

Europe and the Arab (R)evolutions

Andreu Bassols

Director General

European Institute of the Mediterranean (IEMed),
Barcelona

The Mediterranean has changed. After over 50 years of regime stability in the region, a wave of revolutions and evolutions has shaken a geopolitical and cultural ensemble that seemed immutable. The magnitude of these changes has surprised all analysts. This is the confirmation of a reality that is no longer in doubt: the Arab world truly exists as a single political area. What happens in one Arab country inevitably has an impact on other Arab countries. The construction of a single discourse since the pan-Arab nationalism of the 1950s, in particular with the struggle for the liberation of Palestine, has created a political entity that has been evolving according to a relatively coherent rhythm. The autocratic regimes that had fostered a nationalist view of reality upon which to base their historical legitimacy after decolonisation could not suspect that the political space they were building would facilitate the transmission of revolutionary ideas fifty years later, in 2011. This is the first lesson to be gleaned from the Arab revolutions. In the opposite direction to the muezzins, who make their calls to prayer from the east towards the west, the Arab awakening spread from the Arab west in Tunisia to Libya, Egypt, Jordan, Syria, Bahrain and Yemen. An awakening in the form of revolutions, protests, uprisings or, unfortunately, also in the form of bloody confrontations that can degenerate into civil war, as in Syria.

The second lesson is much more important. It has to do with the surprising fragility of political regimes considered very solid until then. Indeed, it is precisely the most authoritarian countries, those equipped with the most extensive and so-to-speak most effi-

cient State security apparatuses that were affected by the revolts and were hardest hit by social protest. It became evident that these regimes were structurally enormously fragile. Their security apparatuses were extremely sophisticated because said regimes lacked the popular legitimacy necessary to rise to the considerable challenges of their societies, which were experiencing transformation and ferment. The breeding ground for the revolutions was the growing delegitimisation of States that were at once economically corrupt, politically closed and socially, increasingly inegalitarian. This fragility is a lesson to be drawn for countries in the region, but also for actors from outside the region, Europe and the United States, for instance, who had the most authoritarian of these political regimes among their allies without bothering to apply the principles and values presiding their own democratic political systems to their foreign policy. We will discuss this matter later in this paper.

The third lesson, still provisional, of what is happening in the Arab world concerns the direction of political change where elections have been held. Those who carried out the revolution are not the winners of the revolution. In fact, everything would seem to indicate that those benefiting from the dissatisfaction demonstrated in the Arab streets are Islamist parties and movements that, as is known, were not behind the revolts. Years of underground or semi-underground opposition; years of firmness and criticism of secular regimes; years of patiently building cooptation and social assistance networks have borne fruit. The question now is how long the promises of honesty and transparency in conducting public affairs will allow the winning parties to meet the expectations of youth, who expect improvement of their quality of life and their job perspectives. The Islamist parties know this: they enjoy an enormous capital of democratic legitimacy and citizen confidence, but

this capital could run out if they are unable to change things in the field. And it is an extremely unstable field: overpopulated cities lacking essential infrastructures; neglected, poor rural areas; little or poorly trained youth without hope of finding a decent job, marrying and starting a family, and who are caught between strict moral codes of conduct imposed by religion and a lack of opportunities for social and personal development.

These lessons are yet provisional and uncertain. They coexist alongside other lessons, some of them still invisible, that will emerge in the forthcoming months and years and will certainly demonstrate, once more, the ignorance of those attempting to explain the realities of a complex Arab world, subject to multiple, unforeseeable factors and actors. But once our ignorance and the uncertainty of our judgements has been asserted and confirmed, we should be in the position to make an analysis of Europe's options regarding the changes, evolutions and revolutions in the Arab world, and particularly in the Mediterranean Arab world.

Europe has always had two complexes vis-à-vis the Arab world since the independence of the countries in the region: a guilt complex and a superiority complex. The end of European colonisation of the Mediterranean (by France, the United Kingdom, Italy and Spain) generally coincided with the beginning of the construction of post-war Europe. Since the 1960s, Europe has approached relations with Arab countries from a dual perspective. On the one hand, the sense of having dominated, exploited and subjugated these countries, towards which it has contracted a historical debt. On the other hand, the perception that these countries, as well described by Edward Said in his book, *Orientalism*, were the image of a certain archaism, an example of political, social and economic backwardness. A sense of guilt for an often ruthless colonial history; and a sense of superiority because since their independence, Europe has considered it needed to aid in the modernisation of these "backward" countries, a backwardness that needed to be remedied through European ideas of governance, education and industrialisation.

Moreover, as Europe was gradually establishing an institutional system to unify a continent devastated by fratricidal war (Treaty of Paris in 1951, Treaty of Rome in 1957), the Southern and Eastern Mediterranean Countries (SEMCs) were beginning or completing their decolonisation and independence processes (Morocco and Tunisia in 1956; war in Algeria

from 1954 to 1962; Suez Crisis of 1956; birth of the Egyptian Republic in 1953). That is, while Europe moved towards the establishment of supranational institutions to move beyond the terrible conflicts brought about by expansionist nationalisms, the Arab world, to a great extent heir to 19th-century European political culture, was preparing to build Nation-States.

We will not analyse the history of Euro-Arab and Euro-Mediterranean relations since the 1950s, but in order to comprehend the political choices that Europe must make in order to meet the challenges posed by the Arab Spring, I do feel it necessary to examine the recent evolution of these relations since a decisive date, a key event that has strongly marked these relations: 11 September 2001.

Indeed, the 10 years from 2001 to 2011 were witness to the contradictory approach adopted by the Western world and Europe in their strategic relations with the Mediterranean Arab world: the need to foster changes, aid and promote reforms, but also the need to keep regimes in place as faithful allies in the struggle against terrorism, in the guarantee of power supplies, and in border patrolling to reduce illegal immigration. This hesitation between a "regime-change" policy and a "regime-keeping" one determined European approaches in this ten-year period in which the Middle-East conflict experienced two major crises: the war in Lebanon in 2006 and the Israeli military operation in Gaza in January 2009. Two initiatives put forth by the United States and Europe illustrate the will to reform Arab countries: the Broader Middle East and North Africa initiative, formally adopted by the G8 at the 2004 Sea Island Summit, and the European Neighbourhood Policy, formulated in a European Commission Communication in March 2003 and implemented through the Neighbourhood Action Plans concluded as of 2005 with many South Mediterranean countries.

If we had to choose a statement, a phrase that summed up this will to promote changes and in-depth reforms, we would most certainly cite the famous speech by US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice at the American University in Cairo in June 2005. She effectively condensed the concerns of the United States with regard to the Arab world into a few words when she asserted that "for 60 years, the United States pursued stability at the expense of democracy in the Middle East – and we achieved neither." She thus expressed the conclusion that the US neoconservatives had reached: democracy

could be a means of consolidating security in the region since authoritarian regimes had not succeeded in doing so.

Yet this reforming vision, which predominated in discourse from 2001 to 2005, ran out of steam precisely as of 2005. Two factors contributed to this: first of all, the results of elections in Lebanon (excellent results for Hezbollah in 2005), Palestine (victory of Hamas in 2007), Iraq (victory of Shiite Islamist parties in 2005) and Egypt (significant results for pro-Islamist independents in the 2005 legislative elections); and secondly, the aggravation of the conflicts in the Middle East (2006 and 2009) and Iraq. These two factors seem to have led the United States towards a return to a more realistic view of international relations, aware that the potential for conflict in the Middle East and the whole of the Arab world demanded prudent policies. Afghanistan, Iraq and Palestine remained open fronts that have proven intractable in many regards; it was not a good idea to encourage the emergence of other sources of instability through democratic processes that would have given the floor to the adversaries of the West. The controversy of the cartoons appearing in a Danish newspaper in 2005 also inflamed spirits in many countries in the region. The intelligent manipulation by the authoritarian regimes of Egypt, Syria and Libya set off alarm bells in a Huntingtonian confrontation that served to strengthen the position of dictators in the region. They created a problem and put themselves forth as the only ones capable of providing a solution. Europe faced a difficult choice between freedom of expression as a fundamental right and human and trade security. The supposedly secular authoritarian regimes won the wrestling match and imposed their viewpoint. Then began a new stage of *Realpolitik* vis-à-vis authoritarian regimes. It is in this context that in February 2007, then candidate Nicolas Sarkozy delivered a speech in Toulon in which he put forth a new vision of Euro-Mediterranean relations. This was the genesis of the Union for the Mediterranean, which led to the Paris Summit of 7 July 2008. This summit also represented the expression of respect for the political choices of the regimes in power in the South Mediterranean, and their being accepted as partners in building cooperation based on concrete projects. The reform objectives of the European Neighbourhood Policy were mentioned, but they were not the focal point of debate or of the declaration adopted by the Heads of State and Government. Thus began a stage dominated by pragmatism and institu-

tionalisation. This multilateral framework, henceforth represented by the Union for the Mediterranean, does not tackle issues of reform, governance or human rights. It was, however, immediately subject to the vagaries of developments in the Middle East conflict. The institutional structure of joint representation with the establishment of an Egyptian co-presidency allowed the Arab countries to block dialogue after Israeli military intervention in Gaza beginning on 27 December 2008. It was not until March 2010 that the joint Secretariat of the UfM was set up in Barcelona. The Secretariat's operational debut in October 2010 preceded the onset of the Arab revolutions by several months. The Union for the Mediterranean, borne of the will to cooperate with a certain number of regimes, was immediately faced with a significant change of spokespersons in the South Mediterranean.

Many also consider that the European Neighbourhood Policy launched in 2003 is discredited. Neighbourhood Action Plans were concluded with countries such as Tunisia and Egypt, whose will to introduce reforms was more than questionable. Advanced Status was even considered for Tunisia. On the whole, European policies in the Mediterranean were considered partial failures. The Barcelona Process, with the introduction of free trade, had succeeded in putting in place important reforms on the economic level, but beyond the economic sphere results were poor. An excellent initiative in collective cultural diplomacy such as the Anna Lindh Foundation allowed all Euro-Mediterranean Partners to work together and develop projects with civil society. The European Investment Bank (EIB), with its Facility for Euro-Mediterranean Investment and Partnership (FEMIP), became the main investor in the region. The European Commission, with over 900 million euros per year, carried out cooperation projects in all the countries in the region as well as regional projects by supporting networks such as FEMISE (Forum Euroméditerranéen des Instituts de Sciences Économiques), EuroMeSCo (a political think-tank), EMWIS (a network of water experts), ANIMA (investment network) or the Euromed Heritage project, concerning the promotion and conservation of cultural heritage in the Mediterranean. There were many concrete achievements, though they are considered insufficient or hardly visible in the face of the region's political immobility and the nearly complete lack of substantial political reform.

The ten years since the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 were thus the years of the security

paradigm of “war on terrorism,” oscillating between the demand for reforms and the recognition of the fact that the regimes in power were better able to effect the struggle against jihadi terrorist organisations, in particular Al Qaeda. From 2001 to 2005, the first approach took precedence. As of 2005, the Western powers gradually adopted prudent, wait-and-see attitudes, or in some cases, positions of implicit or explicit support to the regimes in the region. President Obama’s 2009 Cairo speech already contained little reference to democracy and human rights. The “Arab exception,” the cultural and political relativism that accepted respect for cultural and religious traditions to explain that liberal democracy was not applicable to the Arab world, was accepted as a lesser evil. In the face of this situation, there was a single exception to the policy of respectful non-intervention: in 2009, the contested election results in Iran giving the victory to Mahmoud Ahmadinejad received the complete attention of the media and the full support of Western governments. However, this was far from the Mediterranean and well beyond the Arab world.

And it was in such a geopolitical environment, in a small, remote city of inland Tunisia, where a young man of 26 years of age immolated himself. It was Saturday, 17 December 2010. This act, at first concealed, then underestimated by the regime, was the seed of a wave of revolts in the inland areas of the country. And we know the rest. In three months, the wave of protests spread through the entire Arab world in the Mediterranean and beyond. Since then, the political map of the Arab world has changed radically, and with it, the European policy roadmap in the region. The South Mediterranean emerges today as a region in full evolution. Post-revolutionary, reformist or repressed political transitions comprise a much more open, fluid, unforeseen and unforeseeable political landscape than the one in 2010.

European policies must thus evolve in order to make the appropriate response to a new paradigm that illustrates a region in full evolution; a more fragmented region, one where the potential for internal conflict is higher and more immediate than the former pre-eminence of international conflicts; a region where new political leaders are or are about to be Islamist; in sum, a region thoroughly, dramatically shaken up, completely transformed by the consequences of poorly analysed internal dynamics and not by international intervention as was the case in Iraq or Afghanistan.

What was and what could be the response of the European Union to such regional evolution?

European Institutions (the European External Action Service and the European Commission) published two communiqués in February and May 2011 establishing the principle of the EU’s support to the democratic transitions through a triple offer that, according to Catherine Ashton, could be summed up as “the 3 Ms,” i.e. “Money, Market and Mobility” (more money, greater access to European markets and greater mobility for people to move in Europe). It is not surprising that Europe focuses on these three domains since it is precisely in these domains that it can make concrete offers through its economic cooperation and development policy, its commercial policy covering industrial and agricultural products as well as services, and its mobility policy and policy on Schengen area visas.

These three dimensions, above all the latter two, concerning market access and mobility, aim to consolidate the position of Europe as an area to which neighbouring countries to the East and South can aspire to accede; ultimately, the European Union wishes to position itself as a centre of gravity for the Mediterranean and Eastern Europe.

However, Europe knows that it is competing with two other emerging actors: Turkey and the Gulf States. On the one hand, the Turkish economic power, which represents the success of a liberal economic model governed by moderate Islamists; and on the other hand, the economic power of the Gulf States, exporters of petrodollars, with a social and religious conservatism highly attractive to countries seeking to consolidate their identities following the enormous social upheavals of these past 40 years of urbanisation, secularisation and contraction of the family towards a nuclear family model. This competition is, of course, much stronger in the Middle East than in the Maghreb, but it is still a factor throughout the region. There is a perception that Europe is not a model to follow because it lost part of its credibility during the Arab Spring. Europe, experiencing crisis, is considered to have lost its power and will to act in the region.

What Should Europe Do? What Vision Should it Have? What Strategic Choices Should it Consider?

There are no easy answers to this question, but we all know that Europe should be capable of conceiving a platform, a framework, a structure capable of welcom-

ing and at the same time encouraging and attracting the emerging Mediterranean democracies. This task could be essential. If we analyse the evolution of Eastern Europe – the part having acceded to the European Union in 2004 as opposed to the Europe that has remained outside its borders, more vulnerable to Russian influence – we quickly realise the importance of the European Union as a welcoming framework wielding the gentle power of attraction of democracy and stability. It is clear that the European Union cannot allow the South Mediterranean Countries to join its institutions, but this should not prevent it from developing a framework or common platform for work and cooperation capable of offering these countries a political horizon. A European Neighbourhood Policy strengthened by the conclusion of the Neighbourhood agreements stipulated in the Lisbon Treaty is one of the options available. A community of democratic States as proposed in 2005 by EuroMeSCo, the Euro-Mediterranean network of think tanks, would be another possibility. The idea would be that Europe undertake to maintain special relations involving concrete benefits in terms of proximity, participation and access with countries respecting criteria of democracy and human rights according to the first two Copenhagen criteria, i.e. the establishment of stable institutions guaranteeing Rule of Law, democracy, human rights, respect for and protection of minorities and the implementation of a market economy. The difficulty of setting up a regional initiative involving a special relationship with Europe resides in defining the contours of the European offer, as was also the case with the European Neighbourhood Policy; in other words, the content of an offer by the European Union that would go beyond an Association Agreement but would exclude a country's accession to European Institutions.

Conclusions

The three key concepts here are access, participation and solidarity. The aim would be to define an area similar to the European Economic Area (EEA), which, with a configuration adapted to the development needs of Mediterranean countries, could become a Euro-Mediterranean Economic Area or, to

continue in the logic of neighbourhood policy, a Neighbourhood Economic Area.

The European Economic Area, of a multilateral nature, is the highest level of integration attained by the EU with non-Member States. It covers the free circulation of goods, services, capital and people. It likewise includes common regulations in the spheres of competition, environment, social policy, consumer protection, statistics and commercial law, as well as policies on research and education. The countries of the European Economic Area are excluded from the EU's foreign relations policy (CFSP and ESDP), common agricultural, fishing and transport policy, regional policy, justice and domestic affairs, and fiscal and monetary policy.

An adaptation of this range of freedoms and participation would probably be necessary to meet the specific needs of Mediterranean countries. It would also be important to preserve the multilateral nature – as is the case with the EEA – of the initiative between the European Union and non-Member States within the Euro-Mediterranean Area, and the Union for the Mediterranean seems the most appropriate framework to accomplish this.

This would involve a long-term perspective for the gradual, conditional creation of an area of access (access to the market and human mobility) and participation (in certain institutions and certain policies), but also of solidarity (the development levels of certain countries in the South necessarily call for development policies which EEA countries such as Norway or Iceland do not require).

This triple dimension of access to the EU area, participation in certain common policies and institutions and solidarity through concrete, substantial cooperation policies should constitute the base structure of close-knit relations with Mediterranean countries respecting democratic principles and the market economy.

The other matter is, clearly, whether the EU is ready to make an effort in this triple dimension and place a substantial offer on the table at a time when it has to handle a large-scale internal crisis in the Mediterranean. It is of the utmost importance to devise a Mediterranean strategy, to have the courage and the historic vision necessary to identify and meet the medium and long-term challenges in the region. It is up to the politicians and the EU Institutions to recognise this and act accordingly.