

Europe and the Arab Spring

Volker Perthes

The European Union and the United States, taken by surprise by the sudden outbreak of the Arab Spring, have had to accept their lack of influence over these revolutionary upheavals. They may assist or obstruct, but they cannot determine the course of events. This applies even to Libya. Without NATO's intervention, it would certainly have taken much longer to oust the Gadhafi regime. Whether Libya, however, remains divided or spirals into anarchy, whether the outcome will be a new dictatorship, some kind of tribal confederation or the emergence of a democratic system, will be decided by Libyans, not by Europe or NATO.

If anything, the limited influence of Europe and the international community on the timing and progress of the uprisings is an advantage. Alongside their peaceful trajectory, the beauty of the Egyptian and Tunisian revolutions was that they were autochthonous, immune to accusations of foreign meddling. But having little influence is not the same as escaping all responsibility.

Discussion of Europe is conspicuously absent from the websites and blogs of the Arab Spring activists. This political generation is overtly positive towards Europe, but overwhelmingly cynical about European governments (if they are discussed at all).¹ Nonetheless, the people have concrete expectations of Europe: from investment and technical support in establishing democratic institutions to freedom of travel.

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Europe does have an interest and a responsibility to expand and at least partially revamp its cooperation with the region, especially with those states that are undergoing transformation. Change always involves risks, and Europe had its fair share of alarmists who could see nothing but trouble and danger. But the risks of the process in Europe's southern neighbourhood are largely short term, whereas in the medium term opportunities predominate, if only because better-governed states that treat their citizens better also make better neighbours and partners.

Europe is not the only international player in the Middle East and North Africa, but the interests of other powers are much more selective. American strategic interest focuses above all on the Persian Gulf and on Israel and its immediate neighbours. It will remain involved in both arenas, as most regional actors would wish. For all their differences, the Arab gulf states depend on American assistance to contain Iran, and even Arab states that accuse the United States of taking sides in the Middle East accept that there can be no peaceful settlement of the Israel–Palestine conflict without decisive US intervention. But Washington's strategic interests in the Mediterranean are limited. Egypt as well as Israel are seen as strategic partners, but interest in other states is secondary. Washington made that very clear in connection with the Libyan war, which it would have preferred to leave completely to its European allies.

China, India and South Korea all have rapidly growing economic interests in the Middle East and North Africa: Chinese trade increased tenfold during the first decade of the century, India's eightfold and South Korea's threefold. All three run trade deficits with the region and are consequently seeking to increase exports and win more contracts for major construction and infrastructure projects, but they will pay little attention to political processes in these countries.

This leaves Europe as the only major international actor tied to the region by both political and security relations as well as trade, economic and development interests. It is an immediate neighbour. After the Arab societies themselves, Europe has the strongest interest in the success of the political uprisings. The Arab Spring is, therefore, a serious test for the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy and Neighbourhood Policy. As far

as joint action by the EU and shared positions among its members are concerned, the EU has not made a good start. But the Union has often shown an ability to learn.

Europe's toolbox

Where the consolidation of democratic initiatives, economic development and social stabilisation are concerned, there is a particular role for Europe. The political, social and economic problems that sparked the Arab uprisings offer useful starting points for European policy initiatives. It is also important to ensure that the new democratic governments in Tunisia, Egypt and other states are not dragged down by problems inherited from their predecessors.

Political and institutional reforms are essential. States that guarantee individual liberties, human rights, rule of law, democratic participation and transparency give their citizens greater confidence and thus release greater development potential in society. Outside support is needed here, but must involve more than good advice.

There is a great deal that the European Union and its member states can do to support the political transformation process in the Arab states. As well as numerous measures already in the EU's tried and tested toolbox, there is a need for stronger political messages and a clear stance towards the region and its societies.

Europe needs to set its priorities clearly. First and foremost, support must be given to states that are moving towards democracy or attempting to consolidate nascent democratic processes. In other words, the EU should concentrate much of its political energy and resources on making a success of Tunisia and Egypt. A successful transformation in these two states will radiate out across the region. Given fortuitous political developments, that could mean the Palestinian territories, Lebanon, Morocco and perhaps one day even Syria. Not all of these states, to be sure, will need or want the same kind of support. If, for example, Jordan joins the Gulf Cooperation Council it might not be exactly 'lost' to Europe (which implies it was Europe's in the first place) but would probably tend to rely on help from the Gulf and show little interest in meeting European conditions for support and demands for reform.

Such a European orientation, with a clear statement of intent that relations with states on a democratic development trajectory will become closer as they progress, would also send a message to other states. There should also be the option of a new form of association with the EU, to open up the prospect of full access to the internal market with its freedom of movement for goods, capital, services and people.²

Europe has had its own experiences with democratic transformations and can supply much that is needed to support such processes in other countries, starting with assistance organising free elections and election monitoring, and including help in reforming the police and judiciary. And it encompasses a series of rather unexciting but very important topics: general legal reforms; drafting a modern labour law and regulating relations between employers and trade unions (including rules for strikes and collective bargaining after the legalisation of free trade unions and industrial action); anti-trust legislation and rules for transparency and responsibility in business; and not least the establishment of effective social-insurance systems. Market-opening measures remain important, but should encourage job creation and must, if they are not to undermine the political process, go hand in hand with a credible social policy.

The importance of the Arab states for the European economy is likely to increase, especially considering the demographic structure of these countries. These are young countries, set to become more dynamic as they shed the chains of authoritarianism. In Egypt, Morocco, Syria and other countries in the region, 20% of the population will enter the labour market for the first time during the next ten years. That is an economic and labour-market challenge, of course. But this generation will also be seeking education, housing, consumer goods and communication, opening up new opportunities for the producers of consumer and investment goods as well as for businesses involved in housing construction, health, education, energy infrastructure and electricity generation. European businesses involved in the region's growing markets can (and should) themselves support the democratic transformation process, for example by committing to the working conditions, employee rights, environmental protection and transparency standards that apply in their home countries, and by offering proper training or supporting

training in state-run institutions and in local companies. Most companies know that such investment will literally pay for itself.

An open Europe

The political transformations that have taken hold in Egypt and Tunisia will take time and effort, and they are themselves contested. Their details will be controversial, triggering disagreement, opposition and disappointment, and they will experience setbacks. To encourage progress towards democracy Europe must make it clear that that is what it wants itself.

The EU should present itself as an 'open Europe' and offer the transforming states a new form of partnership that is not only intergovernmental but also draws in the societies involved. Openness should relate to people as well as goods. Although the EU has concluded free-trade agreements with Tunisia, Egypt and other Mediterranean states, it still maintains protectionist rules that need to be abolished. Agricultural imports from Egypt, for example, are restricted by seasonal quotas.

Europe is largely occupied with its own problems. The sovereign debt crisis; high youth unemployment and social protests in some states; differences over the path to stronger economic and financial governance, at least in the eurozone; difficulties in getting the European External Action Service started; and the successes of eurosceptic populist parties may all help make European policymakers hesitant to declare the Union more open towards others. There is nonetheless a strong consensus that Europe needs to respond positively to the changes in its southern neighbourhood, and that its multidimensional interests with regard to North Africa and the Middle East need to be underwritten by support for political and economic transformation in these states. Successful transformations will reduce security risks that emanate from the region and enhance the chances of economic cooperation; failed transformations will increase the risks. European policymakers will need to explain to their own populations that support for the countries on the other side of the Mediterranean is mutually beneficent.

Soon after the uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt the European Commission presented plans for a 'partnership for democracy and shared prosperity'.³ These plans, including financial assistance and improved market access,

need to be made concrete and implemented. Greater openness to the people of these countries is even more important: of the three 'M's that characterise European institutions – money, market and mobility – the latter is the most important in connection with the Arab states undergoing transformation. The region as a whole is not poor, and a Marshall Plan of the sort often proposed would be more likely to make these states dependent than to solve their core problems. The EU and the international financial institutions are willing to lend financial support to help these countries overcome their economic difficulties, but they cannot offer more than Saudi Arabia or Qatar. The issue of market access creates some difficulties in Europe, with a degree of competition between countries south and north of the Mediterranean. The abolition of particular trade barriers would help, but hardly more than

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an increase in the number of European tourists or granting young people from these countries easier and sensibly managed access to the European job market.

What Tunisia, Egypt and other states setting out down the road of democratic transformation need most is a strengthening of their own capacities. This could be supported by a comprehensive pact for training, work and energy designed to promote vocational training in these countries, but could also include a programme aimed directly at university graduates from transforming Arab states whose lack of professional experience makes it difficult to find a job matching their qualifications. Tens of thousands of young engineers and doctors, architects, accountants or MBAs are unemployed. Europe, by contrast, because of its own demographic structure, needs immigration (if only temporary) of young and skilled workers, above all in technical and health professions. A long-term programme for tens of thousands of graduates annually, encompassing traineeships in European firms and multi-year work permits allowing young skilled workers to acquire sufficient experience to go on to found businesses in their own countries, would send a clear message that there are better alternatives to illegal immigration. Young people in Tunisia or Egypt would instead be motivated to complete their studies in order to apply for a programme that promised them several years of legal employment in Europe, the acquisition of new skills and pos-

sibly start-up capital through business loans from a European development bank, and would themselves eventually provide jobs and training to others. It would be a programme that benefited both sides, Arab and European.⁴

The same applies to a longer-term energy partnership. Europe's energy relations with North Africa remain very one-sidedly focused on oil and gas imports, and Europe's perception of the southern Mediterranean is predominantly as an energy abundant region, a view that overlooks the fact that energy poverty prevails for large parts of the population. An average increase in demand for electricity of 5–7% per year up to 2030 is expected in the region. Climate change and desertification, the need for desalination and a rising population are the major drivers. The growing demand will affect the will and ability to export fossil fuels to Europe, depending on the future electricity mix. North Africa needs an appropriate transmission grid for rural, urban and industrial development. Cooperation in this field can promote shared prosperity by, first and foremost, improving the local electricity supply and benefiting the local labour markets through investments in photovoltaics, concentrating solar power (CSP) and wind farms, fitting with Europe's own climate, industry and technology interests. But Europe needs clean energy, and the countries of North Africa offer excellent geographic conditions for large-scale solar (thermal) power and wind farms. 'Desert electricity' can be produced more cheaply than in Europe and is cleaner and safer than electricity generated from coal, gas or uranium. A 40-year, €400bn project to meet 15% of European electrical demand by 2050, as well as a significant proportion of North African domestic demand, has already attracted significant investment from German, French, Italian and Moroccan companies and the World Bank. If various political barriers can be overcome, in its later phases, desert electrical power would be transmitted around or over the Mediterranean, further serving regional and European–Mediterranean integration.⁵

Basic rules for European policy

There are a handful of general rules that should guide Europe in its dealings with the states of the Middle East and North Africa, especially in the wake of the Arab uprisings.

European states and politicians should avoid expressing abstract support for democratic transformation in specific Arab countries while at the same time wishing for a particular outcome. Foreign actors must understand that they cannot pick the winners of democratic processes, and must avoid creating the impression that they would like to. The credibility of the young Arab democracies will depend on the acceptance of decisions by foreign partners, including election results that may run counter to the preferences of these partners or donors.

Instead, mutual confidence must be built, even with actors European leaders do not yet know and to whom they should extend a trust bonus. That will not always be easy, especially when those actors belong outside the traditional client base of European institutions and are perhaps sceptical towards Europe or the West. It might be helpful to remember from time to time that the problem in Egypt, Tunisia, Syria, Algeria and elsewhere was not these new, unknown actors but people who had been known in Europe for a long time, and often held in high esteem.

Amidst the detail of political, economic and social transformation in the Middle East and North Africa, Europe must not ignore the region's geopolitical rivalries and conflicts. Nor can Europe rely on the United States, as the most important external actor, to automatically do the right thing in every case. The United States is, to be sure, indispensable here: it has greater influence over regional actors and can give individual parties credible security guarantees. But to achieve fair solutions and secure them politically and economically, Europe has to play its part.

Although the uprisings and revolts in the Arab states have transfixed international and regional observers, the Palestine conflict (specifically the occupation of Palestinian territory and the unfulfilled aspirations of the Palestinians to independence, liberty and dignity) remains the most important basis of radical Islamist and nationalist mobilisation. Until Israel and the future Palestinian state have settled their territorial dispute – which is the core of the conflict – Israel will never be regarded as a full and equal regional partner, and many opportunities for cooperation will remain untapped: in commerce and trade, environmental protection and regional water management, and of course in the realm of security. Europe's credibility in many

Muslim societies still depends substantially on it at least actively attempting to bring about a fair resolution.

Europe is well advised to work with regional actors, especially in efforts to resolve protracted conflicts. This will naturally also involve states that have to date evaded or resisted political change. The EU (and even more so the United States) should avoid repeating the mistake of dividing states into 'moderate' and 'radical' on the basis of their geopolitical orientation, which has often led the West to overlook the deplorable state of human rights and political development in regimes classed as pro-Western or moderate. But Europe, like other powers, cannot simply renounce cooperation with important regional states. In dealing with Saudi Arabia, for example, much more use should be made of existing good relations for an honest dialogue that makes clear where shared interests and differences lie while at the same time offering support for a domestic reform process that is still much too cautious. Criticisms of human-rights violations, discrimination against women and members of the Shia community, or repression of civil protests in a neighbouring state, are not an undue interference in internal affairs. They rather express Europe's genuine concern for the future and long-term stability of such an important trading partner.

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Europe must also be open and honest about its own interests. All states have economic, political and security interests that sometimes require cooperation with authoritarian regimes. Europe needed Egypt, even under Mubarak, for the peace process, as a trade route and as an economic partner; it will continue to need Saudi Arabia for its oil, but also as an export market and for its regional influence. Similar considerations apply to other states in the region. There is nothing reprehensible about that, as even the citizens of Arab states protesting against their regimes acknowledge. But it would enhance the credibility of the EU and its member states if such interests were clearly stated, rather than cloaked behind sugary declarations.

In its ongoing dealings with the Middle East and North Africa, which is such an important part of its neighbourhood, Europe will have to redefine its understanding of stability. Europe has a vital interest in political and social stability on its borders, and regional stability is a central concept in European policy. There is nothing fundamentally wrong with that. But Arab autocrats hijacked the concept, presenting themselves as guarantors of national and regional stability and, often enough, asserting that their regimes represented the only alternative to Europe's fears of instability, chaos, terrorism and the victory of radical Islamism. As it turned out, these regimes were stagnant rather than stable. Many a European leader confused stagnation with real (that is, sustainable) stability. Europe should on no account abandon the goal of stability, but should instead develop a dynamic understanding of stability as an equilibrium that permits change and transformation. Europe knows from its own experience that political systems are most stable if they are based on a division of powers, public and parliamentary control of the executive, and regular elections that allow a peaceful change of government.

One may doubt whether politicians and the public in Europe have really understood that the people who drove the uprisings and revolutions in the Arab states have sounded a political signal far and wide beyond the Arab world, and in the process done a great service for European democracy. China's rising power in the worldwide competition of political models had increasingly forced Europe's democratic market-economy model on to the defensive. Many thought that the Chinese authoritarian capitalist model based on harmony, growth and wise leadership (as opposed to individual freedom, human rights and democracy) was the more promising. Although political transformation in the Arab world has just begun, the revolts have shown that the great Chinese narrative, so popular among ruling elites in Arab states as well as in Iran, Central Asia and many African states, does not offer a prospect for the younger generation. Instead, this generation showed how vital the desire for democracy and liberty remains, even in states that have long sought to repress it. The European narrative, according to which a combination of individual liberty, democracy and social justice ultimately represents (for all its defi-

cits and drawbacks) the best political model, thus received support from an unexpected quarter.⁶

Euphoria is poor political counsel, but fear is worse. Transformations are always difficult, and always take longer than their protagonists and outside supporters would wish. This was the case in Russia and Ukraine; it also showed in early political initiatives launched by the European Union with an eye to the Mediterranean region and the Middle East. But Europe's interest in the success of these transformations is hardly smaller than it was, 20 years ago in Eastern Europe.

Notes

- 1 Dima Tarhini, 'Inside the Arab Bloggers' Minds: Europe, Democracy and Religion', SWP working paper, June 2011, http://www.swp-berlin.org/fileadmin/contents/products/arbeitspapiere/WorkingPaperIL_Tarhini_Dima.pdf.
- 2 See Alvaro de Vasconcelos, 'The Shared Goal of a Euro-Mediterranean Community of Democratic States', in European Union Institute for Security Studies, 'The Arab Democratic Wave', Report no. 9, March 2011.
- 3 European Commission, 'A Partnership for Democracy and Shared Prosperity with the Southern Mediterranean', 8 March 2011, final, http://ec.europa.eu/commission_2010-2014/fule/headlines/news/2011/03/20110308_1_en.htm.
- 4 For more detail see Volker Perthes, 'A European Opening for the Arab World', *Project Syndicate*, 2 May 2011, <http://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/perthes8/English>; for further recommendations for action see Muriel Asseburg, *Der arabische Frühling: Herausforderung und Chance für die deutsche und europäische Politik*, SWP-Studie 17/2011 (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, July 2011), pp. 26–31.
- 5 See Isabelle Werenfels/Kirsten Westphal, 'Solar Power from North Africa. Frameworks and Prospects', SWP Research Paper 2010/RP 03, May 2010.
- 6 For a more detailed discussion of this topic see Stefan Mair und Volker Perthes, 'Ideen und Macht: Was definiert die relative Gewichtsverteilung in der Welt?', *Internationale Politik*, vol. 66, no. 3, May–June 2011, pp. 10–23.

