworks, and instruments.

The EU has had a positive, reinforcing influence where domestic processes have gone in the “right direction.” Tunisia is definitely the one example where the EU was able to support the institutional process, competitive elections, and civil society, and thus contribute to a political transition toward a more participatory, inclusive, and pluralist political system. At the same time, the EU has been in no position to lure elites in other Arab countries into processes aimed at more democratic and just orders, nor to prevent authoritarian restoration in Egypt. It was also not able to contribute to halting the deterioration of political power struggles into civil war and state failure in Syria and

Libya, entailing millions of refugees and internally displaced people, and a strengthening of sectarian mobilization and radicalization across the region, epitomized in the so-called Islamic State phenomenon. Nor has it offered answers on how to contain these civil wars and prevent them from destabilizing entire sub-regions or how to effectively address the refugee crisis in the Mediterranean. Last but not least, the EU has not had any tangible impact on the one conflict that it has prided itself on for having progressive positions for the last 35 years and in which it is heavily invested, i.e., the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Thus, rather than proving themselves as effective democracy promoters or a stabilizing force in the

southern Mediterranean, Europeans have been largely reduced to ad hoc partners in crisis interventions of multinational alliances and to shouldering parts of the humanitarian fallout of violence and war.

### **Major flaws of European approaches**

Major flaws have hampered more effective EU policies in the region. First, Europeans have based their policies toward the region on misled assumptions about the transformation processes unfolding in Arab Spring countries. To name but one: In contrast to the post-1989 experience in Central Europe, transformations in Tunisia, Libya, and Egypt have been anything but centrally crafted processes based on elite bargains regarding transition to democracies and market economies. Rather, the transformations have been the outcomes of intense bargaining processes and power struggles among forces for which institutional reform and transitional justice have not been priorities, and which have been marred by identity politics, political and societal polarization, and political violence. That has robbed Europeans of central local partners for driving transformation forward. Those reform processes that have been initiated and largely geared from the top, i.e., by the monarchies of Jordan and Morocco, have seen much less bumpy trajectories. But the depth of change has been narrowly constricted, and the processes underway there should not be mistaken as anything akin to democratization or even a substantial increase in meaningful participation or checks and balances.

Second, the ENP as well as the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership and the Union for the Mediterranean have not only failed to achieve their objectives with regards to fostering inclusive growth and helping political transition, regional integration, the cooperative engagement in lighthouse projects, building bridges between the shores of the Mediterranean, etc., they have also failed to create frameworks that would provide identity, serve as a point of refer-

ence, or have geopolitical relevance. Not only did the grouping together of eastern and southern partner countries in the ENP framework not make any sense. Southern Mediterranean countries have also been characterized by their being part of several (shifting) regional security complexes, each with specific challenges and a specific set of regional and international actors intervening, which have not been reflected by these frameworks.

Third, European instruments have either been ill-conceived, not adequate for the challenges at hand, or suffered from a lack of consistency and backing from EU member states. The revised ENP's "more for more" approach, for example, promising more support to good performers, has failed to provide strong incentives that could have impacted on crucial domestic actors' cost-benefit analysis. That has especially been the case because, on the one hand, crisis-ridden and inward-looking EU member states have failed to back up the "3 M" approach with substance and, on the other, regional competitors that favor authoritarian upgrading, such as the Arab Gulf states, have weighed in with much more financial clout.

In view of increasing destabilization in the region, Europeans have at least tacitly endorsed authoritarian restoration in Egypt, a regional player considered "too big to fail." They failed to come out in a strong and united fashion against the July 2013 military coup and sent monitors to observe the 2014 Egyptian presidential elections – thus providing legitimacy to the process, even though it was obvious that no level playing field existed in view of the severe crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood and a plethora of opposition activists, politicians, journalists, and human rights groups. In doing so, the EU and its member states have undermined their own consistency and credibility.

In addition, Europeans have failed to coax local decision-makers, even in Tunisia, into addressing the main factors behind the initial uprisings by making socio-economic reform – including tending to neglected pe-

ripheries – much more of a priority than before. Last but not least, new instruments such as the European Endowment for Democracy and the Civil Society Facility have not only been equipped with negligible funds and been confronted with difficult working conditions in some partner countries, they have also stuck to a line of mainly working with elitist, Western-oriented representatives of civil society, thus robbing themselves of a larger societal and political impact.

### **Lack of a strong conflict component**

Crucially, the ENP has not offered any tools for dealing first with countries in which the central state and the formal transformation process hardly matter anymore, as armed non-state actors dominate the scene, and second with phenomena, in particular the region's overlapping refugee crises, which cannot be attributed to a single country. Thus, the EU has not had a central role in mediation and diplomacy to mend local and regional conflicts. The notable exceptions have been the E3 (United Kingdom, France, and Germany)'s involvement in negotiations with Iran; an EU mediation between Tunisia's political forces, secondary to the domestic Quartet's role; and the failed, yet important attempts by the High Representative and her team to bridge the gaps between the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces and the Muslim Brotherhood after the July 2013 coup in Egypt. Rather, the abolition of the EU Special Representative for the Middle East Peace Process in early 2014 and the void with regards to the EU Special Representative for the Mediterranean since May this year have seemed to signal the EU's withdrawal of diplomatic attention from the region.

The EU has also been absent in the more robust approaches to dealing with violent conflict and non-state actors. Military interventions or military support for specific forces in these conflicts have been mostly ad-hoc security fixes driven by the US or by individual EU member states rather than

being a result of joint European strategizing and planning, which would have taken into account and addressed regional side effects.

On top of it, it has become clear that the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) instruments cannot have a stabilizing effect in environments of severe conflict. The European Union Border Assistance Mission Rafah has been suspended since mid-2007, and it is very doubtful that it will receive a new mandate that would allow the Europeans to effectively contribute to ending the Gaza blockade – as proposed by an E3 initiative in the summer of 2014 – unless Europeans were to revive and assume a much more active role in negotiations about a durable ceasefire. EUBAM Libya also had to be put on hold this summer as the country descended once more into civil war. Indeed, the mission has not had a chance to have any tangible impact on border security in a situation where the central state's reach did not extend to all its borders and where no national security forces to speak off existed.

### **Conclusions**

In the face of an ever more reluctant and intervention-averse US government, Europeans will have to assume greater responsibility for stabilization in their immediate neighborhood – not least because they are the ones directly affected by spillover effects of the region's violent conflicts. This also means that Europeans do not have the choice to only back the “good performers,” as some observers have suggested. Although it is indeed important to help make success stories come true – and Europeans should therefore undertake an extra effort to support transition in Tunisia and inclusive reform processes in countries such as Morocco – they should not fall into the trap of wishful thinking again when assessing the processes at hand. In addition, support for transition and domestic reform in the countries where political elites are willing to cooperate with the EU will not be enough to stabilize the region. In order to have a

tangible positive impact, Europeans will have to revisit their priorities, address the underlying assumptions of their approaches, interlink Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) and ENP instruments, and strengthen their diplomatic and conflict-prevention capacities. More concretely, four issues need attention.

First, policies should be based much more on a realistic assessment of EU interests, priorities, and potential influence than to date. In reality, even if the ENP framework is maintained for the time being, that would lead to a stronger differentiation between clusters of countries in the southern Mediterranean that take into account the objectives of local political elites (as long as there is a central government in control) with regard to reform and cooperation with the EU, regional security complexes – with Libya, Syria/Iraq, and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict at the epicenter of the most important ones as of today – and other third actors active in the countries or sub-regions who have to be factored in as adversaries or potential partners. The High Representative should have the lead in the coordination of the different policy fields (CFSP, trade, humanitarian aid, development cooperation, migration, etc.) and align them strategically.

Second, although the ENP objectives of fostering prosperity, stability, and democracy remain valid, prosperity, democracy, and the guarantee of human rights can hardly be achieved in an environment that is dominated by violent conflict or (partial) state failure. That means that, for the time to come, stabilization will have to be at the top of the European agenda for the region – stabilization, of course, not to be confused with stasis and repression. This implies that the EU must urgently strengthen its conflict prevention, management, and resolution capabilities, including the instrument of civil and civil-military CSDP missions, so that they can also work in a rough environment. It also means that the prevention of spillover effects of violent conflict *within* the region and the strengthening of state insti-

tutions in transition or reform countries should be at the center of EU support, including support for structural reforms in administration, judiciary, and security sectors – where, and as long as, this is possible, without at the same time strengthening repressive capacities.

Third, Special Representatives for the Middle East Peace Process and Syria should be appointed urgently, alongside the Special Representative for Libya. At the same time, their mandates should be tailored so as to have much broader outreach in the region. They should be put in a position to offer mediation and good offices and get involved in informal talks with a broad range of civil societies, local actors, as well as involved third states. In this, they would definitely profit from a permanent presence on the ground and a lifting of the no-contact policy toward important actors listed as terrorist groups, such as Hamas.

Fourth, the strategic challenge of refugees in Europe's southern neighborhood and migration to Europe needs to be addressed much more systematically and progressively than it has been to date and should take into account refugee rights, burden-sharing (among EU member states and internationally), migrants' potential contributions to development, as well as immigration needs (see SWP Comments 36/2013).

Last but not least, the intended review of the ENP should, in contrast to the 2011 revision, start from the interests of the EU and its neighbors and identify strategic objectives and priorities rather than being a bureaucratic stock-taking exercise focused on the evaluation of ENP instruments. It should also not be the outcome of bureaucratic procedures but rather a political debate from the start that involves the High Representative, the relevant commissioners, and the member states. Only then can the political will needed to forcefully implement new approaches be achieved.

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**SWP**  
Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik  
German Institute for International and Security Affairs

Ludwigkirchplatz 3–4  
10719 Berlin  
Telephone +49 30 880 07-0  
Fax +49 30 880 07-100  
www.swp-berlin.org  
swp@swp-berlin.org

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