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About this Series

Op-Med is an ongoing series of opinion pieces on topical issues in Mediterranean politics from a transatlantic perspective. The series brings together European, North American, and southern Mediterranean experts through the German Marshall Fund–Istituto Affari Internazionali strategic partnership. The series examines key questions surrounding the political, societal, and economic evolution of specific Mediterranean countries as well as the broader regional and international dynamics at play in the Mediterranean region as a whole.

One Year On: A Balance Sheet of the EU's Response to the Arab Spring

by *Nathalie Tocci*

The Arab Spring can be read as a revolt against adaptive authoritarianism in a globalizing world, defined in part through state capture of the economy alongside persistent and deepening repressive practices that resulted in soaring food prices, bulging youth unemployment, and staggering socio-economic inequalities. This authoritarian adaptation to globalization was not only a domestic development. It was supported by external players, such as the European Union (EU), that contented themselves with this authoritarianism for the sake of a specious stability.

After dithering, the EU admitted its past failings and unambiguously declared support for the democratic aspirations of the Middle Eastern peoples. In practice, it did so by revising the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP). The motto of the ENP review is “3 Ms”: money, markets, and mobility, to be deployed in the neighborhood following the principle of “more for more.” However, a year on, delving into the details of what has — and has not — been done reveals important weaknesses at the core of the EU's overall response to the historic change underway to its south.

Unresponsive Goals

The EU has certainly acknowledged that the goals of its reform agenda were in dire need of revision. Such revision meant not only putting democracy back on its policy agenda, but also revising the specific interpretation of its reform-related goals. Hence, the EU's newfound emphasis on “deep democracy,” “sustainability,” and “inclusiveness.” Accordingly, it now also supports education, health-care, and job creation through micro-credit and small- and medium-sized enterprise incentives. Yet these additions have only tweaked EU goals at the margins. On the whole, far from engaging in a paradigmatic revision of its policy goals, the (neo) liberal democracy and market economics imprint of EU external governance have remained largely unaltered. While the Union seems to recognize it must adopt a holistic approach to the political and civil society landscape of its neighbors, its approach continues to favor liberal-leaning NGOs and political actors, while still shunning radical Islamist groups — i.e., Salafist groups — that have made important electoral inroads. Economically, the EU's neo-liberal approach remains by and large unvaried, as evident in the rules embedded in Deep and Compre-

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hensive Free Trade Agreements (DCFTAs), Agreements on Conformity Assessment and Acceptance (ACAAs), and EU-promoted investor dialogues. It is precisely for this reason, alongside the complex demands made by the EU to third countries in terms of *acquis* approximation, which makes it unlikely that many (if any) Arab Mediterranean countries will actually conclude DCFTAs. Likewise, mobility partnerships, while a welcome step away from fortress Europe's approach to the South, provide meager incentives in terms of legal immigration and do not establish a sound link between migration and development.

Insufficient Instruments

The EU's rethink has essentially centered on the ENP. When it comes to other policy instruments, not much can be recorded. As for the Common Foreign and Security Policy, the Union's response was characteristically disappointing, marred by the typical divisions between member states. On Libya, bitter intra-EU division between France and the United Kingdom on one hand and Germany on the other meant that all the EU could muster was EUFOR-Libya, a Common Security and Defence Policy mission to support humanitarian efforts that would be activated only if requested by the UN-Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, a condition that was most unlikely to materialize.

Inaction has also characterized the multilateral level. Whereas the bulk of the EU's transformative agenda can and should be tackled through the EU's bilateral relations with individual countries, there remain a number of key policy questions, ranging from infrastructure to non-proliferation, combating organized crime, and maritime security, that continue to warrant multilateral solutions. Also, democracy-related questions can be usefully tackled multilaterally, in forums such as those established in the Eastern Partnership that contribute to setting regional norms and standards.

At the international multilateral level, the Union has set up a Task Force for the Southern Mediterranean, bringing together EU institutions, the EU Special Representative for the Southern Mediterranean, as well as international financial institutions (IFIs). Within the region, it has intensified dialogue with regional groupings such as the Arab League, the Arab Maghreb Union, and the Organization of the Islamic Conference. But these dialogues remain ad

hoc and do not envision a clear policy agenda. As for the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM), EU institutions have attempted to salvage that cumbersome initiative by taking on the co-presidency from France and launching the first project at a desalination facility for the Gaza Strip. This is more than what the UfM can record in its previous four years of existence. But it does not make the UfM any less of an anachronistic relic of a long-gone Euro-Mediterranean past. Nor does it cure the UfM of its obstinate neglect of all things political. Rather than insisting on artificial region-building, it is only if the EU nimbly institutionalizes its multilateral dialogues with existing regional, sub-regional, and, where relevant, extra regional (e.g., Turkey, the United States, China) actors, assigning to each forum the policy questions for which it is, or can be, competent, that its multilateral efforts are likely to bear fruit. A pragmatic and probably more sub-regional approach, building on existing sub-regional groupings, would seem the appropriate avenue to deal with regional problems in a post-Arab Spring Mediterranean.

Inappropriate Methods

Finally, the EU has reinstated conditionality as a guiding method of its democracy support activities. In some cases, results are clear, as evident in EU policies toward the reform frontrunner, Tunisia, including the almost doubling in aid, the establishment of an EU-Tunisia Task Force, and the open negotiations over a mobility partnership and a DCFTA. Yet beyond Tunisia, Morocco and Jordan also fare equally well, despite their far less impressive steps forward, with both countries on course for negotiating DCFTAs, mobility partnerships, and in the case of Morocco, an agreement on agriculture liberalization that was concluded in February 2012. As aptly argued by Behr,¹ the EU's privileged relations with its southern partners have remained largely the same since the outbreak of the Arab Spring.

Beyond the partial implementation of conditionality, a deeper problem exists regarding the appropriateness of conditionality as a method of action. In a post-Arab Spring context, the EU is faced with a dilemma. In essence, conditionality can only be applied to those countries that have either experienced regime change or appear to be

¹Timo Behr, *After the Revolution: The EU and the Arab Transition*, Policy Paper 54, Notre Europe, Paris, 2012, available at: <http://www.notre-europe.eu/en/axes/europe-and-world-governance/works/publication/after-the-revolution-the-eu-and-the-arab-transition/>

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progressing toward reforms as a result of domestic — and not external — pressure. Yet in these countries, the sense of popular empowerment, and at times nationalism, generated by a self-assertive domestic change may render external conditionality inappropriate. This is particularly true given that Arab peoples are well aware that until recently the EU had happily engaged in unconditional partnerships with then-dictators. The EU remains woefully unable or unwilling to use conditionality toward those countries in which authoritarianism remains robust. In a post-Arab Spring situation, conditionality then is possible where it is most inappropriate and impossible where it is most needed. The EU may have to come to terms with the fact that in a post-enlargement and post-Arab Spring context, conditionality may no longer represent a viable instrument to induce domestic change. Rather than top-down conditionality aimed at macro-level polity and institutional changes, the EU may have to develop further democracy promotion methods aimed at the micro-level — i.e., through civil society development — and at the meso-level — e.g., good governance and rule of law promotion within sectoral policy areas in which the EU engages with the neighbors.²

The EU must be given credit for responding to the Arab Spring by placing democracy and sustainable development at the forefront of its policy agenda, and reviewing, enhancing, and at times replacing its policies toward its South. Nevertheless much remains to be done. The shift of tectonic plates on its southern shores is historic, and its outcome far from assured. Neither can the Union adequately respond to this change alone, nor can it do so by tweaking at the margins of its existing policy instruments. In order to rise to the challenge of the historic change underway at its borders, the EU must become genuinely open to the input of local, regional, and extra-regional actors. This would entail a definition of policy goals that responds far more to local demands, the establishment of multilateral policy instruments that welcomes the engagement of regional and extra regional actors, and the pursuit of policy methods that account for rising local, and indeed at times nationalist, sensitivities. The Euro-Mediterranean vision, for the time being, is gone. The Union must make good on its quest for effective multilateralism if it is to remain a relevant actor in the neighborhood.

²Sandra Lavenex and Frank Schimmelfennig, Frank, "EU democracy promotion in the neighbourhood: from leverage to governance," *Democratization*, Vol. 18, No. 4, 2011, pp. 885-909.

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