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# The EU & the “Arab Awakening”



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## Introduction

When a 26 year-old Tunisian street vendor, Mohammed Bouazizi, set himself on fire on 17 December 2010 in protest at his treatment by local officials, he cannot have imagined the enormity of the consequences. President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, who had ruled Tunisia since 1987, was forced from office on 14 January 2011; major protests erupted in 12 countries with minor incidents in others. The most dramatic were in Egypt, where President Hosni Mubarak was forced from office after 30 years, and in Libya where a large-scale rebellion against the rule of Colonel Gaddafi evolved into a civil war with intervention by the international community and ended with Gaddafi's overthrow and death. Serious protests continue in Syria and Yemen and there is on-going turbulence in a number of other countries, including Bahrain and Iran. It is clear that the Arab revolutions have not yet run their course.

The events of 2011 have been called the “Arab Spring” or the “Arab awakening” by many commentators and likened to the collapse of Communism in Europe after 1989.

The scale of these events caught politicians and diplomats unawares and the response of the international community has often been criticised as inadequate. This paper looks at the events of the Arab Awakening and assesses the EU's response.

## Background

In the Arab World each country is different but certain themes and problems can be seen as threads that bind the separate national protests. These include rapid population growth, economic stagnation with high levels of unemployment, an absence of democracy and the rule of law, corruption and disparities of wealth and power, repressive governments and political instability. Over all this hangs the place of Islam in Arab politics.

The population of the 22 Arab countries has almost trebled since 1970 – from 128 million to 359 million, compared to a 12 per cent increase in Europe over the same period and 52 per cent in the USA – making it the fastest growing region in the world.<sup>1</sup> In some countries, such as Egypt, Tunisia, Syria and Saudi Arabia, the increase has been particularly large. One aspect of this demographic change has been the increase in the number of young people; 60 per cent of the Arab countries' population is under 25.<sup>2</sup>

An International Labour Organisation survey in 2006 found that unemployment in the Middle East and North Africa was the highest in any region of the world at 12.2 per cent. Participation in the workforce was the lowest in the world, largely because only one in three

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<sup>1</sup> 'Bulging youth populations in the Mideast', Joseph Charmie (Yale), *The Jakarta Post*, 1 April 2011

<sup>2</sup> UNDP, *Arab Human Development Report 2009: Challenges to Human Security in the Arab Countries*, 26 May 2009, p. 36

women is in employment. This high level of unemployment prompted Carnegie economic expert Sufyan Alissa to argue in 2007 that “the repeated failure of Arab government to find radical solutions to this problem could lead to public pressure to topple these governments”.<sup>3</sup> That view was shared by other commentators who also noted the failure of Arab governments to address poor educational systems. This unemployment problem reflects not only population growth but also economic stagnation in many countries. The vast wealth of the Persian Gulf states contrasts markedly with the plight of Yemen – the poorest of the Arab states – where 40 per cent of the population live on under £1.25 a day. Even in Saudi Arabia, 40 per cent of young people have no job and of those that do, nearly half earn less than £500 a month.

Democracy and the rule of law exist only partially in most Arab countries. Of the countries where major protests took place, Egypt, Tunisia, Algeria and Yemen all had elected presidents, but protestors challenged the legitimacy of the government because of the absence of free and fair elections, open media and because of corruption amongst the ruling elite. The absence of democracy and the rule of law in most Arab countries meant there was no safety valve through which public concern about the state of the economy could be vented. Violent repression of protests only made the situation worse.

Political instability is a notable feature of the region. In addition to the long-standing Israel/Palestinian dispute (see below), there are considerable problems arising from the dominance of ethnic or religious minorities in several countries. In Bahrain, Lebanon and Syria (and in Iraq until recently), religious or tribal minorities rule. In other states, such as Yemen, there has been political violence associated with regional or territorial disputes. Terrorism has been a factor too – and one which has complicated the Arab world's relationship with the West.

One of the consequences of political instability, including that the region is home to half the world's refugees, has been a rise in illegal migration as people have understandably tried to find better prospects in Europe and elsewhere. This has caused considerable tension between North African countries and EU countries.

Given this background, it is hardly surprising that tensions in some Arab countries spilled on to the streets. The financial crisis of recent years, and the global economic down-turn that followed, put additional pressure on unpopular governments with high food prices contributing to the mood of anger in several countries.

The communications revolution played a part in the Arab Spring too – the wide availability of satellite television enabled Arabs to follow developments in other countries, particularly Tunisia, and respond. The younger Arabs used social networking sites on the internet as way of communicating with one another and the wider world when the mainstream media in their countries was often under state control.

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<sup>3</sup> Sufyan Alissa, 'Strengthening the Private Sector Is A Prerequisite for Dealing with Unemployment in the Arab World', Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 7 March 2007

## **The Wider Context**

The wider picture is dominated by the Israel/Palestine dispute and the lack of progress in the peace process. This dispute has had a poisoning effect on relationships between the Arab world and much of the West and within the Arab world itself, as Arab countries take different approaches to the issue, although the Palestinian application to the UN for membership as a nation state has provided an issue around which all Arab states can rally. The continuing influence of Hezbollah in Lebanon and the threat this poses to neighbouring Israel, as well as the de-stabilising impact in Lebanon itself, only makes the situation more complicated and more dangerous.

Hezbollah derives much of its funding and arms supplies from Iran, which also provides money and weapons to Hamas in the Gaza strip. Iranian influence is feared by many Arab states and Iran's continuing search for a nuclear weapons capability, in defiance of the international community, makes it a wider cause for concern. The EU is involved in both the diplomatic initiatives to deal with Iran's nuclear programme and in the Middle East Quartet, that is the EU, US, Russia and the UN.

Global dependence on the oil and gas reserves of many Arab countries has made energy a potent factor in the relationship between these countries and the rest of the world. Many commentators have seen the reluctance of Western countries to confront the rulers of Arab countries over their poor human rights and democratic records as being because of the influence of energy over decision-makers. But Western action on Libya undermines the claim that the West always acts in the Middle East to protect its energy sources.

The US and UK invasion of Iraq in 2003 had many negative consequences in the region, not least in exacerbating anti-US and anti-Western sentiment. The overhang from invasion of Iraq has become a constraining factor in US foreign policy, as the Obama administration has sought to avoid confrontation with Muslim countries. In addition, they feel that the US policy of unconditional support for Israel has caused a stalemate in the dispute over Palestine. But the Arab Spring was not driven by anti-US or anti-Western sentiments nor indeed the Islamist agenda or the Palestinian issue.

## **The EU's Relationship with the Region**

From the early 1960s the EC developed a series of bilateral cooperation agreements with its Mediterranean neighbours, essentially offering trade benefits and aid.

At present, Algeria, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Palestinian Authority and Tunisia have association agreements with the EU. The treaties that allow for trade liberalisation, enable the third country to be part of EU aid programmes but also require action on the part of the third country, such as measures to establish the rule of law in business or to improve human rights. Syria negotiated an association agreement with the EU but it has not been formally agreed because the Council required Syria to co-operate with the Special Tribunal for Lebanon, set up to prosecute those suspected of the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri in 2005, before it could be adopted. Negotiations with Libya began in 2008 but they had not been completed at the time of the Libyan uprising.

In EU policy terms the region forms part of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP). This policy is intended to enable countries on the edge of the EU to enjoy a close association with the EU without necessarily joining it in the future (only European countries can join the EU; there is a separate Senior European Experts paper on the ENP).

The Barcelona Process was the framework for a more ambitious programme for re-negotiated association agreements between the EU and its Mediterranean partners, with improved trade and economic cooperation, more political content (bedevilled however by the Arab-Israel dispute), dealing also with migration (including the EU's right to return illegal economic migrants) and including a human rights, aspirations to good governance and the rule of law. The agreements have sometimes been difficult to negotiate because of the resistance of some partners to the human rights and linked suspension clauses.

The EU's relationship with the countries of the Southern and Eastern Mediterranean is also dealt with in the forum of the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM); a body established in 2008 to replace the Barcelona Process.<sup>4</sup> A range of co-operative ventures have been launched, including economic development projects, measures to tackle pollution in the Mediterranean Sea and an energy project aimed at harnessing solar power. But the UfM has not achieved the political importance that was hoped for. It has not become a significant factor in debates about the future of the Southern Mediterranean countries, nor a player in political discussions.

This may have reflected a lack of commitment to the project within the EU – not all Member States were as enthusiastic as President Sarkozy about the setting up of the UfM. The fact that not all the UfM member countries were democracies added to doubts inside the EU about the value of the body. The disparate nature of the Southern Mediterranean members themselves with a lack of agreement among them on the bigger political questions, as well as reluctance to involve outsiders, contributed to the perception that the UfM was a solution proposed by the EU to problems identified by the EU rather than a partnership established with the Southern Mediterranean countries.

After 2008 two summits of the UfM were proposed and then postponed; a situation that added credibility to the view that it lacked leadership and impetus. Both the Barcelona Process and the UfM have suffered from disagreements over the Arab-Israel dispute leading to Arab countries declining to attend meetings with Israeli representatives present.

An aim of the UfM is the inclusion of the countries of the Southern Mediterranean with the EU, EFTA countries and Turkey in a Euro-Mediterranean free trade area. This in turn would link to the Greater Arab Free Trade Area, which came into being in 1997, and operates under the auspices of the Arab League. EU countries do substantial trade with countries of the Southern Mediterranean - €224 billion in 2009 – but there is relatively little intra-regional trade amongst the Arab countries – just €15 billion in 2009. The potential economic benefits of establishing a large free trade area covering most of Europe and the Mediterranean could therefore be significant for Arab countries currently experiencing severe economic difficulties and which need to create jobs at a faster rate than in the past.

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<sup>4</sup> All EU Member States are included with Albania, Algeria, Bosnia & Herzegovina, Croatia, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Mauritania, Monaco, Montenegro, Morocco, the Palestinian Authority, Syria, Tunisia and Turkey

## **The EU & International Response**

The international community's first response was to call for restraint when force was used by governments and then to provide emergency assistance to those caught up in the protests, such as foreign workers who wanted to return home.

### Libya

The UN Security Council became involved when Colonel Gaddafi's forces used lethal force against protestors. UN Security Council Resolution 1973 agreed on 17 March 2011, crucially following the request of the Arab League for a no-fly zone, authorised members to use necessary force to protect civilians from attack by Gaddafi's forces, including establishing a no-fly zone. A military operation led by NATO commenced shortly afterwards to implement the no-fly zone. Germany's abstention in the UNSC vote highlighted divisions within the EU over the use of force to deal with Gaddafi.

Nevertheless, there was unanimous agreement within the EU that Gaddafi's actions were unacceptable. A range of sanctions and travel bans had been agreed against Gaddafi and his supporters in advance of UNSC decisions and were strengthened in accordance with resolution 1973. Extensive measures were taken to support refugees, including providing financial aid but also involving EU staff on the ground, particularly on Libya's borders. Humanitarian aid to people in Libya was also provided and the European External Action Service helped in support of the operation to rescue EU citizens trapped in Libya.

The question of who should lead the military force to enforce the no-fly zone was more contentious. Britain and France were the EU countries most determined on military action. NATO became the vehicle through which the military operation was mounted with the US initially in charge but Europeans later took command because of US reluctance to take the lead in operations affecting a Muslim country.

### Immigration

Immigration became a significant problem for the EU as the Arab revolutions developed. Large numbers of refugees fled from affected areas and sought entry to Member States. Italy, Spain and Malta were all affected, with 15,000 people arriving on the Italian island of Lampedusa, south of Sicily, in the first few weeks. A joint EU operation was established in response to the problem, with 14 Member States putting up the necessary assets to enable forces to be deployed in response to the migration problem. The Schengen Agreement has been put under strain by the large flows of migrants and Italy's decision to issue travel documentation to refugees arriving in their country.

### Syria

The Syrian situation posed particular challenges for the international community. There was not the same support from the Arab world for internationalising the Syrian situation that there had been in the case of Libya. With Russia and China particularly loathe to publicly criticise the Syrian regime, a UN resolution authorising action against Syria was vetoed.

The EU adopted the policy of publicly criticising the violent repression of Syrians by their own Government, seeking international condemnation at the UN and introducing targeted

sanctions. As the violence in Syria grew in scale and impact, some Arab and Muslim states began to call publicly on the Assad government to stop using violence. Turkey, a neighbour and important ally of Syria, has been particularly sharp in its criticisms of Assad, has set up camps in Turkey for refugees fleeing the violence in Syria and hosted a conference of Syrian opposition groups in Ankara. The fact that Iran is Syria's closest ally has meant that the difficulties within Syria have become a proxy contest for the disputes between the Iranians and Arabs.

The EU has now banned imports of Syrian oil into the EU, a significant development as a quarter of the country's income comes from oil and 95 per cent of the oil it exports goes to EU Member States.

### **The EU's Proposals for a Long-term Response**

The High Representative for the CFSP, Lady Ashton, and the European Commission proposed an over-arching response by the EU to the Arab revolutions in March 2011.<sup>5</sup> The paper suggested that the right approach was one of partnership with Arab states, based on the notion that the faster those states proceeded towards becoming rule of law democracies, the greater the EU's response. This approach, known as "more for more", is designed to speed up Arab states' ability to join the partnership. Free and fair elections are the basic criteria for entry to the partnership. Clearly in countries (such as Libya) where there is no recent history of democracy, a capacity-building programme is required in order to establish relevant institutions and to enable political parties to develop. The EU intends to support that process – as it has very effectively in the past in Europe.

This new partnership will come under the long-standing umbrella of the ENP – itself re-launched in May 2011 to reflect the changed situation on the borders of the EU. For the first time, the European Bank for Reconstruction & Development (EBRD) will be able to lend money to the Southern Mediterranean countries, providing a key additional source of investment funds from an institution experienced in this field of lending.

The EU's financial support is part of a wider international response. At Deauville in May 2011 the members of the G8 agreed to provide support to help Arab states in the transition to democracy. It was agreed then that the multilateral development banks (which include the World Bank and the EBRD) would provide Egypt and Tunisia with over \$20 billion; of this, €3.5 billion would come from the European Investment Bank (an EU body). Jordan and Morocco joined later and the total resources available from multilateral institutions for the period 2011-13 for Egypt, Tunisia, Jordan and Morocco reached \$38 billion by September 2011, with the IMF available to provide resources on top of that. Libya is expected to become one of the recipient countries in the near future.

EU Member States are also providing bilateral support, such as French aid to Tunisia to help stabilise the Tunisian economy.

In recognition of the scale of the challenge, the EU High Representative for CFSP established a Task Force in the early summer of 2011 bringing together key EU personnel to provide

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<sup>5</sup> See European Commission & High Representative of the Union for Foreign and Security Affairs, *Joint Communication: A Partnership for Democracy and Shared Prosperity with the Southern Mediterranean*, COM (2011) 200 final, 11 March 2011



more effective co-ordination. In July 2011 Spanish diplomat Bernardino León Gross was appointed as the EU's Special Representative to the Southern Mediterranean with the job of leading the EU's work during the period of transition in the region.

Of course each Arab country is different and the EU will continue to need to respond accordingly. Association agreements will be the basic format for agreement between the EU and each country. That will enable existing agreements to be updated or adapted rather than to begin afresh.

Migration remains an important issue for both the Arab countries and for the EU. As a result of the large number of refugees and the difficulties these caused for several EU Member States, the EU is now committed to working with Arab states to agree on "mobility partnerships", essentially an agreement between the EU and a third country for co-operation on the legal migration of that country's citizens. Egypt, Morocco and Tunisia are the first countries with whom the EU is negotiating such partnerships.

The difficulties over refugees and the Schengen area led to a review of the Schengen rules and proposals for them to be changed. If these rule changes are adopted there will be a clearer mechanism for reintroducing internal border controls in an emergency.

## **Assessment**

The events of the Arab awakening have been dramatic and the consequences will be far-reaching. The decision of the new government of Egypt to re-open the border between Egypt and Gaza against Israeli objections is but one example of the many changes that are to come. Egypt and Israel, while not allies in any formal sense, shared a common approach to many issues of mutual concern when Egypt was led by Mubarak; that is not the case under Egypt's current leadership. And while Tunisia has held democratic elections, it is not certain that Egypt will so easily move towards democracy. Some of the old certainties of the Southern Mediterranean have gone and no one quite knows what will replace them.

Like all international observers, the EU was not expecting the revolutionary upheavals and like others, it has been criticised for an inadequate response. Is the perception that the EU has failed to rise to the scale of events fair or an over-estimation of what the EU could achieve?

The EU's influence in the Southern Mediterranean was (and is) likely to be different to that it achieved in the past on its European borders because when it supported the transition to democracy before in southern, central and Eastern Europe it had the carrot of membership to offer. The proposed partnership was a good first step but it felt somewhat basic and it was not a new Marshall Plan on the scale needed to respond to the problems and opportunities of the region. Since that initial response in March the EU has been bolder, taking a tougher stance on Syria than others, participating in the G8's package of economic support to Arab states and pushing forward the recognition of the National Transitional Council in Libya.

The EU will have a significant role to play in the region, depending on events on the ground. The EU has better instruments to respond to the post-revolutionary phase of political and economic development than any other body – although it will have to fit its own response with those of the UN, the Arab League, the African Union and the US (as it has been doing). Of course it will be up to the peoples of the Arab countries to determine the direction of

their countries and what relationship they should have with others, including the EU. The reality is that there is likely to be a prolonged period of uncertainty in the Middle East and North Africa which will generate considerable challenges for the EU.

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## Senior European Experts

The Senior European Experts Group is an independent body consisting of former high-ranking British diplomats and civil servants, including several former UK ambassadors to the EU, and former officials of the institutions of the EU.

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