



Helping Hands

Across the Mediterranean

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Europeans must assist democracy and modernization in societies transformed by the Arab Spring

Midday on December 17, 2010, a young Tunisian street vendor named Mohamed Bouazizi doused himself with gasoline and set himself alight while standing in the middle of traffic across from the local governor's office. It was an individual show of frustration and a protest against the constant humiliations and harassments suffered at the hands of the local authorities.

His act of absolute despair resonated throughout the Arab world, ultimately igniting what came to be known as the Arab Spring.

One man's gesture put into motion the most extensive geopolitical shift in Europe's "southern neighborhood" in more than four decades. Within half a year from Bouazizi's self-immolation, the longtime presidents of Tunisia and Egypt were deposed, NATO was drawn into a civil war in Libya, Syria's 40-year-old state of emergency law was repealed and the kings of Jordan and Morocco agreed to advance radical constitutional reforms relinquishing some of their powers. Echoes spread all the way to Yemen and Bahrain, across an arc of crisis encompassing most of the 350 million people of the Arab speaking world.

A Libyan woman displays messages of thanks on her palms during a rally in Benghazi to honor the first visit by European leaders after the fall of Moammar Gadhafi's government in September 2011.

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This page: Tunisians wave flags during a 2011 protest in Ras Jdir to support government change in Libya.

Right: Libyan refugees at the Libya/Tunisia border crossing of Dehiba rally against former leader Moammar Gadhafi in 2011.

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The Arab Spring's implications for European security are framed by two basic questions:

- What are the true nature and effects of these events?
- How should Europe respond to them?

In dealing with the puzzle of what is happening in North Africa one should try to see things as they are, not as one wishes them to be. In this sense, the obvious unknown regarding the current wave of radical political transformations in Europe's southern neighborhood is whether this is a real change or just a surface scratch. Does a true political vision lurk behind these popular movements or are they just glorified food riots? Either way, by themselves, the resignations of Hosni Mubarak of Egypt and Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali of Tunisia and even the death of Moammar Gadhafi of Libya won't change the fundamentals of the problems these countries are faced with. Although the official hagiography presented them as omniscient and all-powerful rulers, they, as individuals, were never as potent as they liked to present themselves. Actual power resides with the security, economic and administrative establishment that was lurking in the shadow of the leader's iconography and was responsible for generating a considerable amount of the despotic inertia. This is why the West should focus now on creating strong, modern and sustainable institutions, not on backing powerful rulers.

In helping to build viable and sustainable democracies, there is a hazard in reading the wrong indicators. Chiefly, there's a risk that the movements' current lack of a dominant Islamic political agenda is the result of it already taking over the social and cultural spheres. Thus, the world may witness the establishment of Western-inspired institutional architecture manned by religious fundamentalists. To avoid being deceived by such a facade, an emphasis should be placed not only on electoral processes that are transparent and fair, but also on the establishment of real checks and balances (especially the ones provided by effective rule of law and respect for basic human rights – or "deep democracy" in the words of European Union High Representative Catherine Ashton). The idealists, young democrats and liberals might have made Ben Ali's and Mubarak's departures possible, but when it comes to

the inner workings of administering the state, they run the danger of being outflanked and marginalized by pragmatists and veterans of the old regime and/or by the fundamentalists.

In this sense, a sign of wishful thinking is illustrated by the recurrent tendency north of the Mediterranean to read signals from the South in accordance with Western ideas and experiences rather than in Arab context and circumstances.

Two main examples of this tendency are:

1. taking at face value the new authorities' discourse on freedom of speech and conscience, representative democracy and women's rights, and
2. the constant comparison of the Arab Spring with Central and Eastern Europe's liberation from communism in 1989.

When it comes to the first issue, one must constantly remember that the political vocabulary common to the Western world doesn't always resonate outside its epistemic community. Others might use the same terminology in form but not in substance. And regarding the comparison to the end of the Cold War, the main resemblance between the current Arab arc of crisis and Central Europe's 1989 transformation is that both provoked internal confusion and external perplexity. But comparisons don't really go much further than that. Central European societies were modern and industrialized with strong (although totalitarian and non-legitimate) institutions. More importantly, they were

aware of the meanings of democratic administration, free market economics and the rule of law. In fact, most of these countries were among the most advanced societies in the world until the Second World War and the Soviet occupation. In this sense, the European revolutions of 1989 were not so much about advancing toward modernity but rather getting back to normalcy.

Turning to Europe's reaction to the Arab Spring, while the magnitude and swiftness of the revolutions in North Africa took the world by surprise, the EU and its member states' reaction came under particular scrutiny. With revolution in its backyard, the Union's new foreign and security instruments and its commitment to democracy and international justice were put to the test and, so far, they have performed less than perfectly. But with more than just its international credibility at stake, the EU cannot afford to fail.

The barrage of criticism leveled at the EU and its member states started from the very beginning with the appearance that Europeans were totally oblivious to what was happening in their own backyard. Despite claims of traditional relations, privileged contacts and unique expertise, no decision-maker in Europe was aware of the simmering situation across the



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French President Nicolas Sarkozy, left, and British Prime Minister David Cameron flank Mustafa Abdul Jalil, leader of Libya's National Transitional Council, during a September 2011 meeting in Benghazi, Libya, to applaud the fall of Moammar Gadhafi's government.

Mediterranean Sea. When the demonstrators finally broke the wall of fear and revolutions started to propagate, the first reflex north of the Mediterranean was to maintain the status quo rather than back popular calls for democracy and justice.

By failing to identify and deal with basic regional problems, the EU regional policy framework was proven largely irrelevant and particularly unconnected to the political and economic trends of the southern neighborhood. More worrisome, the entire Common Foreign and Security Policy decision-making process and its instruments (supposedly considerably upgraded after the Lisbon Treaty entered into force) failed in preventing the two typical drawbacks of its foreign action: the taking of initiative by individual states (effectively imposing *faits accomplis* on the other EU members) and reliance on the United States for the “heavy lifting” (i.e. security operations).

For example, on January 29, 2011 – less than two days before a European ministerial meeting to discuss the Egyptian revolution – British, French and German leaders published a joint statement on that precise topic. And in the case of the Libyan war, Europe's involvement was carried out through NATO command structures rather than those of the EU, and even then with considerable difficulty (political ones initially, logistical and military ones later on). In the end, the EU managed to offer only 8 million euros for a four-month operation to deliver humanitarian assistance (and this was only to be activated at the special request of the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs). All this threatens to spill over and affect transatlantic relations as it further exposes the administration in Washington to criticism for effectively subsidizing a European security operation, further

emphasizing the burden sharing asymmetry within NATO. On the positive side, however, the success of Operation Unified Protector will most likely help boost NATO's credibility within its core, *raison d'être* theater of operation.

With so much at stake, it is paramount for the EU and its member states to increase their presence and activity in North Africa and the Middle East. Generally speaking, there is a need for more structure and coherence in an area where already there's a considerable amount of substance but not a particularly high level of convergence or pragmatism. With Lisbon now into force for more than two years, it is time to move on from the EU's introverted decade of institutional introspection and turn to the pressing task of making the EU a relevant global player. And in this sense, improving security and advancing prosperity in the EU's immediate neighborhood should be pursued as one of the main priorities of its agenda.

Given the current circumstances, it has become critical for the EU to play a more substantive role in the southern neighborhood. The window of opportunity represented by the spirit of the Arab Spring might be rapidly closing. Actually, the odds are largely against the establishment of a proper, vigorous Egyptian democracy: The society has no tradition of individual dissent, separation of state and religion is taboo, and, aside from the army, the repressive/intelligence apparatus and the Muslim Brotherhood, there are no self-standing functioning institutions. Plus, the sheer geopolitical pressure of its troubled neighborhood will hardly allow the necessary breather for Egyptian society to develop its own organic democratic reflexes. But no one has more experience than Europeans in transitioning to democracy and rebuilding shattered societies.

For moral and practical reasons, the EU should have a more robust and comprehensive aid package ready to be activated the moment these transitioning societies open up for it. In this context, the imperative is to engage and capture the imagination of the youth, opinion leaders, teachers and academic professionals, small- and medium-sized entrepreneurs and the army and the intelligence community.

In drafting any sensible European policy toward North Africa and the Middle East, one should consider some of the following factors:

First, a too overt European backing for any particular person or movement would compromise them in the eyes of their local supporters. Besides, as any authentic democracy is built on local ownership, foreign support should steer clear of anything interpreted as lecturing and be based instead on the idea of equal partnerships.

Second, demographic factors are important. There has been an exponential increase in Arab populations over the past three generations, and this overall trend continues. As the demographic map around the Mediterranean is rebalanced, its southern shores teem with a growing constituency of young, angry, unemployed individuals with few institutions or community structures to turn to except Islam and/or the tribe.

Third, as the West procrastinates, the prospect grows that opportunistic actors could interfere as a way to externalize their own domestic problems or snipe for geopolitical and economic gain (Russia, China and others).

Fourth, there's a troubling risk of deprioritizing Europe's "eastern neighborhood." These countries share a European outlook, not to mention that their social and economic potential is vastly superior to anything the southern neighborhood could generate in this generation or the next. European engagement in the eastern neighborhood is made even more imperative as presently, in the absence of any other benign outside influence, the region shows a worrying tendency to swing towards authoritarian consolidation, either homegrown (i.e. Belarus) or by incorporation into a "sphere of influence." Engaging the eastern and southern neighborhoods should not be approached as a zero sum game; more resources need to be allocated to both areas, based on whether individual nations meet the necessary conditions. As comparisons are unavoidable, we need to remember that, on a per capita basis, it is in the South, in the Palestinian territories, that we find the biggest European Neighbourhood Policy beneficiaries.

Fifth, the EU should get more involved in the Middle East peace process. Not only is this the keystone for stability and security in the broader Middle East, but it is also one of the most resonating symbols in Arab politics. A better coordinated engagement with Israel is needed, as it could demonstrate for the wider region how democracies function and cooperate in managing crises. In addition, this

would, within Israel, help dispel the argument of it being totally on its own, while at the same time empowering the Israeli secular, western, liberal-democratic camp.

Sixth, one has to avoid using "one size fits all" formulae when dealing with individual countries involved in the Arab Spring. While Tunisia witnessed a largely genuine popular uprising with an economic and social agenda, in Syria most of those challenging the authorities have followed tribal or religious impulses. In fact, in this latter case, apparently a significant part of the population (Christians, Allawis and some of the secular middle class) backs the Assad regime from fear of sectarianism.

Ultimately, a European policy should take into consideration the emerging roles of local actors such as Turkey and Saudi Arabia. In the first case, we might have just passed the point where, when it came to managing the European neighborhood, sidelining or taking Turkey for granted was an option. One must consider whether one wants Turkey as an active partner in defining and advancing Europe's plans or risk having it compete and promote its own self-serving initiatives. In fact, by forging an autonomous and self-sufficient foreign policy, Turkey has become even more important to Europe than before. When it comes to the strategic debate about Turkey's role in Europe, behind such terms as "critical choice" and "historical opportunity" lies the basic truth that European procrastination is no longer an option. Stirring up a theological debate about the depth of Turkey's European orientation risks alienating not just its political establishment but the very demos of what is still the most modern and Western-oriented Muslim society. This in turn would only amplify the feeling in the wider region that the EU is unable or unwilling to become involved in its neighborhood.

When it comes to Saudi Arabia, one might detect a growing sense of frustration and insecurity in Riyadh. From the Saudi perspective, one reading of the Mubarak story is that the West withheld support from an ally and helped create a power vacuum in the Middle East. This in turn might lead them toward unilateralism and confrontation, as the intervention in Bahrain has shown.

Beyond these theoretical debates, the Arab Spring has clearly shown that Arab societies have become, at their grass roots level, more open to Western soft influence and more aware of their immediate neighborhood. The EU response should be to support fully the transformation of the region's states into democracies and help anchor their societies in modernity, on a case by case basis, under a tailored approach contingent on local ownership. No democracy is perfect, but any democracy is a step in the right direction, away from authoritarianism. □

Information in this article is current as of November 2011. The views expressed in this article are those of the author, and do not necessarily reflect those of the U.S. Department of State or the U.S. Government.