

The EU in the MENA region: confounded by the chaos?

by Domhnall O’Sullivan

Key Points

- *European Union (EU) policy in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region was traditionally quite simple. Though rhetorically committed to propagating liberal-democratic values and fuzzy ideas of shared governance, policy in practice kowtowed to the stability and continuity offered by autocrats. Fears of Islamist terrorism and energy insecurity ensured that Brussels stuck with the least bad option.*
- *The momentous upheaval of the Arab uprisings has left it with no option but to shift track. Recognizing history in the making in early 2011, Europe scrambled to get on the right side. Admirable initiatives to support the democratic transitions were launched, while the extra cash that was found in the midst of economic crisis testified to the importance of the MENA region.*
- *But as the dust thrown up by the Arab spring continues to swirl three years on, the EU struggles to see clearly. Instability reigns in Syria and Libya and threatens to spill into fragile surrounding states. Egypt has witnessed violence, profound social cleavages, and a return of authoritarian trends. Even the Gulf monarchies are struggling to maintain unity faced with the shifting regional dynamics. State-specific disorder and social polarization have become the new normal.*
- *The EU - like most international actors - is confounded. Much policymaking has become a day-to-day exercise in diplomatic improvisation. Nevertheless, several overarching shifts in the European stance towards its southern regional neighbour can be observed. Some have come about as a direct result of the post-2011 turmoil; others were already quietly taking shape in preceding years.*

From regional ambition to bilateral ad-hocism

The first concerns the fundamental methodological logic of the policy instruments underpinning EU action in its neighbourhood. Historically, a certain duality has existed between the multilateral regionalism of grand approaches towards the south and the bilateral realism which often comes to the fore. According to institutional dynamics and preferences – as well as vacillating local conditions – the EU has moved back and forth along this continuum.

Launched in Barcelona in 1995, the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP) contained elements of both approaches. Aiming to create an enlarged Mediterranean area of peace, stability, prosperity and

understanding, it created multilateral partnerships based around the three baskets of politics and security, finance and economics, and sociocultural affairs. Although it also laid the ground for what was to come later by proposing bilateral association agreements, the process was ostensibly centred upon regional programmes and funding initiatives.

But recognising the shortcomings of this approach – especially in the areas of democracy promotion and serious security dialogue – the EU unveiled the more robust European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) in 2004. Coming at a time of EU enlargement and amid tensions felt after the September 11th attacks (2001), the ENP represented a stepped-up effort to create a “ring of friends” around the periphery of Europe. And

notwithstanding rhetoric of regional cooperation and a grand “economic community”, the focus this time was firmly on the bilateral. The European Commission, which had sole responsibility for the policy, preferred country-to-country trade and technical agreements outlining specific objectives for each neighbour. Even the much vaunted re-launch of the EMP in 2008, under the new title of Union for the Mediterranean (UfM), largely failed in its effort to move some focus back onto multilateral objectives of shared governance.¹

The Arab spring has cemented this trend. Ironically, both the initial European reaction to the democratic fervour and its current ambivalence have prompted more and more differentiation. Initially, the revamped ENP – updated in 2011 to support the democratic transitions – clearly took stock of the diverse levels of democratic progress and economic development across the MENA region. Pledging to increase conditionality and offer ‘more for more’ (more rewards for greater reforms) Brussels aimed to recant for previous failures to adequately reprimand states which stuck fast to authoritarian methods. With transitions likely to take different routes in different countries, bilateral conditionality would provide both an impetus and reward for speedy implementation of reforms.

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While such implementation has since seriously faltered, the current variations across the region have nevertheless consolidated the logic of differentiation. If Tunisia has proved a somewhat successful case, other reformist states such as Jordan remain stable but static. If the difficulties in Libya are exacerbated by poor security and the proliferation of militia gangs, the war in Syria is protracted by authoritarian resilience and the failure of the international community to reach a consensus on a way out. The EU has duly moved towards a more classic, pragmatic diplomacy which accounts for the strikingly varied security and economic concerns across the region. It has upped humanitarian support to Syria and the surrounding states; prioritised diplomatic mediation and dialogue to urge for calm in Egypt; and launched a border assistance mission in Libya. “In each case, we have tried to do whatever we can”, said EEAS secretary-general Pierre Vimont in October 2013.²

Such ad-hocism has its advantages. In a region of political, economic and social disparities, a one-size-fits-all approach is cumbersome at best, counterproductive at worst. Differentiation allows the EU, its diplomats and member states to craft more nuanced and targeted policies towards specific scenarios, rather than engaging in broad but unrealistic rhetoric. Yet at a time when major hurdles facing North African states are economic stagnation and the threat of cross-border extremism,

more regional cooperation could tighten political links while boosting trade and development.³ Similarly, causes and effects of the Syrian crisis are regional. And persistent delays in signing a region-to-region trade agreement with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) hampers European economic and political clout in this important region.

If bilateral flexibility is important, strategic multilateralism should not be wholly forgotten.

From democratic idealism to diplomatic realism

Academic and policy analyses have long debated the underlying *raison d'être* of the EU. The *sui generis* nature of the organization and its sometimes conflicting agendas in different policy fields have inspired various theories of the type of power

it constitutes. The southern neighbourhood, where stated objectives of democracy promotion jarred with a tolerance of authoritarian rulers, offered a compelling snapshot of the confusion between Europe the normative actor and Europe the realist player. It also provided ample fodder for critics of the putative double standards of the EU.

In the immediate aftermath of the 2011 uprisings, the EU was quick to atone for these inconsistencies. Politicians and officials admitted that the approach had been wrong and had been based on “short-termism” and guaranteeing regional stability.⁴ Commission strategies unveiled in March and May 2011 overhauled the ENP and underlined the commitment of Europe to supporting and pushing the transitions in the south. In order to achieve “deep democracy” – EU jargon for a broad vision of democracy encompassing basic societal freedoms as well as pluralistic elections – a range of policy modifications were announced.

The three “M’s” were pledged. Money (more financial aid as well as loans by the European Investment Bank and European Bank for Reconstruction and Development), markets (more trading access for southern exporters) and mobility (more visas and travel options for southern immigrants) would help to tackle the most pressing need of economic regeneration. Breaking with the toothless nature of previous policy, vamped-up conditionality would mean that more aid would be allocated only upon evidence of more democratic progress. Overall, the fervour which engulfed much of the Arab world in 2011 was matched by an EU which appeared equally excited by the prospect of a more pluralistic Mediterranean region. A spirit of inclusiveness and integration permeated the rhetoric.

But as transitions have floundered, commitment to the three M’s has waned and their impact has been largely underwhelming. Although extra money was pledged,

1 See Nathalie Tocci, “One Year On: A Balance Sheet of the EU’s Response to the Arab Spring”, Istituto Affari Internazionali, May 2012

2 “Vimont: EU shouldn’t underestimate its soft power”, *Euractiv*, 4 October 2013

3 A 2012 report by the African Development Bank estimated the benefits of increased integration in North Africa as 2 to 3 percent of GDP

4 Stefan Füle, “Speech on the recent events in North Africa”, European Parliament, 28 February 2011

the gulf between the millions offered and the billions necessary to shore up weak southern economies is stark. In terms of markets, southern exporters still struggle to get past the protectionist concerns of some European states. Not one Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (DCFTA) – the flagship trade initiative of the ENP – has yet been signed. And as Europe faces its own internal economic crisis and swings towards the right, facilitating increased mobility for MENA citizens is politically and socially difficult. To date, just two mobility partnerships have been pencilled, with Morocco (June 2013) and Tunisia (March 2014).

Rather, Europe has reverted somewhat to focussing on stability and security. As turmoil spreads not only across the MENA region but also in the EU's enlarged neighbourhood (notably the Sahel and Horn of Africa), pressing concerns about stability have taken precedence. For example, if Europe sometimes criticizes the heavy-handedness of the regressive al-Sisi regime in Egypt, it rarely talks about its lack of democratic legitimacy. Reaction to the coup in July 2013 was muted, while recent reports from the region suggest that Cathy Ashton, High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, congratulated the General on his "brave" presidential bid.⁵ A border management mission was deployed to tackle the destabilization in Libya, while there has been discussion of a possible EU naval mission in the Mediterranean to curb illegal immigration from North Africa.⁶ In Syria and the surrounding states, providing humanitarian aid and mitigating spillover destabilization has taken precedence. And in the Gulf, the EU still largely neglects the persistent lack of democratic progress in favour of a fragmented approach which sees its member states securing their bilateral interests.

In its defence, Europe – like any other international actor without a hegemonic position in the region – is often forced to react to shifting and unpredictable local conditions. Further, it has continued to provide high-level support to National Dialogue and mediation initiatives across the region, using its added-value as "the only actor able to speak to everybody."⁷ This is a welcome short-term policy in the face of growing sectarianism and societal cleavages. However, if it is to maintain the credibility of its initial commitment to deep democracy, the EU should not completely revert to simply mediation and classic high-level diplomacy. This could easily come at the expense of the very necessary political reforms which were ultimately the initial drivers of the Arab uprisings themselves.⁸

From first violin to second fiddle

Owing to colonial history, geographic proximity and trade necessity, the EU was traditionally one of the major players in the MENA region. If the strategic balance was maintained by American hegemony, Europe was the primary commercial and cultural connection, particularly to the Mediterranean states. However, in a shift which has mirrored the twenty-first century move towards a more multipolar world, a greater plurality of actors has muscled into the affairs of the region. And just as the EU struggles to maintain global influence in the face of rising powers, so has it been forced to contend with increasingly powerful competitors to its south.

Paradoxically, several are from the region itself. The Gulf states, who have seen their political and economic clout shoot up in recent decades, have become increasingly active in the Mediterranean, where their deep pockets and no-strings cash injections are often more attractive than European offers of conditional aid. For example, while EU leaders dithered about the legitimacy of the toppling of Mohammad Morsi in Egypt in July 2013,⁹ Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates offered \$8 billion to support the al-Sisi regime. This directly undercuts EU efforts at democracy promotion. Further, ideological rifts *within* the Gulf states (most recently involving Saudi Arabia and Qatar) complicate the European and international reaction to violent conflicts such as in Libya and especially Syria, where myriad sources of finance fund diverse rebel groups fighting both the Assad regime and each other.

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Iran's role in the region also presents a challenge. Although the interim nuclear deal brokered by Ashton as chief negotiator of the P5+1 (the permanent five members of the UN Security Council plus Germany) represented a personal success, the optimism it generated along with the election of the 'moderate' President Rouhani have yet to concretise into a palpable regional thaw. Iran continues to be the main backer of President Assad in Syria and has not publicly made any signs of pushing for an end to the violence. Similarly, in its financial and moral backing of Hezbollah in Lebanon, it contributes to a lasting instability in this complex state. Finally, as Iran continues to battle with Saudi Arabia for regional hegemony, the resultant proxy wars in states such as Iraq, Bahrain and indeed Lebanon foster sectarian cleavages and increased tension – further hampering EU objectives of stability and development.

Turning to emerging powers from further afield, the main concern of China in the region is energy. It has duly played a minor role in the complicated politics of the Arab spring states, preferring to secure its supplies of oil and gas further east. According to the United States Energy Information Administration, over 50 percent of Chinese crude oil imports in 2013 came from the Gulf states and Iran. Further, over the past decade China also overtook the US as the largest

5 "Sisi tells Ashton nomination responds to popular will", *Al-Masry Al-Youm*, 11 April 2014

6 Council of the European Union, document 16394/13, 19 November 2013
7 Vimont, *op. cit.*

8 See Richard Youngs, "From Transformation to Mediation: The Arab Spring Reframed", Carnegie Paper, March 2014

9 Andrew Rettmann, "EU reaction to Egypt Coup: 'Awkward. Disturbing'", *EUobserver*, 4 July 2013

overall trading partner of the six Gulf states. This reflects a broader shift eastwards of the GCC as a whole, with the most recent EU Commission statistics showing the first four export markets of the body to be Japan, India, South Korea and China. And with China's growth model – economic development with limited political opening – also attractive to the entrenched Gulf monarchies, this development could pose a challenge in the future for an energy-thirsty but often incoherent Europe in the Gulf.

Non-state actors are also increasingly active in the region. NGOs, multinational corporations, faith-based organizations, international bodies, and terrorist networks have all proliferated and added to the growing complexity. In dealing with the Syrian crisis, for example, the EU works alongside a multitude of NGOs and UN bodies such as the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). In Lebanon alone, where a quarter of the national population is now made up of Syrian refugees, this latter body has seen its budget grow from \$13.5 million in 2010 to \$370.9 million in 2014. On the other side of the range of non-state actors, extremist networks have also spread. Groups – some linked to al-Qaeda – have flowered in the lawlessness of Iraq, Libya and Syria, posing a serious terrorist threat in the EU's immediate neighbourhood.

Faced by the proliferation of such actors in the region, the EU has been forced to realise that it is no longer the major player. Although it still has economic clout in some North African states, it is difficult to wield decisive influence. This particularly impacts upon the ENP, a rigid and long-term initiative which relies on the enthusiasm and needs of partner countries in order to function. Yet the EU still has much to offer in such a multipolar scenario. As a somewhat neutral actor in a divided region it can utilize its mediation niche and maintain at least a seat at most tables. Similarly, it can use its commitment to multilateralism to try to shape fluid and adaptable links which might also help it elsewhere. The EU has often been seen as reluctant to think strategically in the past; local conditions might force it to do so in the Middle East.

Start tweaking or start over?

If the Arab awakenings have shown anything about EU foreign policy, it is that it is built for times of peace. If

Americans are from Mars, Europeans are from Venus, Robert Kagan famously wrote in 2002; the EU is either unwilling or incapable of impacting upon serious crises and conflicts.¹⁰ The MENA region, particularly the Mediterranean, has been a case in point. Modelled on the long-term, structural objectives of the highly successful enlargement policy, the unwieldy nature of the EU's neighbourhood policy has been ineffective faced with the dynamic flux which has gripped the region. Although promising initial efforts were made to make the policy more differentiated, conditional and flexible, it has simply not been able to keep pace with the shifting dynamics.

When Catherine Ashton's replacement takes office at the end of 2014, the new High Representative will be faced with the dilemma of re-strategizing. This is all the more pressing as the other neighbourhood encompassed by the policy, bordering Eastern Europe, is currently the scene of a geopolitical showdown with Russia. Rather than the "ring of friends" which was envisaged a decade ago, Europe is surrounded by a ring of fire.

Yet the shifts which have been outlined do not all have to be negative. Bilateral, classic diplomacy should not take precedence over efforts at regional integration and multilateral cooperation; but it can complement it and allow the EU to play a more adaptable and strategic role. Similarly, if the current situation calls for a safeguarding of security, this is not mutually exclusive to democracy promotion; the success of Tunisia, where the EU remained present and was receptive rather than prescriptive, demonstrates this. Finally, the influx of new players in the region does not have to boil down to a geostrategic battle; rather, a diplomatically active EU can use this to create more fluid and plurilateral links which could also benefit it elsewhere.

Sometimes complete revolutions are necessary in order to sweep away the old, corrupt order and start anew. Sometimes altering the current system is enough. For the EU's policy in the MENA region, despite underlying weaknesses and current prevarications, there appears to be still room for adjustment.

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¹⁰ Robert Kagan, "Power and Weakness", *Policy Review*, no. 113, 2002

About the author

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