



A Tunisian demonstrates against the country's Islamist-led government in Tunis in August 2013. Her sign declares that she's a "free Tunisian woman" and that parliamentary leaders don't represent her.

AFP/GETTY IMAGES

Reclaiming THE Arab Spring

Europe supports democratic solutions to resolve tensions in the Middle East *By per Concordiam Staff*

“**I** rhal ... irhal ... irhal ...” For four days, the chant rang out across Cairo’s Tahrir Square, packed with tens of thousands of Egyptian protesters. *Irhal*, Arabic for “leave,” was the message directed at then-President Mohammed Morsi, elected one year earlier in Egypt’s first democratic elections.

By most estimates, more than 30 million Egyptians — out of a population of about 83 million — braved the midsummer North African heat to voice their discontent. Much had changed in the year since Morsi narrowly won a bitterly fought election following the collapse of Hosni Mubarak’s 30-year rule.

Egypt’s economy deteriorated while Morsi and his Freedom and Justice Party focused on consolidating political power, raising criticism that the government was not only unrepresentative but also incompetent. After four days of acrimonious protests and counterprotests, the Egyptian military — reportedly fearing civil war — removed Morsi’s party from power.

The question for Europe is how to stay engaged with the countries of the so-called Arab Spring after the conspicuous breakdown of electoral democracy in places such as Egypt. Recognizing that instability on its doorstep spills over into its own member states, the European Union (EU) continues to promote democracy and economic liberalization in its “southern neighborhood.”

Euro-Mediterranean cooperation

“The European Union is keen to deepen its engagement with Maghreb,” EU Commissioner for Enlargement Štefan Füle said of the five North African states in September 2013. “We set out ways in which we could support efforts by the Maghreb countries

to promote their closer integration within the region — fully respecting their ownership of the process and their ambitions about the speed and depth of this process.”

The European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) provides a framework for EU interaction with the countries of North Africa and the Middle East. The ENP’s stated goal is to work with partners “to achieve the closest possible political association and the greatest possible degree of economic integration,” building on common values of “democracy, the rule of law, respect for human rights, and social cohesion.” The ENP has worked mostly through bilateral agreements in which the EU signed action plans separately with Morocco, Egypt, Tunisia, Jordan, Lebanon, Israel and the Palestinian territories.

Taken by surprise in 2011 by the Arab Spring uprisings, the EU developed a new ENP approach



Hundreds of thousands of Egyptians gather in Cairo’s Tahrir Square during a demonstration against former Egyptian President Mohammed Morsi in June 2013. THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

toward the region that emphasizes democratic change and offers improved incentives to support transitioning democracies. But according to a September 2013 report by the Atlantic Council, the revised ENP, lacking a strategic vision and thwarted by disagreements among members states, has struggled to achieve results in the Arab world.

Nevertheless, Europe still has leverage in the region. European nations remain a major source of financial aid, loans, trade and tourism. In 2012, EU member states pledged 5 billion euros in aid to Egypt. Europe is also Egypt's biggest trading partner with imports and exports totaling 24 billion euros in 2011, the *Belfast Telegraph* reported.

The Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EUROMED), or Union for the Mediterranean, is a more comprehensive program to promote economic integration and democratic reform in Europe's southern neighborhood. EUROMED (formerly known as the Barcelona Process) comprises all 29 EU member states and 15 Southern Mediterranean, African and Middle Eastern countries, including Tunisia, Egypt and Syria. EUROMED was relaunched in 2008 when the EU concluded that the Barcelona Process had been ineffective, according to Álvaro de Vasconcelos of the European Union Institute for Security Studies.

Spring no more

Arab Spring-inspired movements have also appeared in Morocco, Jordan and Bahrain, where the royal rulers have moved to grant differing levels of democratic reforms.

Democratic change has been more difficult in other Arab Spring countries besides Egypt. In Libya, a weak national government has struggled to control tribal militias commanded by regional warlords, including some linked to al-Qaida. An Islamist militia hired by the central government to provide security actually detained Prime Minister Ali Zidan for several hours in October 2013, further weakening and destabilizing the Libyan government. Arms left over from the Moammar Gadhafi regime have spread widely throughout Libya and conflict zones such as Mali and Somalia. And in Syria, democracy has yet to take root as a civil war rages with a three-way battle among al-Qaida-linked Islamists, moderate and secular rebels, and forces commanded by Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.

European diplomats and policymakers have many challenges ahead, suggests Peter Berkowitz, a scholar at the Hoover Institution at Stanford University in California. "Large questions loom — in relation to Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Syria and throughout the region — about the balance

of power between the young secular democrats who gave the revolutions their initial impetus, and the traditionalists and Islamists who are seeking to take advantage of the overthrow of dictators to advance their visions of political Islam," Berkowitz said.

Until Morsi was dismissed, EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Catherine Ashton and Special Representative for the Southern Mediterranean Bernardino León worked to bring Egyptian factions together. According to the Atlantic Council report, the EU quietly warned Morsi and his Muslim Brotherhood supporters about "the perils of its politics of marginalizing and antagonizing the opposition." Polls show that large majorities of Egyptians support freedom of religion and speech, but Morsi supporters had a "winner-takes-all understanding of democracy." The Egyptian military's removal of the Morsi government was greeted with elation by many who had demonstrated for democracy two years earlier, and some of his countrymen have hailed military leader Gen. Abdel Fattah al-Sisi as a national savior.

In late 2013, EU diplomats pressed the country's military to include opposition figures in the government. León told Carnegie Europe that he fears the removal of Morsi has widened the already-deep chasm between secularists and Islamists in Egypt and increased the potential for civil war. Anwar Sadat, a member of the Egyptian parliament and nephew of the former president for whom he is named, told *The Independent*: "From our friends abroad we



An Egyptian policeman stands in front of a burned police station in Kerdassah on the outskirts of Cairo in September 2013 during a period of civil unrest. AFP/GETTY IMAGES

But de Vasconcelos noted critically that the new union focused on an "alliance against political Islam, the fight against terrorism and control of immigration," rather than on democratic objectives. He urged the EU to support the democratic aspirations of the citizens of the Arab Spring nations, and floated the idea of deeper economic and political integration as a reward for those Middle Eastern and North African countries that liberalize.



Egyptian Defense Minister Gen. Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, right, meets with European Union High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Catherine Ashton in Cairo in October 2013. AFP/GETTY IMAGES

need solutions that will help us, not threats. And we as a society have to look into what happened to us. We became very savage, even to our friends.”

The Tunisian path

Many similarities exist between Tunisia, where the Arab Spring began, and Egypt. An uprising begun by young, secular Tunisians ousted a long-established authoritarian ruler, Zine El Abidine Ben Ali. As in Egypt, Tunisian Islamists capitalized on their better organization to win ensuing elections. But that’s where Tunisia and Egypt diverge: Tunisia’s victorious Ennahdha Party, also affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood, formed a governing coalition with two left-leaning secular parties.

Ennahdha has been pressured by Salafists who have called for an Islamic state ruled by Shariah law. In June 2012, Islamists rioted over an art exhibition that they felt insulted Islam, and in February and July 2013, Salafists assassinated two leftist opposition leaders. More than 1 million people turned out for a funeral-turned-protest march for one of the leaders, Chakri Belaid. Amna Guellali of

Human Rights Watch told Al-Jazeera that the many acts of violence from Salafists — without any investigations or consequences — fueled perceptions that Ennahdha was “coddling the perpetrators of violence.”

But Tunisia has a long history of secular rule and a Westernized middle class. According to *Gulf News*, “the influence of Islamists is largely limited to rural regions.” In July 2013, after the second assassination and a month after Morsi was deposed in Cairo, protesters surrounded the parliament building in Tunis and demanded the end to the Ennahdha-led government. Rather than attempting to entrench himself as the Brotherhood did in Egypt, *The Economist* reports, Ennahdha leader Rashid Gannouchi agreed to step down in favor of a temporary technocrat-led administration and scheduled new elections for early 2014.

The Tunisian model, if successful, could suggest a way forward toward greater political, economic and cultural integration with Europe and the world at large. “Tunisia’s experiment may provide a much-needed vision of the role of political Islam in modern Arab societies,” said an October 2013 article in *Gulf News*. □