

The Arab Uprisings: Regional Implications and International Responses

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It has become commonplace to argue that the Arab Spring has turned into the Arab Winter. The instability and conflict in Syria and neighbouring countries, the deep divide between secularists and Islamists, and the return to old autocratic practices in several countries in the region have led many commentators to conclude that the Arab Spring has turned into a winter of regional disorder, sectarian strife and renewed autocracy (see Brumberg & Heydemann, 2013, Friedman, 2013, Cordesmann, 2013).

While these trends are clearly present in the region, this article will argue that the emerging political and strategic landscape is more open-ended and more contradictory than the simplistic “Arab Spring-Arab Winter” metaphor may lead us to believe. Secondly, it will argue that the EU and the US have had difficulties responding to these contradictory developments, partly due to internal political and economic problems, and also because of a reluctance to interfere in home-grown revolutions, thereby leaving the field open to competing regional and international players.

Illiberal Practices, Conflict and Disillusionment

Over the last year, the question has increasingly been raised as to whether the Arab uprisings eventually will lead to the creation of democratic Arab states, or whether we may see a reverse process leading to a restoration of the old autocratic status quo in the region. Since we are only two years into the so-called Arab Spring, and since there are immense differences between the individual Arab countries, any conclusive answer to this question would obviously be premature. Yet it can be argued that there are indications pointing in the direction of renewed autocracy and illiberal practices. In Jordan and Morocco there are signs that the incumbent monarchies are using old tactics of façade democratisation and gradual reform while keeping basic autocratic structures intact, and in the Gulf, the oil-rich monarchies are resorting to old means of buying off domestic discontent and playing regional power politics. In post-revolutionary Egypt and Tunisia, there are some indications pointing to a return to the autocratic measures of the Mubarak and Ben Ali era. In Egypt, for instance, the Brotherhood has backtracked on original promises of power-sharing and seems ready to curb the freedom of internationally funded NGOs and freedom of expression, particularly in the social and cultural domain. Some sections of the secular opposition are also showing signs of being prepared to use illiberal means, such as instigating violence or calling on the army to intervene in political life. In Tunisia,

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Islamist extremism led to the tragic assassination of the opposition leader Chokri Belaid, and ever since, the relationship between the secular opposition and the Troika government has been marked by tensions and confrontation. In both Tunisia and Egypt we are seeing a deepening divide between secularists and Islamists as well as stereotyping and fear-mongering on both sides, precluding inclusion and dialogue, both of which are vital elements in democratic transitions.

The situations in both Libya and Syria, although different in many respects, threaten to evolve into state collapse, with severe consequences not only for the states themselves, but also for the stability and delicate political balance in neighbouring countries. The violence in Syria, nurtured by regional powers and the Bashar al-Assad regime's brutal repression, has radicalised and militarised the opposition, making it next to impossible for peaceful and non-sectarian voices to be heard. At present multiple militias compete for arms and influence, and some of these are informed by highly extremist jihadist ideologies, a far cry from the liberal democratic values that initially informed the protesters in Syria. Neighbouring states are deeply concerned not only with the prospects of the Syrian conflict dragging on for years, but also with the make-up of a post-conflict Syria. There is a real risk that the massive amount of arms that has flooded into Syria may be turned against neighbouring governments, and that rival powers in the Gulf may continue to support their own local militias inside the country even after the fall of the Assad regime, similarly to the way militias in Lebanon traditionally have been sustained by regional powers. While the Syrian conflict erupted as a result of local grievances and was by no means instigated by foreign powers, it is clear today that Syria – in addition to being a tale of a brutal regime cracking down on its own people – has become a regional battleground reflecting the region's main lines of conflicts between Sunni and Shia, pro-Western and anti-Western, Arab and Iranian, Muslim Brotherhood and Salafi. Caught between these rival regional forces, the issue of democracy itself is easily pushed to the side.

The highly volatile situation in most of the Arab states undergoing transition has evidently also diminished the so-called 'demonstration effect' in the region, which initially inspired protesters in Egypt,

Libya and Syria to emulate the Tunisian experience. In fact, one may even talk about a negative effect, insofar as the brutal crackdown in Syria may have caused pro-democracy groups elsewhere in the region to hesitate before embarking on protests and demonstrations, just as it has become easier for incumbent authoritarian regimes to slow down the pace of political change, or to put reforms on the back burner all together. Incumbents can now point to the negative consequences of the Arab revolts, and, given the complicated security situation many of these regimes face – an influx of refugees, sectarian grievances, jihadist terrorist groups, rivalries with neighbours –, immediate security concerns can be posed as more expedient than democratic reforms, playing into the old dilemma between stability and democracy. Some government officials in the Gulf even argue that they are now more concerned with the prospects of a so-called 'Muslim Brotherhood Crescent,' than with the effects that pro-democracy movements elsewhere in the region may have on their societies. The concern with the influence of the Muslim Brotherhood and its regional backers is also evident from the recent arrest of Egyptians deemed to be affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and from the fighting over the leadership of the Syrian opposition.

While these developments arguably point in a negative direction, it should also be stressed that important positive changes have already occurred in the region. Three main changes will be pointed out here: the emergence of democracy as a norm, the reopening of domestic politics and the normalisation of foreign policy.

Democracy as an Evolving Regional Norm, Re-Politicisation and Normalisation

Although we do not predict the emergence of twenty-two democratic Arab states in the near future, one might argue that democracy itself is gradually emerging as a regional norm. Democracy now constitutes a kind of discursive framework that all main political actors must relate to and speak in terms of, comparable to the way that Arab leaders had to speak in terms of Arab unity and nationalism in the fifties and sixties. Thus also Islamist parties, such as

the Ennahda party in Tunisia and the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and Syria, are endorsing a democratic-civil state. A recent study by Al-Ahram and the Danish Egyptian Dialogue Institute (DEDI) shows that 80% of Tunisians and 90% of Egyptians agree that democracy is the best form of government, regardless of whom they voted for. Islamists and secularists might disagree about the role of religion, but they both believe that the State should function according to democratic principles (Benstead, Lust, Malouche et al. 2013). In other words, when secularist and Islamist parties collide in Tunisia and Egypt, the conflict is not over whether there *is* to be democracy or not, but over who is democratic, and who is not, each side accusing the other of being non-democratic. This can also be seen at a regional level: two recent significant events in the region – the military intervention in Libya and the expulsion of Syria from the Arab League – have both been carried out with reference to principles of freedom, dignity and democracy. Similarly, when Morsi went to Tehran for the first time in over 30 years to mend relations with Iran, the Egyptian President at the same time urged all countries to support the Syrian people in their “fight against their oppressors...and help the people build a democratic system of rule that reflects the demands of the Syrian people for freedom” (30.08.2012). These verbal endorsements in the regional and domestic arenas obviously give no guarantee that democracy will materialise in the end, just as it is clear that the different political actors have different understandings of what democracy means. But the very fact that democracy has emerged as the preferred discursive framework is markedly different from the situation that reigned in the region only a few years back. Then, it was still common for authoritarian governments and some Islamist groups to argue that democracy was a distinct Western concept unfit for the region, and/or incompatible with Islam; an imposed outside order.

While the joy and enthusiasm protesters shared in 2011 has arguably diminished, public protest itself has survived. A new vibrant political culture is emerging, where the opposition takes to the streets when it disagrees with the policies of its political leaders, where politics is fiercely debated in new networks, associations and political parties, and where new ways are introduced to hold govern-

ments accountable. This is most evident in Egypt and Tunisia where the (new) governments are exposed to fierce criticism, debate and ridicule from their opponents at street level, e.g. in the form of demonstrations, strikes, and street art, and in social media, where blogs, twitter, and web-based watchdog groups are flourishing. These new forms of protest do not only serve to show that political life itself has exploded as a result of the Arab uprisings, but also that Arab leaders can be held accountable in new ways. For instance, in Tunisia, Al Bawsala – a new watchdog NGO – has monitored the slow progress of the Tunisian Constituent Assembly, providing documentation for the nature of their work and the widespread non-attendance in the Assembly, causing a public outcry in the country. In Egypt the so-called ‘Morsi Meter’ website has similarly kept track of the President’s election promises, comparing promises with the first 100 days in office. Such means of holding government accountable would obviously have been unthinkable during the reign of Ben Ali and Mubarak, but they also show how Arab leaders are on the verge of, and in some cases already have lost, their traditional sacrosanct status in Arab societies. [This applies not only to Tunisia and Egypt, but also to Syria, where Bashar al-Assad and his inner circle have become objects of intense political satire, being “dethroned” in cartoons, posters, graffiti, and the much-acclaimed Top Goon series, unheard of in a Syrian (and Arab) context prior to the 2011 uprisings.]

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As new spaces for political contestation and debate have opened in the Arab world, this is also having unintended consequences at the regional

and foreign policy level. Many commentators have argued that Arab governments now have to take public opinion into account when making foreign policy decisions, and that this will pave the way for more radical foreign policy positions on, for example, relations with the West and the Arab-Israeli conflict. But we may in fact see indications of a reverse trend, insofar as the newly elected governments in Egypt, Tunisia and Libya are less preoccupied with foreign policy posturing and more with domestic politics. Arab governments have traditionally used foreign policy as a stage for high rhetoric, in order to divert attention from domestic politics and societal grievances. With domestic debate being rather limited under authoritarian rule, foreign policy posturing could be used to feign real political discussion. Yet, as the lid now has been taken off the domestic political debate in the Arab states undergoing transition, foreign policy posturing has become less important. In Libya, Tunisia and Egypt, issues such as Palestine, Israel and relations with the West have played only a marginal role in the domestic political debate in the aftermath of the uprisings. Certainly the new Islamist governments are cautious of being seen as more independent in their foreign policies than their predecessors – this being less the case for Libya given Gaddafi's anti-Western positions – but they have until now pursued very pragmatic foreign policies, and are eager to retain relations with the EU and the US. Moreover, whereas regional powers and movements such as Iran, Hezbollah and Hamas before the uprisings were able to mobilise Arab societies around popular causes such as the Palestinian issue and resistance to the West, this has now become more difficult. Iran and Hezbollah have lost popularity as a result of their deep involvement with the Assad regime's brutal repression in Syria, in addition to Iran's own crack down on the Green Movement in 2009, and they are less able to exploit the traditional legitimacy gap between Arab governments and societies. This could change should Israel, for instance, launch a military attack on Iran, or if Hezbollah and Israel's cold war develops into a hot

one. But the old resistance axis is less able to use its traditional soft-power tools.

Taken together these trends prove that developments in the region constitute more of a mixed bag than the Arab Spring-Arab Winter metaphor relates. In light of these contradictory trends, it is perhaps also less surprising that the EU and the US have responded rather reactively and cautiously to the Arab uprisings, as will be argued below.

EU and US Responses to the Arab Uprisings

Although the Arab uprisings took Europe and the United States by surprise, after some initial confusion the EU and the US sided with the protesters, even though it meant giving up on old allies.¹ Both played an active role in the initial months: President Obama worked the phones and urged President Mubarak to step down, the EU issued a number of declarations with the same purpose, and the EU's High Representative Catherine Ashton was quickly dispatched to Tunis and Cairo, after Ben Ali and Mubarak fell, to declare the EU's support. The NATO-led military operation in Libya initiated in March 2011 was largely driven by individual EU Member States, while the United States chose to "lead from behind."

On the economic side, the willingness to support the countries in transition was equally high. The EU immediately granted emergency funds to Tunisia and accelerated the on-going review of the EU's Neighbourhood Policy (ENP). By March 2011, a joint Communication from the High Representative and the EU Commission on the EU's response was announced, detailing a range of different economic and technical measures to assist the countries in transition,² followed by the ENP review in May 2011.³ A new EU Endowment for Democracy was also proposed, and was finally established in 2013. The United States also pledged considerable funds in President Obama's speech on 19 May, 2011, in which he presented the American response to the uprisings, mostly focusing on economic develop-

¹ The relatively muted response to the uprising in Bahrain being one notable exception.

² Joint Communication by the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and the European Commission. *A Partnership for democracy and shared prosperity with the Southern Mediterranean*, Brussels 8 March 2011. COM (2011) 200 final.

³ Joint Communication by the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and the European Commission, *A New Response to a Changing Neighbourhood: A review of European Neighbourhood Policy*, Brussels, 25 May 2011. COM (2011) 303 final.

ment and trade including the prospect of large debt relief and loans to Egypt and a \$2 billion Enterprise Fund for Tunisia and Egypt.⁴

However, looking back at the last two years, the ability of the EU and the United States to influence developments has been marginal. Their political and diplomatic role has been limited, and much of the promised assistance either did not materialise or was, to a large extent, a repackaging of old programmes. The question is: why were the original high ambitions not achieved, and why have the EU and the United States reacted so cautiously to the uprisings?

A Newfound Humility, Problems at Home and Old Policies for a Changing Region

Given the historic role of European powers and the US in the Middle East, the extent to which Brussels and Washington reacted with humility to the events unfolding in the region may be somewhat surprising. However, there appears to have been a genuine respect in Western capitals for what the protesters managed to achieve without any outside help, and an urge to let the uprisings remain home-grown.

While the scope of the challenges was clear, the actual changes in policy and programmes turned out to be limited. On the EU's side, the strong internal pressure for a rapid EU response led to a reliance on the existing programmes within the ENP framework rather than a complete rethinking of the EU's relationship with the region. The continued use of the ENP made sense, assuming that the countries in transition were primarily aiming for democracy and closer ties to Europe, as had been the case for the Central and Eastern European countries twenty years earlier. However the southern Mediterranean Partner States are not looking for membership in the EU, and the motivation to fulfil complicated EU requirements for technical cooperation is therefore not always present.

In the case of the US, quick efforts were similarly made to pull together available resources in a Middle East Response Fund. But the constantly changing situation on the ground and Congress' fundamental scepticism of the foreign aid issue rendered all new appropriations difficult. Most recently, Con-

gress has turned down a request for a new Middle East Incentive Fund, which was to have been the flagship of US assistance to the region post-Arab Spring. Thus, as is the case for the EU, the US response has to a large extent been characterised by a repackaging of old programmes and limited follow-up on initial promises.

Moreover, despite the initial euphoria and enthusiasm for the uprisings in Western capitals, domestic realities in both Europe and the United States quickly overshadowed events in the region. The catchy slogan for the EU's efforts – the “3Ms” for Markets, Money and Mobility – was premised on deliverables in which the southern Mediterranean neighbours would have a real interest. But its components are difficult for the EU to deliver on, particularly in times of crisis. As a result, progress on each of the “Ms” has been rather limited. This reflects the reality of the EU where the eurozone crisis does not leave much room for opening markets, allocating new funds, or designing a more open immigration policy. At the same time, while the principle of “more for more” was the criteria for assistance, unity among EU Member States about the toughness in applying this principle has not been obvious. In general, northern European countries have advocated a tough stance and focused on democracy promotion, while some southern Member States have found the conditional approach less important and argued in favour of longer-lasting relationships with the south. This difference is reflected in the lack of support for the new European Endowment for Democracy from the EU's southern Member States.

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Although the circumstances are different, the United States was also affected by a number of factors that impeded the initial ambitious rhetoric. For the

⁴ Barack Obama, *Speech on the Middle East*, (speech, Washington, D.C., 19 May 2011).

United States, the Arab uprisings coincided with a time of budget cuts, political paralysis in Congress and a President who has very clearly signalled that the United States should delegate responsibility to regional partners and spend its energy rebuilding at home rather than abroad. In particular, there has been a clear wish from the Obama administration to end the US military engagement in the Middle East. This policy has been translated into a reluctance to become militarily or diplomatically engaged in the region – Syria being the most notable example, along with the US acceptance of the GCC lead in Yemen and the European lead in Libya. Moreover, while there has been a real willingness on the part of the administration to pledge greater funds to the countries in transition, resistance in Congress has been considerable, and only limited parts of the suggested new funding for the region have materialised. In a Congress already sceptical towards spending on foreign assistance in a time of budget cuts, the administration has had great difficulty obtaining Congress approval for assistance to Egypt, in particular, but also to Tunisia and Libya after the attack against the US Embassy in Tunis and the US compound in Benghazi. The rise of Islamist parties, apparent discrimination against Christians and the treatment of foreign NGOs in some transition countries have not rendered the task easier for those who wish for a more robust American economic response to the uprisings, and for now there has only been limited follow-up to the promises made in President Obama's speech in 2011.

Finally, it is increasingly clear that the Middle East is no longer the "domaine réservé" of Europe and the United States. Turkey, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Iran, in particular, are vying for influence among potential new allies in the countries in transition, and several of these regional powers can offer attractive economic assistance and trade relationships for the countries in the region. Saudi Arabia and Qatar, for example, have offered \$4 billion and \$5 billion respectively in loans and grants to Egypt, much more than the \$4.8 billion IMF loan that is currently being negotiated. Moreover, other external powers are trying to exert their influence through political, economic and even military means. Whereas Russia's interests in the Middle East are well-known, new emerging powers such as China and even India

and Brazil are also looking for opportunities and seeking to play a political role. The disagreement over Syria in the UN Security Council, where Russia and China's positions are tacitly supported by India and Brazil, illustrates that the latter do not necessarily see eye to eye with Europe and the US when it comes to the appropriate reactions to the Arab uprisings.

Conclusion

The roller-coaster developments of the last two years have been difficult for outside actors to navigate. The many contradicting trends in the region have, on the one hand been cause for a cautious and balanced approach; while on the other hand, it is clear that EU and US influence has been reduced as a result. Rather than proactively shaping events or devising new grand strategies, the US and the EU have been reacting to the changing dynamics in the region and mainly revising old policies. This is also a reflection of the fact that in the emerging Middle East, new actors are competing for access and influence, at the same time as the region is gaining greater regional autonomy vis-à-vis outside powers. These developments pose new challenges for the EU and the US. Yet they should not overshadow the fact that the Arab uprisings have already created profound changes in the relationship between state and people and in Arab foreign policy-making; providing the EU and the US with new opportunities for engagement and interaction.

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