

# The European Security Policy and the Euro-Mediterranean Region 2010-2011

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Over the last year, the shortcomings within the EU's security policy towards its southern neighbourhood have dramatically come to the fore. For years, the EU has declared that the best way to ensure its security around the Mediterranean is through developing a "ring of friends" – "a zone of prosperity and a friendly neighbourhood" with whom the EU would enjoy "close, peaceful and co-operative relations" (European Commission Communication on Wider Europe, 2003). In order to achieve this goal, EU Member States have officially committed themselves to pursue a twofold strategy: to help stem the various conflicts which exist within the region and to promote good governance amongst their neighbours through the offer of closer bilateral ties.

EU governments have invested significant efforts in attempting to achieve the first objective of supporting conflict resolution, and have been particularly active towards the Arab-Israeli conflict, which is considered a key EU foreign policy priority. But the difficulties of working as a single organisation composed of 27 countries have limited the EU's ability to be taken seriously as a diplomatic heavy weight in the region. As a result, the impact of EU efforts has been limited and several of the conflicts across North Africa and the Middle East have continued to worsen.

While EU governments have been genuinely committed to conflict resolution, their interest in implementing their declared objective of strengthening good governance across their southern neighbourhood has been more limited. Over the years, the EU has often given only lip service to calls for democratic reforms and stronger respect for human rights

amongst its Arab neighbours. Many European governments have preferred to cooperate with the various authoritarian regimes in place in order to guarantee short-term stability and secure the collaboration of southern countries in areas of interest to Europeans, including the control of illegal migration and counter-terrorism. But as popular protests toppled regimes across the Arab world during the early months of 2011, they threw into question many of the EU's short-term security gains and highlighted the long-term unsustainability of its approach to the Mediterranean.

## Helpless EU Institutional Innovations

2010 began with the entry into force of the EU's Lisbon treaty. Member States had heralded the treaty as strengthening the EU's ability to speak with one voice and to become a more effective security actor. By creating the European External Action Service, double-hatting the High Representative for Foreign Affairs as a European Commissioner and eliminating the rotating Presidency for matters relating to foreign policy, the treaty will, in the long run, strengthen the coherence of the EU's institutional set up. Before Lisbon, the existence of numerous spokespersons for EU foreign policy – from the European Commission, the EU High Representative to the rotating Presidency – often confused its message. In addition, the fact that both the European Commission and the Council worked on foreign affairs meant that the EU duplicated many of its efforts. At times the allocation of resources was strikingly inefficient. For example, although the European Commission did not have any competences to deal with political matters relating to the Middle East Peace Process, it had staff working on the issue within its delegations in each country of the region. The Council on the

other hand – which was in charge of political matters – only had one staff member in the region. Many of those inefficiencies will be addressed in the long term, although over the course of 2010, the internal debates about the structure of the External Action Service had the unfortunate downside of distracting the EU from pressing foreign policy matters across the Middle East and North Africa.

However, institutional tinkering has been incapable of addressing the more fundamental challenges that have limited the EU's ability to act as a coherent actor across the Mediterranean in the past and has continued to do so during the course of 2010 – namely the difficulties EU governments face in forging common positions and their unwillingness to let the EU speak on their behalf. For example, in September 2010, French President Nicolas Sarkozy criticised US attempts to revive the Middle East Peace Process and invited Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas and then-Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert to Paris to hold peace talks. The French President did so without consulting other Member States or the EU institutions, and at the time the official EU position was to support the US-led efforts.

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During the course of 2010, the EU's other flagship institutional innovation of recent years, the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM), also proved incapable of addressing some of the underlying challenges limiting the EU's influence amongst its southern partners. Introduced as a French initiative under President Sarkozy in 2008, the UfM was designed to strengthen the EU's regional policy towards its Mediterranean neighbours by focusing on projects (such as cleaning up the Mediterranean Sea and building motorways) and creating new institutions – including a joint Secretariat and co-Presidency that would be held by one EU Member State and one Southern partner. But since its introduction, the UfM has suf-

fered from the same problems that blighted its predecessor, the Barcelona Process: disputes amongst the Southern partners relating to their various regional conflicts – the Arab-Israeli conflict in particular – have prevented cooperation on other matters and the initiative has ground to a halt. During the course of 2010, a summit for the UfM leaders was postponed for the second time, indefinitely, and the Secretary General of the organisation resigned.

### Continued Inability to Stem Conflict

Throughout the course of 2010, the EU continued its attempts to implement a key aspect of its security policy towards the Mediterranean: stemming the various conflicts across the region that endanger European stability, in particular the Arab-Israeli conflict. The EU did some valuable work in alleviating Palestinian living conditions, but its lack of diplomatic clout continued to prevent it from encouraging Israelis and Palestinians back to the negotiating table, and the conflict continued to worsen.

Europeans continued to provide large amounts of financial assistance to the Palestinians. These made a significant contribution to the development work of Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas and Prime Minister Salam Fayyad in the West Bank. EU funds also alleviated the humanitarian situation in Hamas-controlled Gaza, still facing significant limitations on imports and exports imposed by Israel. The EU continued training Palestinian police forces in the West Bank through its police mission EUPOL COPPS, and troops from several European countries remained deployed within the UN's mission on the Israeli-Lebanese border, monitoring the cessation of hostilities.

During the course of the year, the EU also continued making constructive statements aimed at progressing towards a two-state solution. It issued repeated statements encouraging Israel to stop settlement construction and reopen Gaza's borders. It called for Palestinian reconciliation and an end to violence. EU Member States also repeatedly encouraged both sides to return to peace talks, and they maintained their offer to provide confidence-building measures, including monitoring Gaza's borders, if this could help the local parties reach an agreement. But with Palestinians and particularly Israelis giving little importance to the EU as a diplomatic actor, European statements failed to encourage any shifts amongst

the various parties involved in the conflict. Although even Washington, which traditionally has significantly more leverage than Europe over Israelis and Palestinians, struggled to weigh on the various parties during the course of 2010. Despite repeated efforts by the Obama administration, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas refused to restart peace talks, barring a brief moment in the autumn that rapidly came to an end.

As a result the conflict worsened throughout the course of the year: Hezbollah and Hamas continued their military build-ups in Lebanon and Gaza respectively, partly with Iranian assistance. The long-term damage to Gaza's private sector grew under the sustained border closures, as did the risk of radicalisation amongst its alienated population. Israeli settlements expanded in East Jerusalem and the West Bank – further complicating their withdrawal in the event of a peace agreement. And in October, Mahmoud Abbas declared that the Palestinians would unilaterally attempt to seek recognition of an independent Palestinian State at the UN by the autumn of 2011.

### **The Final Days of Short-Termism**

2010 was to be the last year before Europeans would be forced to face the unsustainability of their bilateral security policies in the Mediterranean. For years, EU leaders had acknowledged that many of the authoritarian regimes across North Africa and the Middle East were vulnerable to collapse. European leaders were conscious that several autocratic leaders were ageing and that their succession was uncertain – not least in the case of Egyptian leader Hosni Mubarak. There was a general awareness across Europe about the risks posed to various Arab regimes resulting from their low levels of economic development and large young populations. At the same time, EU officials also acknowledged that the lack of political pluralism within many authoritarian regimes was hampering the development of liberal opposition parties and in certain cases fuelling religious extremism.

EU leaders, however, did not adopt any long-term strategy to cater for the likely eventual collapse of autocratic regimes within their southern neighbourhood. The EU gave lip service to the need for democratic reforms amongst its neighbours in order to ensure long-term security, but in practice, European

leaders preferred to focus on their short-term well-being. EU governments were conscious that democratic reforms could produce significant instability in the medium term. The victory of Hamas, Hezbollah and the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood in elections in the Palestinian territories, Lebanon and Egypt over recent years had done much to limit enthusiasm across Europe for strong calls for elections within the Arab world.

EU governments preferred to work with the various authoritarian regimes in place in order to ensure their cooperation on a variety of short-term European security interests. These included cooperation on counter-terrorism and illegal migration. In 2010, the EU notably continued trying to negotiate readmission agreements with its southern partners so that they would take back illegal immigrants from Europe – notwithstanding the poor human rights record of several southern neighbours in handling migrants. EU governments were also keen to work with autocratic leaders across North Africa and the Middle East to ensure access to oil, gas and trade.

During the years leading up to 2010, even if the EU had given more importance to democratic and broader good governance reforms amongst its neighbours in the Mediterranean, the scope for success would have been limited. The leaders of autocratic Arab regimes had no interest in reform and the EU had few incentives to sway them. EU membership – which had proved so effective in reforming Eastern Europe during the 1990s – was not in the cards, and, in any event, was not of interest to most southern countries; meanwhile, aid, trade concessions and visa facilitations could not offer the EU the same leverage.

Nevertheless, EU Member States showed strikingly little interest in exploiting the potential of the limited incentives at their disposal. For years they remained reluctant to liberalise trade in agricultural goods and to offer greater mobility for the populations across the shores of the Mediterranean. Upon taking office, Stefan Fule, the new European Commissioner for Enlargement and Neighbourhood Policy, suggested that the EU should consider facilitating visas for its southern partners; but he was strongly rebuked by Member States.

By 2010, the EU's policy of conditionality appeared to have gone significantly astray. Of the various regimes that would face popular protests during the early months of 2011, several had seen their bilateral relations with the EU upgraded as a reward for

good behaviour, or were in the middle of negotiations, including Tunisia.

## The Arab Spring

In the early months of 2011, the various shortcomings in the EU's security policy towards its southern neighbourhood were dramatically brought to the fore. European leaders were completely taken by surprise as protests calling for democracy spread across the Arab world, toppling the regimes in Tunisia and Egypt and leading to military conflict in Libya. While the collapse of the various autocratic regimes has created a significant opportunity for the spread of democracy, there is also now the risk of significant turmoil and instability across the region. The social and economic disparities within many Arab societies, including those of Egypt and Tunisia, and their lack of many foundations required for stable democracies – such as strong political parties and civil societies – are likely to make their political transitions a formidable challenge. In some countries there is a risk that the popular uprisings, and the ensuing government response, will strengthen sectarian tensions, not least in Bahrain.

The EU's response to events was once more weakened by divisions amongst EU Member States. Initially certain EU governments were averse to criticising the leadership in Tunisia and Libya and were completely divided over the merit of intervening militarily in Libya in order to stop the attacks Gaddafi was inflicting on his people in response to their protests. Germany was pitted acrimoniously against France and Britain. And after failing to reach a consensus within the EU or NATO, Paris and London decided to seek UN endorsement for a coalition of the willing. (Although the EU has subsequently agreed to deploy a military mission to support the humanitarian efforts in Libya).

Since the uprisings erupted, several EU senior policymakers, including Commissioner Füle, have acknowledged that the EU had not given enough importance to democracy promotion and human rights in the region, equating authoritarian regimes with stability. The EU is expected to invest significant efforts in assisting the countries that have overthrown their autocratic leaders. And several EU Member States would like the EU to give more weight to conditionality within its neighbourhood policy – a policy that the EU was already reviewing before the uprisings.

But at the time of writing there was still no consensus on exactly how the EU should redesign its long-term approach to its neighbours, and the EU still needed to address several key challenges.

Firstly, European leaders are likely to want to continue ensuring their short-term security interests with their southern neighbours, be it cooperation on counter-terrorism or controlling illegal migration. But there is a risk that some of the new governments in North Africa – if they are elected representatives – will be unwilling to provide the same level of cooperation with EU partners as their predecessors, if the terms of such cooperation appear unpalatable to their electorate. New governments might be less willing to accept illegal migrants from the EU, if EU Member States continue to be so unwilling to envisage any form of visa facilitation.

Secondly, if the EU becomes a fervent supporter of democratic reforms in countries whose regimes have been overthrown, how will it reconcile such an approach with its policies towards countries whose autocratic leaders have not been overthrown? If the EU adopts two very different policies, there could be a risk that its credibility suffers, both in the eyes of the autocratic regimes and those undergoing political transitions.

Events have forced the EU to acknowledge that its approach to security – both long- and short-term – had significant weaknesses. Whether EU Member States choose to strategically review their approach to their southern neighbourhood remains to be seen. Even if they do, it is unlikely that stability will ensue in the medium term within the countries beginning political transitions under difficult conditions. Nonetheless, any marginal improvements that EU leaders can deliver in terms of political and economic support to the region will be of great benefit to both Mediterranean and European security.

## Bibliography

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