

# The EU and the Arab spring: from munificence to geo-strategy

Richard Youngs

>> For all the fears over potential instability and less amenable governments taking office, political change in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) is good news for Europe. The EU is right to set the deepening of Arab reform as a key objective. Many admirable new European policy initiatives have been introduced offering support for Arab reform. The recently-held inaugural EU task force meeting on Tunisia produced an impressive list of assistance projects. But emerging dynamics in the region suggest that over the longer-term the EU will also require a fundamentally more strategic approach. Much more is needed than the current plethora of small-scale transition-related projects. A paradigm shift is called for: from the EU endlessly reiterating the responsibility it has to help MENA reforms to a more hard-headed look at how Europe needs to reposition itself geo-strategically in light of changes in the region.

With the anniversary of the Tunisian revolt not far over the horizon, the next step is for an evolving EU policy to move onto this new paradigm. Some astutely forward-looking policy-makers in the European external action service and national foreign ministries do show signs of wanting to move policy in this direction. What follows below is a series of suggestions that might contribute towards thinking on this more strategic outlook.

## THE UNWANTED?

One refrain is routinely and somewhat ritually now repeated: Arab protests are in the name of freedom *from* the West and not in aspiration of joining a 'Western project'. This apparently fundamental difference

## HIGHLIGHTS

- The EU has in many ways reacted well to the Arab spring, but must now gradually move beyond its stance of 'listening and helping';
- The EU should map out a geostrategic vision for how the Arab spring conditions its own long-term interests;
- To do this, the EU must seek to influence a nascent set of underlying economic, governance and security dynamics across the Middle East.

»»»»» with previous transition waves, especially in southern and then eastern Europe, is now frequently noted. The same point of view has been forwarded even by the most prominent of Libyan writers and intellectuals, after six months of British- and French-led commitment in this country. The rather stage-managed reception given to David Cameron and Nicolas Sarkozy in Tripoli in September cannot mask the fact that autonomy has been the leitmotif of uprisings across the MENA region.

While policy-makers have outwardly taken this observation on board, there is a growing mismatch between European and Arab perspectives on EU-MENA relations. In Europe the focus is on how the EU should be doing more to foster genuine partnership, be more generous and less self-interested, listen to local voices and be more sensitive to different forms of political organisation. This author is struck by the frequency with which European diplomats and analysts now suggest that the EU should refrain from emphasising its own preferences and interests, and rather follow the flow of unfolding trends in the MENA. Listen to every interview senior officials or ministers offer upon departing for the region: we are going to listen and not to impose our preferences, they invariably insist. Nomenclature portrays this aspired glow of shared warmth: think of the Commission's so-called SPRING programme, promising Support for Partnership, Reform and Inclusive Growth.

In contrast, Arab reactions are notably combative. A familiar stock of complaints is forthcoming from Arab interlocutors. In what is apparently becoming the standardised term of warning, even the most liberal of reformers say Europe is not an 'acceptable partner' in religious matters. Arabs want European money and the freedom to work in Europe, but the fuzzy talk of cultural partnerships and shared communities leaves them unimpressed. Mediterranean 'Union' certainly does not appear on their wish lists for outside help; indeed questions on this benighted initiative usually trigger a wry grin of slight disbelief from one's Arab interlocutor.

European must stop 'preaching' its experiences and models of transition, most Arabs say. While Europeans give great weight to initiatives purporting to disseminate the lessons of transitions, Arab reformers dismiss these as well-intentioned but marginal. The EU has no role in the ebb and flow of Egypt's process of political change; the shifting alliances and tactics of different actors in Egypt are unfolding quite beyond the orbit of EU influence. Algeria is distancing itself increasingly from EU policy initiatives.

Arabs leave the EU an unenviably thin line to walk. If Europe fails to help, it is lambasted as evil conspirator with authoritarian remnants. If it does help, it is often berated for being driven only by pernicious self-interest. The commonly heard plea is that the EU should also keep out of foreign policy questions on which more representative governments are likely to become more nationalist and assertive.

In short, the EU appears to be more the suitor now, and on many matters unrequited by its Arab partners. Of course, many in the region want European funds. But one cannot help feeling that the EU's painfully politically-correct embrace is met with an increasingly cold shoulder. Given the past hypocrisy in European policies this should come as no surprise. The EU is paying and will pay for its past misdemeanours. More than a few speeches claiming humility and many mea culpas will be needed to correct Europe's legitimacy deficit in the region. In this sense, many Arab complaints are largely as they should be. Mostly they do not reflect actual hostility towards Europe, but governments' past actions have bred a dearth of trust. Add in Europe's patent decline and financial crunch, and the absence of a strong European orientation among Arab reformers is perhaps even more understandable.

But while Arab reactions may be unsurprising and justifiable, the EU must similarly be less insipid in response. The EU must wake up to the fact that north and south of the Mediterranean are talking qualitatively different languages. The tone of

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European discourse is: thanks to the Arab spring we can join together in partnership. The Arab line is: tangible help is welcome, but now you can take the opportunity to get out of our affairs. Europeans are dressed in hair shirt, Arabs in the regalia of mordant assertiveness.

The EU needs to change its mindset from that of passive and limpid ‘helper’ to that of the geo-strategic planner. If Arab actors keep repeating that the EU is not an acceptable partner to ‘interfere’, the EU insistence on ‘equal partnership’ and shared

decision-making seems increasingly like recondite self-abasement. The implication of heeding Arabs’ own complaints about EU policies is that reformers in the region must ultimately sort out their own problems. Europe should help, and

generously so. But it should drop the often-heard pretence that ‘we are part of the region’ and that we are engaged in the creation of a mutually-desired project of deep and harmonious politico-social integration.

The EU should aim for more careful calculation of where change in the region can advance European interests. Arabs should be heeded when they say they do not want Europe trying to micro-manage reform processes. But the Union must make clear that the other side to this coin is that the EU must be tougher in ascertaining where its own interests lie in the complex and varied processes of political change across the MENA region.

If Arabs are not particularly enamoured of nebulous EU visions of shared community-building, they should not object to a less sentimental riposte from European governments. It is legitimate for the EU to focus far more on making sure that the instability of change does

not spill-over to have negative repercussions on a broader regional basis. If Arab reformers want more freedom *from* the West, then the EU should also map a more autonomous vision of its strategic positioning.

To be absolutely clear: this is categorically not a question of becoming less ethical, sensitive or soft power-oriented. The EU must be more geo-strategic but not in an old style realpolitik fashion. Europe should be unapologetically pro-reform. But governments are not NGOs. It is unsatisfactory for European politicians to be saying merely that they wish ‘to listen to the region’ without any set of clear strategic preferences. They have the responsibility to map out a vision that advances European interests – it is for this that they are responsible to their citizens. This author has been upbraided by senior EU officials based in the region for even posing the question in terms of strategic interests. These officials earnestly commit to ‘listening to the NGOs more’ and ‘putting the welfare of local people first’. An admirable and necessary sentiment, indeed, but not a foreign policy. Beyond this, one probes strategic intent in vain. The question of what their ten year geostrategic vision is for safeguarding EU interests is invariably met with bashful and blank-eyed silence. This is deeply pre-occupying.

The EU needs to move beyond its bureaucratic mindset of thinking that a response to the Arab spring is a matter merely of embellishing existing frameworks like the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM), the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP) or any other so-far ineffectual acronym. Offering more ‘money, markets and mobility’ is part of the equation but does not constitute a geo-strategic response to such potentially momentous events. The EU needs a geostrategic vision for where it wants the region to be in the next ten or twenty years, which problems need to be overcome and where Europe should be able to work with new regimes on broader global questions. It should work back from this vision to decide which policy changes are appropriate in

»»»»» the short-term. At present, the direction of deliberation is almost the reverse: policy-makers look at what is bureaucratically feasible now, then see what can this achieve in strategic terms.

### **GEOSTRATEGIC PRISMS**

Many will say that the EU is already too self-centred and focused on its own immediate power maximisation. In fact, its policies gravitate to two extremes simultaneously. At one extreme, its pronouncements are too NGO-like, in eschewing any focus on interests. At the other extreme, they still betray a reflex of exclusion and control that is devoid of longer-term rationale. What is missing is a renewed attempt to delineate the longer term implications of current changes in the region. Here are (non-exhaustive) suggestions for issues that merit consideration.

First, the EU must map out what kind of 'governance model' is envisaged for its relations with the MENA. In the long-term, the challenge is not merely to think in terms of what amounts of new assistance the EU should be offering, but also how the underlying institutional templates of European-MENA relations will change as a result of the Arab spring. Through the EMP, the EU purported to create a collective security community based on shared decision-making and deeply integrated policy structures across all realms. In practice, European governments themselves limited the depth of such dynamics. Reassessing its interests in the light of Arab protests, does the EU now want deep integration between Europe and the southern Mediterranean? Or would it be better served by a more distant relationship, offering support for reform but from a basis of autonomy? The best way forward is likely to be eclectic. The EU should opt for a more selective and lighter-touch use of the Euro-Mediterranean governance model, combining this with a more pro-reform and agile engagement at the level of high-politics.

Second, the EU must assess the risk of the Arab spring hastening the rise of non-Western powers

in the region. Is this more of a modern 'Suez moment' than a new opening to the spirit of 'Euro-Mediterranean collective security'? If so, the EU needs a vision for how it intends to react. How can it best influence the way that emerging powers act in the MENA? Will the EU adopt a geo-strategy of positive-sum cooperation, based on the hope that having more actors involved can help improve the 'soft security' deficits that effect Europe's own interests so acutely? If so, it has a long way to go to put such an approach into action. Most obviously, the EU must look at how it can engage Turkey more systematically on the future of the Arab spring. Despite all the attention lavished on Turkey's rising regional role, the EU has not attempted to devise a joint strategy with Ankara towards Arab democracy or, conversely, thought about what the limits might be to Arabs' acceptance of Turkish involvement.

Third, the EU needs to look beyond Islam. It is often said that being more strategically self-interested would involve trying to reduce the likelihood of Islamist governments. This would be a mistaken approach. But neither will European engagement with Islamists be especially relevant. If there is a turn towards more social conservatism in the Middle East this is of no primordial matter to Europe. It might complicate really deep social linkages and it might not be something Europeans look upon with much admiration after such courageous democracy protests. But it is not of major geo-strategic interest. Geopolitical problems are more likely to flow from the depth of social anger if reforms fail, rather than from the inclusion of Islamist parties. The EU must transcend the debate over 'engaging versus containing' Islam. Its own interests will depend a lot more on the institutional processes and economic strategies through which social justice is pursued.

Which leads on to a fourth consideration: EU economic interests will require a fine balance between markets and the state. The EU must recognise that the way in which economic liberalisation was prompted during the last decade nourished much social discontent. But it

should be wary of over-shooting in the other direction. It is currently fashionable to argue that the Arab spring will and should usher in a fundamentally different and strongly anti-market economic model. Many see this as the key to social stability, job creation and a reduction in migration. However, the EU needs a much more granular analysis of the interweaving of political and economic opening. A rigid model of economic liberalisation is to be avoided. But the EU should also resist current anti-market fashion and try to dissuade the region from veering too far away from economic liberalisation.

The region needs more dynamic private sectors to generate jobs, not a return to state-socialism. Problems have arisen from the corrupt and nepotistic way in which economies have been liberalised, much more than from the principle of economic openness per se. The key for geo-economic interest is to support a better quality of economic governance, with balanced roles for the state and market, devoid of the clientelistic dynamics that have for long distorted both sectors. The EU must take particular advantage of the opportunity to push the region beyond the rentier-dominated management of the energy sector that has fed both economic and political pathologies for so long.

Fifth, the EU must begin to get to grips with what the Arab spring means for the long-ruminated prospects of a pan-regional security framework. The EU needs to sort out its interpretation of how the Arab spring conditions intra-regional relations. What does it feel about an incipient competitiveness between Egypt and Saudi Arabia? Clarity is lacking here: some diplomats argue that Egypt will be the big winner, others insist that the key will be to back Saudi Arabia as the region's star rising power. The way that the Arab spring promises to reshuffle the already-fragile set of inter-state relations within the Middle East places more of a premium on pan-regional political dialogue. The regional dimension to non-proliferation efforts are, for example, likely to become more important. The impact on the Arab-Israeli conflict will also be complex. In

consequence, the EU must shift beyond its rather fragmented set of policy frameworks across the region and make more effort to joint together its Mediterranean, Gulf, Yemen, Iran and Iraq policies.

Finally, the EU must consider how and where it can engage with North African states on wider global issues. In some ways, North Africa is so small in economic and demographic terms compared to the magnitude of the challenges and opportunities emanating from Asia, that Euro-Mediterranean relations must be crafted with this broader context in mind. The EU needs to move beyond a mind-set that sees the 'southern neighbourhood' only as a burden to be lightened. In view of shifting global power balances, the EU will need a broader set of strategic alliances built around key principles of internationalism. So far only limited coordination on crisis management issues with the likes of Morocco has been pursued in the MENA. The EU must map out a vision that conceives of deepened partnerships across the neighbourhood as instruments to help the EU build its global presence. The EU and countries to its south (and indeed, east) will need to establish a common cause in confronting future challenges together. The template will be to build from a strong neighbourhood out towards the broader changes to global order.

## CONCLUSION

Both Europeans and Arabs want things both ways. Europeans want the caché of a politically-correct discourse that 'we are only here to listen and help', but still have to acknowledge that the local response to this may be 'keep your distance'. Arabs convey this message of 'keep your distance', but simultaneously complain of the paucity of European money and labour market access. Both sides need a reality check.

Some will feel that such hard-nosed sobriety runs contrary to a spirit of other-regarding brotherhood latent in the Arab spring. Yet, for the EU to focus more on its own geo-strategic



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»»»»» vision would not represent a betrayal of courageous reformers. The EU is broadly right to be in listening mode and accept locally-driven solutions. But it must be legitimate to complement this with a clear vision of its own concerns. The EU should not be so cautious that it does nothing to make it harder for reform-spoilers to regroup. This would replay the EU's miscalculated hands-offs approach in the Balkans in the 1990s and waste a potentially historic opportunity. Some already fear that the Libya intervention was only undertaken because it was reasonably easy, where resources might be required in more strategically important parts of the region. The EU needs to supplement admirable humanitarianism with a more variegated assessment of its geopolitical interests.

The appropriate strategic doctrine might be defined as a form of liberal realism. Some will doubt that such a mix of non-prescriptive support for locally-driven reforms is compatible with the pursuit of self-interest. The EU must certainly work hard to ensure that liberal realism is something more than the symbolic compliment that virtue pays to vice. Yet, the risk currently lies in the direction of under-playing the strategic impact of changes afoot in the Middle East. The Union is moving so far towards a rhetoric of disinterested munificence that its pleas to be involved in the region's future look like mere supplicant importuning. The EU risks much if it fails to deal in a more geo-strategic coinage.

*Richard Youngs is director general of FRIDE.*