

THE “ARAB SPRING” AND THE EXTERNAL ACTOR’S ROLE WITHIN THE EURO-MEDITERRANEAN REGION

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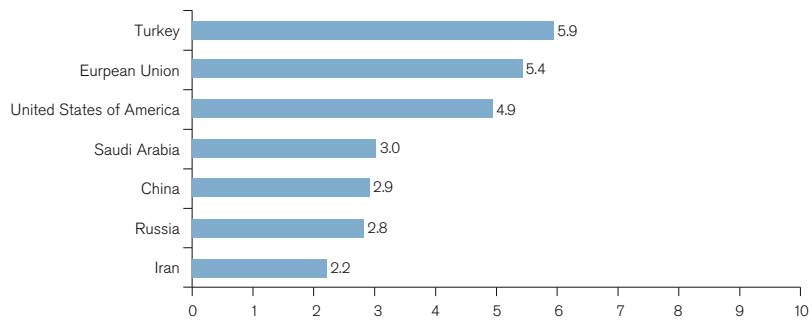
From the fruit vendor Mohamed Bouazizi in Tunisia to the graffiti painting youngsters in Daraa Syria, the Arab Spring has vividly demonstrated that the wish and drive for political change come from within the region itself. External actors from the European Union to the United States, from Russia to China, have all struggled to find a consistent response and a long-term strategy to events, which are changing by the day and sometimes by the hour. International actors arguably knew that how they ended up responding to these revolutionary events would affect their public image and their future role in the region. Indeed, the IEMed Survey confirms that those actors that have been the least supportive of political change – China, Russia and Iran – stand to lose influence in the region, just as those actors who are viewed as the most supportive during the Arab Spring – Turkey and the EU – stand to gain.

This paper will provide an analytical framework and possible explanation for these results. The first part will look at Turkey’s enhanced regional role and Iran’s dwindling influence, and will suggest that we are seeing a gradual emergence of a new normative order in the region. The second part will look at explanations for the relative positive assessment of EU policies compared to other international actors, particularly focusing on the EU’s role as a normative actor, while the third part will account for some of the less positive assessments of EU policies; describing some of the dilemmas that continue to haunt European policies on the southern Mediterranean. Finally, the paper will conclude that the EU is likely to play an enhanced role in the region.

Arab Spring: Turkish Harvest, Iranian Fall

Turkey has in recent years emerged as a regional heavyweight in the MENA region. A zero-problem foreign policy, enhanced trade relations and strong support for the Palestinian cause have given Turkey a new position in the Middle East and a positive image in the Arab world at large. The Arab uprisings have reinforced this picture and Turkey has so far come out as one of the winners of the transformations sweeping the region. Indeed, in the Survey results Turkey is remarkably ranked as the most supportive external actor during the Arab Spring; ahead of both the European Union and the United States.

Graph 1: Assessing the international response of the following actors to the uprisings in the Southern rim
(average on a scale of 0-10)



Source: Compiled by the IEMed based on the results of the 3rd Euromed Survey

Turkey is perceived as having strongly sided with political change, even when this has run counter to Turkish short-term security and trade interests. Although the Erdogan government held strong bilateral ties both with the Gaddafi regime in Libya and with Bashar al Assad in Syria, Turkey ended up supporting the opposition in both. Yet Turkey's role has clearly been most visible with respect to the Syrian crisis. The Turkish foreign minister initially attempted to persuade Bashar al Assad to end the crackdown on the opposition yet, as no results materialized, Turkey cut off all bilateral ties with the Syrian regime. Since then, Turkey has housed the opposition in exile, provided for the Syrian refugees within Turkey itself, in addition to playing a leading role in the international efforts under the auspices of the Arab League, the UN and the Friends of Syria grouping.

Comparing Turkey's results with Saudi Arabia, it is however clear that "active involvement" in the Syrian crisis cannot alone explain why Turkey's policies are viewed so favourably. Saudi Arabia, together with Qatar, has for instance played a very active role in the Syrian crisis, yet Saudi Arabia's policies during the Arab Spring are not viewed positively (72 percent of the respondents giving a negative assessment). This points to another important factor about regional credibility: in order to be able to voice legitimate criticism of repressive governments and to be seen as a credible supporter of democratic change, any international actor needs to have its own house in order. In the Survey's open questions, several respondents thus point to Saudi Arabia's double standards both relating to its own political system and to its conduct in neighbouring Bahrain. And, conversely, those three international actors that themselves have well-functioning democracies – Turkey, the EU and the US – are also the ones who are ranked the most positively.

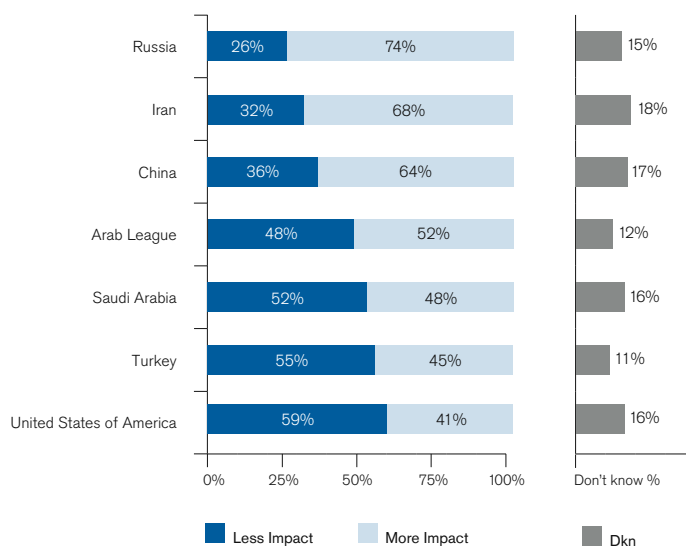
Domestic legitimacy problems also spill over into the regional arena in the case of Iran, which in the Survey remarkably comes at the bottom compared to all international actors. This arguably reflects that Iran has lost much regional legitimacy and power as a result of the Arab Spring. Iran has failed in its initial efforts to make the Arab revolts part of an Iranian revolutionary narrative.

Claiming that what took place in Tunisia and Egypt were mere repetitions of Iran's own revolution in 1979, Iran initially sought to "seize" the Arab revolutions. According to the Iranian leadership, the Arab uprisings were rebellions against western-allied puppet governments and a new Islamic awakening. Yet, to most observers, Arab protesters resembled Iran's Green movement of 2009 – which had been so thoroughly crushed by the regime – rather than the 1979 revolution. The subsequent uprisings in Libya and Syria made the Iranian narrative even more difficult to sustain, as both Gaddafi and Bashar al Assad were obviously not allies of western powers. And as Iran's support for the brutal repression in Syria has grown ever more visible, Iran has clearly lost its remaining regional support.

In this respect, the very poor assessment of Iran's policies is also an indication of a wider transformation of the region's normative order and balances of power. Where Iran, Hezbollah, Syria and Hamas prior to the Arab Spring were popular "revolutionary" players in the region, these very same actors are now emerging as less popular status quo powers, insofar as they oppose the current democratic change and try to keep the old regional order intact. The new emerging revolutionary powers – those which have either undergone political change themselves such as Egypt, Tunisia, Libya or have clearly sided with democratic change such as Turkey – have, on the other hand, gained both domestic and regional legitimacy.

Within this emerging new order, we also see an enhanced role for regional actors and a new regional assertiveness. It is clear from the Survey results that most respondents believe that the Arab Spring first and foremost has been an internally-driven process, and that the policies of external actors have not been the real drivers of change in the region. Both the US and the EU are given grades around average, and Russia and China are given very poor grades (2.8 and 2.9 out of 10). No doubt the latter obstructions in the UN Security Council over Syria have contributed to this negative perception of their role during the Arab Spring. Yet given the fact that the principle of non-intervention is usually held dear in the MENA region, it is remarkable that these two actors are given such a poor assessment, having been the main advocates of a conservative interpretation of the principle of state sovereignty and adversaries of the principle of the Responsibility to Protect (R2P). Interestingly, the low grades for China and Russia also holds when respondents assess the *future impact* of these two actors compared with the EU. Here, they once again hit the bottom together with Iran. In light of recent years' academic debate on "emerging powers" and the enhanced role of BRIC countries, this is a remarkable finding, and may substantiate the liberal and constructivist claims that international power does not only derive from realist power capabilities, but also from norms and legitimacy.

Graph 2: Assessing the EU's future role in the Mediterranean Partner Countries compared to other external and regional actors. Will the EU have more or less impact on regional developments compared to:



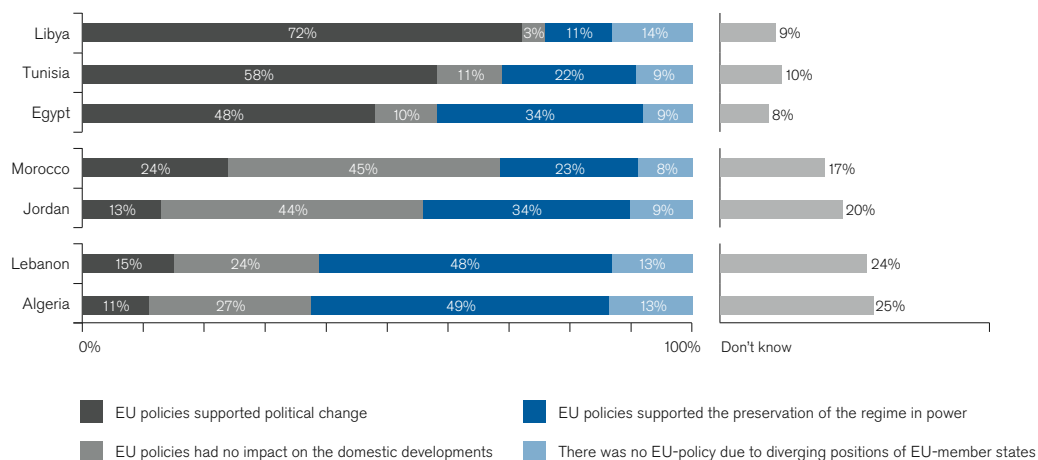
Source: Compiled by the IEMed based on the results of the 3rd Euromed Survey

The EU's Most Supportive International Actor

Normative power may also explain another remarkable feature of the Survey: namely, the relatively positive assessment of EU policies during the Arab Spring. The EU is ranked as the second most supportive actor, above the US and just after Turkey. In light of the often-voiced criticism of EU policies – being too late, too little and too uncoordinated – this is a notable finding that points to the relatively strong role and credibility of the EU in the region compared to other outside actors. The EU's self-perception and identification as a “normative actor” no doubt play a significant part in this positive assessment, just as the EU's historical, cultural, and geographical proximity to the MENA countries should also be taken into account. Moreover, the EU and leading European Heads of State have been relatively visible and active with regard to the revolutionary events in the Arab world – especially after the initial and somewhat hesitant responses to the uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt. Since March 2011 the EU has introduced a string of new proposals and initiatives, among them the Partnership for Democracy and Shared Prosperity with the Southern Mediterranean, a revised Neighbourhood Policy, and a new Endowment for Democracy, just as European governments have been leading the international efforts with regards to Libya and Syria, while the US has self-consciously taken more of a backseat.

However, it should be stressed that the Survey confirms that the EU is above all seen as reactive rather than proactive in terms of events in the MPCs. The highest European grade when it comes to supporting political change thus coincides with the three countries that have seen a clear-cut regime change out of the Arab Spring (Libya 72%; Tunisia 58% and Egypt 48%). Whereas a relative majority of respondents regards the EU as having preserved the status quo in Morocco (45%) and Jordan (44%), the EU is seen as having had no impact on domestic developments in Algeria (49%) and in Lebanon (48%). Interestingly, the latter is at the same time viewed as one of the MPC countries with the greatest chances of developing a lasting democracy.

Graph 3: Assessment of the EU's role in Mediterranean Partner Countries during the “Arab Spring”



Source: Compiled by the IEMed based on the results of the 3rd Euromed Survey

These findings indirectly support the main considerations that have emerged in recent months in the public debate about the European response to the Arab Spring. The first is that the EU is seen as having acted upon the momentous developments in MENA only after the events, rather than in anticipation of them. Secondly, the EU response is seen as dependent on whether the countries in question experienced regime change or not, rather than on measures that the EU adopted on its own. The results also appear to confirm that the EU response suffered from an old problem with internal policy and strategic coordination. An explanation of these considerations becomes more evident in some of the qualitative answers offered by the respondents, which are worth pondering at some length.

The Bureaucracy-Diplomacy Gap

The uprisings in the MPCs provided a stark contrast to the discourse emanating from Brussels about growing foreign, security and defence policy coordination within the European Union. “The CFSP is still not visible,” argued one respondent; “the absence of a concerted policy is regrettable,” said another. This became especially evident, as the upheaval took place over one year after the entry into force of the Lisbon Treaty reforming the EU, whose main innovation was arguably the creation of a more coherent foreign policy for the EU, with the establishment of a foreign minister in everything but name, and of the European External Action Service, the EU’s putative diplomatic corps.

Aside from institutional inconsistencies, the Arab uprisings have also exposed the limits of a common European foreign policy, insofar as European governments continue to be seen as pursuing their own interests. Moreover, while Brussels may have earned some legitimacy on the basis of the policies that it implements (“some long-term programmes have recently empowered the local civil society,” said one of the respondents), its largely technocratic apparatus lacks the political punch that makes its policies very visible and effective in the region. As a consensus-based organization, the EU is typically slow in reacting to foreign policy crises. But the disconnection between a slow-moving Brussels bureaucracy and the diplomacy of key governments, often guided by economic interests and historical ties, has proven to be detrimental.

The “Integration-Security” Gap

On top of the institutional discrepancies of a multileveled organization, there is another more profound explanation at play. The EU strategy towards the MPCs has been traditionally driven by a strategy of gradual political and economic liberalization and closer integration into Europe. Thus, in the midst of the uprisings, on 25th May 2011, the EU presented key proposals to include the creation of “mobility partnerships” with Tunisia, Morocco and Egypt aiming at facilitating travel for local students and businesspeople (European Commission, 2011). Similarly, on 17th August the EU announced €380m of new funds for the region – over one third of them for Morocco, whose constitutional reform was praised as a clear commitment to democracy.

However, the EU has at the same time been strongly focused on countering the perceived security challenges emanating from the MENA region. Radicalization, terror, and immigration have been regular items in the discourse on the Mediterranean emerging from key EU member states over the past two decades. It is remarkable that these arguments continued to play a central role during the revolutions. Writing in the *Financial Times* in mid-February 2011 (i.e. after the toppling of regimes in Tunisia and Egypt), Italian Foreign Minister Frattini argued for instance: “this ‘arc of crisis’ will lead to more illegal immigration, terrorism and Islamic radicalism” (Frattini, 2011).

During the uprisings, the security logic was particularly visible in relation to immigration. Hundreds of thousands of people have fled Libya (over 700,000, as of October 2011, IOM, 2011), most of them crossing the borders into neighbouring Tunisia and Egypt. In the spring of 2011, this led to a dispute between Italy and France (the principal destination of most Tunisians), which ended with Paris reintroducing checks at its border. Regrettably, there seems to be a direct correlation between social unrest on the other side of the Mediterranean and some European governments' instinct to close off. This arguably makes the simultaneous European efforts to enhance stability by bringing neighbours closer to Europe ring hollow in the southern Mediterranean countries.

Conclusion: Europe's Responsibility

The underlying tension between the EU's short-term security policies and long-term support for democratization is likely to continue influencing future European policy in the region, creating well-known contradictions and dilemmas. Yet the Arab Spring and the relative positive assessment of EU policies compared to other external actors also create new opportunities for the EU in the region. Europe clearly does not start from scratch when it comes to supporting political reform in the Mediterranean, and can with the unfolding events speak with a much clearer voice than before. Moreover, with the US self-consciously withdrawing from the region, the EU is bound to play an even greater part in the region's economic development, political reform processes and further integration with the European Union. In fact, there is no doubt that the southern Mediterranean countries expect it to do so.