

EUROPE AT HOME AND ABROAD

## A European Opening for the Arab World

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BERLIN – The people of Tunisia and Egypt have shown that democracy in Arab countries need not come at the barrel of a Western gun. But, while the drive for democratic change has been local and authentic, there is no guarantee of a successful political transition: democratically elected governments will have to address the same social and economic problems that contributed to the old regimes' fall – not least the need to create jobs and opportunities for the young.

This will be impossible without external support. Given the myriad links between the European Union countries and the Mediterranean's southern rim, Europe must not miss this opportunity.

So far, the EU has offered to support democratization in Tunisia and Egypt by helping to organize free and fair elections, establish political parties, and reform the police, courts, and local administrations. But such political-administrative support is not enough. Nor is a Marshall Plan-type program of grand investments sufficient.

This is not to discount the need for such projects; the renewable-energy sector, in particular, holds enormous opportunities for cooperation. Europe needs clean energy, and will not be able to produce enough on its own territory. The countries of North Africa also need energy – particularly more electricity and new networks to support urban and industrial development.

Indeed, the availability of uninterrupted electricity often makes the difference between, say, a shoemaker's workshop and a shoe factory. And these countries have the most suitable environment for solar thermal power production. According to some optimistic studies, solar thermal power plants and wind farms in North Africa could not only boost economic growth there, but also provide more than 15% of Europe's electricity by 2050. Obviously, cooperation agreements and private investment in this sector should be encouraged.

The problem is that such long-term investments bring results only in the medium and long term. They do not address today's social or economic problems, nor do they signal a new society-oriented approach by Europe towards its Mediterranean neighbors.

New EU programs should mainly aim at strengthening the specific capacities of Tunisia, Egypt, and others, and seek opportunities that benefit both sides of the Mediterranean. Catherine Ashton, the EU's vice-president and high representative for foreign affairs and security policy, has proposed a Partnership for Democracy and Shared Prosperity with the Southern Mediterranean, which contains a host of useful measures, including facilitation of visas for students, academics, and business people.

But, to make this scheme more concrete, I would suggest augmenting it with a “pact for labor and skills” between the EU and the Arab countries that choose a path to democratic transformation.

Europe, while afraid of illegal migration, needs foreign labor for its own demographic reasons – not least young engineers, technical staff, doctors, and health-care workers. Tunisia, Egypt, and the other Southern Mediterranean countries have an abundance of young people with degrees and no jobs, who often also need to acquire practical skills. This is most urgent for the Arab world’s baby boomers – those between 20 and 35. The next generation is already smaller.

As a practical step, the EU and its member states should offer 30,000 visas and work permits annually for graduates from participating Mediterranean countries. Such a program would include, first, a traineeship in European firms, followed by the opportunity to work in Europe for 5-8 years. At the end of that period, participants would receive soft business-startup loans from European development banks to create employment in their countries of origin.

Designed for at least a 15-year period, such a program would be a strong signal in itself. It would show young people from Tunisia, Egypt, and other transformation countries that there are other options than getting on a boat to the Italian island of Lampedusa. It would be a real incentive to finish one’s university education (indeed, it should be augmented by investment in vocational schools, technical high-schools, and universities in North Africa and the Middle East).

Once implemented, the labor pact would help to change attitudes towards Arab immigrants in Europe – and Europe’s image in the Southern Mediterranean. It would likely create lasting ties between people and economies. And it would address real needs in the Southern Mediterranean countries – improving professional skills, reducing the pressure on the local labor market, creating businesses and jobs – as well as in Europe.

Some warn against any programs for “temporary” or “circular” migration. To be sure, some who benefit would want to stay. But, while this “burden” might, in fact, benefit aging European countries, the risk is relatively low in the first place: Arab countries entering such a pact would be better governed than they were under the previous regimes. If they become consolidated democracies, as hoped, would-be entrepreneurs could stop worrying so much about official corruption. And start-up loans from Europe would make it much easier to seek one’s fortune back home.

Such an approach needs to be communicated both to the European public and to the people of Tunisia, Egypt, and other Arab countries. It would reverse the pattern whereby Europe relies on repressive regimes to supply it with oil and gas and guard its borders against migrants. At long last, these countries’ demographic wealth would be used to meet their development needs.

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