





BUILDING A European-Mediterranean COMMUNITY

Common cause with the
EU could help Arab states
transition to democracy

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The democratic uprisings in North Africa call for a radical shift in the European Union's approach to Euro-Mediterranean relations. These have traditionally been dominated by economic concerns, founded on the misguided belief that globalization will bring well-being for all if southern countries make their economies attractive to foreign investment. The present upheavals, however, clearly demonstrate that politics and social challenges must be brought to the forefront of EU-Mediterranean relations.

The wisdom of the Mediterranean strategy of ignoring political and social dimensions to ensure the good will of authoritarian leaders for the development of concrete (though as yet unrealized) projects is thus called into question. The EU now needs to revise its Mediterranean policy. In order to do so, it needs to build on some good practices of the past and pursue them more consistently.

This should translate, first of all, into prioritizing the citizens' agenda, which in fact corresponds to the basic principles articulated in the Barcelona Declaration of 1995, in which EU member states and the Southern Mediterranean countries jointly agreed "to develop the rule of law and democracy in their political systems." This objective was not consistently pursued, however, and this was highlighted in the important debate that took place on both shores of the Mediterranean during preparation of the Barcelona summit of 2005. As was pointed out then, the main conclusion of the overview and evaluation of the first 10 years of the Barcelona Process was that "the causal and sequential link between economic reform and political liberalisation has failed to materialise. If there has been any progress in human development terms, it has been neither uniform nor sufficient to respond to the grave social problems of the region. Economic reforms have largely failed to encourage political reform."¹

As a consequence, it was proposed that the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership abandon a path that was leading nowhere and concentrate

Egyptian demonstrators rally for national unity in Cairo in May 2011.

on meeting the aims set forth in the founding 1995 declaration, through the implementation of “specific actions designed to create a Euro-Mediterranean Community of Democratic States.” This aspiration was already shared by the civil society of the South and has since been reiterated on many occasions by their representatives.

The European Commission (EC) adopted many of these recommendations in the action program that was approved at the 2005 summit, where it was established that the members of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership would “strive to achieve their mutual commitments” in the implementation of the democratic objectives of Barcelona over the following five years through a number of measures such as “extend[ing] political pluralism and participation by citizens, particularly women and youth, through the active promotion of a fair and competitive political environment, including fair and free elections.”²

In virtually all Southern Mediterranean countries, however, this commitment was blatantly ignored. In Egypt, Tunisia and Syria, no progress at all was visible in this domain. Elections in Egypt, Tunisia, Syria and Algeria returned entrenched leaders with more than 90 percent of the vote without real opposition groups or figures being allowed to participate in the electoral process. Libya never signed up for either the Barcelona Process or the Union for the Mediterranean.

A fair and comprehensive assessment of the Barcelona Process still needs to be carried out. It is

true that the 2005 Barcelona summit was a diplomatic failure. Mediterranean chiefs of state failed to show up, amid complaints about their lack of ownership of the process and excessive conditionality on the part of the EU. From a democratic perspective, shared by southern civil societies, however, it was a success and the EC followed up on part of the recommendations relating to support for civil society with specific initiatives aimed at strengthening human rights, namely promoting women’s rights and examining ways of reaching out to Islamic political parties. The Neighbourhood Policy sought to adapt to the need to support political reform by granting an “advanced status” to Morocco as a reward for the progress achieved in that country, in particular through its organization of parliamentary elections that were judged to be fair and free, including allowing for the participation of the Islamist Justice and Development Party, even if most constitutional powers remain in the hands of the sovereign.

Unfortunately, in 2008 the EU concluded that the Barcelona Process was a total failure, owing to the fact that it was greeted with an increasing lack of enthusiasm by the leaders of the South, and decided to replace it with the Union for the Mediterranean, co-chaired by France and Egypt. The primary area of concern was no longer the democratic objectives of 1995 but the alliance against political Islam, the fight against terrorism and control of immigration. The democratic objective and political conditionality were sidelined in favor of a number of concrete projects, including de-pollution of



the Mediterranean Sea, promoting the production and use of renewable energy, and business cooperation.

Clearly, the following recommendation contained in an EU Institute for Security Studies (EUISS) report published before the 2008 Summit of the Union for the Mediterranean was not heeded: “The abandoning of political reform incentives and positive conditionality in the name of *realpolitik* and avoidance of the main socio-economic and political issues within the Mediterranean region is to be avoided as well, as is also the marginalization of civil societies there. Positive conditionality in the ENP (European Neighbourhood Policy) should emphasise respect for the international rule of law and evolution towards democratic governance.”³

STRENGTHENING DEMOCRATIC FORCES

In the current phase of dramatic transition, it is imperative that the EU fully support the democratic aspirations of the citizens of the Mediterranean, bearing in mind at all times that democratic processes are national in nature and that, in spite of the “domino effect,” each transition process is different and unique. As this EUISS report shows, differing attitudes to civic and political rights characterize four groups of countries and four different subsets of issues that must be urgently addressed by the EU:

Egypt and Tunisia – the democratic transition states, where the plurality of the political party system is still quite weak and, in the case of Egypt, the military has

taken control of the transition process and has not yet made clear what steps will be taken to transfer power to elected civilian bodies.

Morocco and Jordan – the liberal monarchies, where free, competitive elections now take place, and there is a certain degree of openness in relation to freedom of expression and of association, but power is fundamentally still in the hands of the monarchs.

Lebanon – a weak liberal state, and a divided and occupied **Palestine**, where the free, democratic elections have yet to be implemented, hindered by sectarian divisions and war that have made the emergence of fully democratic processes quite difficult. In Palestine, it is impossible to build a fully fledged democratic system in the absence of sovereignty and the current context of occupation and blockade, but the aspiration was clearly expressed in the free and fair elections held in January 2006.

Libya and Syria – the dictatorships, and **Algeria**, where no real democratic progress has yet been made. Grave abuses of fundamental rights are commonplace. The military have been in power in Algeria for decades. In Libya and Syria presidents have been nominated for life and dynasties established. (Though the ouster of Libya’s President Moammar Gadhafi in 2011 altered that equation). The media is tightly controlled and all expression of dissent is brutally suppressed. Algeria is more complex, with a very weak, but at least existing, political party system. The country is still marked by the trauma of the civil war of the 1990s.



Left: European Investment Bank President Philippe Maystadt speaks in Brussels in 2011 as the EU readied a multibillion-euro loan to North African states undergoing democratic reform. Some believe economic partnerships with Europe could accelerate democratization in the Arab world.

Right: EU foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton meets in September 2011 with Tunisian foreign minister Mohamed Mouldi Kefi. Ashton was on a two-day official visit to discuss closer economic and political ties between Europe and Tunisia.



Wearing the new Libyan flag, a woman joins a cheering crowd in Martyr's Square in Tripoli, Libya, to celebrate a change of government in the North African country ruled for decades by Moammar Gadhafi.

Right now Tunisia and Egypt need to be the EU's main priority in the southern neighborhood. The EU should aim to contribute to consolidate the results of the peoples' revolutions that have taken place in these countries, namely through constitutional reforms, promoting civilian control of the security forces and encouraging the development of a political party system, as well as supporting civil society organizations.

In its dealings with these countries in the throes of transition, the EU needs to move from the priority that it has traditionally and rightly given to nongovernmental organizations to focusing on consolidation of new democratic actors. For example, it should be active in funding training courses in local institutions. Particular attention must be given to security sector reform, specifically with regard to the police, namely by leading and supporting initiatives in training on human rights and justice, as well as dealing with the critical questions related to the civilian control of the military.

The European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights should be activated in this regard. The EU should assume a leadership role with regard to the provision of international financial support to Tunisia and, to a certain extent, Egypt, given that both countries face a grave economic and social situation, as a result of the financial and food crises, but also from damage that their respective economies have suffered during the uprisings. There is a real risk of destabilization in this critical transition phase if the economic and social crisis is not overcome. In this context, an international donors' conference co-organized with the transitional authorities would be invaluable.

A COMMUNITY OF DEMOCRACIES BY 2020?

The current conditions of transformation are favorable to a rethink of the long-term objectives of the EU's Mediterranean policy and a revision of the Neighbourhood Policy. Most importantly, the Union for the Mediterranean must be reconstructed. In both cases, priority should be given to establishing coherence between political reforms and economic and social policies with the goal of creating, before the end of the decade, a Euro-Mediterranean Community of Democratic States, thus fulfilling the objectives announced in 1995 in Barcelona.

Such a Euro-Mediterranean community would validate the citizens and their aspirations as central actors. This should include extending all the freedoms of the European single market to the members of this community, including, in time, freedom of the movement of people.

A new generation of association agreements should be signed with those countries of the South willing to subscribe to the objective of such a democratic community. Such agreements might include a democratic clause inspired by the EU enlargement experience. A democratic clause should seem natural if one bears in mind that even the British Commonwealth includes such a clause.

A Euro-Mediterranean community of democracies would be an important factor for peace and would enormously facilitate dealing with crisis in the region, in particular in relation to the Israel-Palestine conflict. Membership should be extended to the Israelis and Palestinians only on condition that a two-state solution is well on track.

This community would certainly find a lot of support in the Obama administration, reflecting the U.S. president's own vision of a "common humanity" in this post-Huntington Arab world.

This is not a utopian dream, but an ambition whose chances of success are much more viable in the circumstances currently prevailing in the southern Mediterranean. Were the EU to announce its commitment to this goal, it would represent an important incentive for the democratic processes in the region, in particular in the Maghreb, where the EU is seen as a major partner.

Right now the notion of a Euro-Mediterranean Community of Democratic States would readily find support in the transitional democracies and possibly the liberal monarchies. Furthermore, this goal would garner enormous support among civil society movements all over the southern Mediterranean. If the EU were to announce its ambition to work to that end with like-minded southern partners, it would be a way for it to restore credibility with Arab public opinion. It would show that European leaders have heard the call for freedom and democracy that is coming from their neighbors, who in spite of all the disappointments of the past still look to Europe with hope and believe in the ideals that the Union affirms as its own. □

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