

SOME LESSONS FROM NORTH AFRICA - AND SOME TIPS FOR EUROPE

Much has been said about the EU's response to the uprisings in North Africa. Much has been and will continue to be said on how the EU should radically change its approach to this region. But beyond the criticism, little has been said about how the new foreign policy structures set up by the Lisbon Treaty have met this challenging task.

Leadership. The EU has been fiercely attacked for the belatedness, weakness and uncertainty of its response to these historic events. Indeed, if compared with its response to crises in Macedonia in 2001 and Ukraine in 2004, it did not display a similar responsiveness and charisma. But perhaps these criticisms are addressed to the wrong areas. The European Council's Conclusions on Egypt of 4 February, and the behind-closed-doors negotiations on the text, speak volumes: the EU was forced to accept the wording agreed by the Heads of State and Government whereby the Council asks it to convey the EU's message by sending a representative to Cairo. The different positions of the Member States on whether or when Mubarak should leave were glossed over in the final text, with his name not even mentioned. Outside the EU framework, Member States have delivered diverse messages, both separately and in groups. In short, if EU leaders continue to cling onto their national differences and are unwilling to delegate policy delivery and not just executive tasks, it will be hard for the EU to change the face of EU foreign policy. Separate ownerships do not generate collective leadership.

Strategies. Whatever the outcomes of the uprisings, the EU and its members will have to rethink their decade-long policies of supporting the status quo in the region through containment (of Islamists, migrants, terrorism, the Israel-Palestine conundrum) and cooperation (against terrorism, illegal migration, and to secure energy supplies). The changes in the individual countries



Amr Moussa, secretary general of the Arab League, right, greets EU Foreign affairs chief Catherine Ashton during her visit to the Arab League headquarters in Cairo, Egypt, Monday, March 15, 2010.

as well as the balance of power in the region will require a radical reassessment of what EU objectives and priorities are, whilst supporting the democratic aspirations of the people. Some tasks the EU can carry out, such as helping and advising on preparing for and holding elections; establishing democratic and functioning institutions; reforming security forces; and empowering civil society. Others will force it to confront taboo issues, such as how to establish a dialogue with the various democratic opposition groups, including the Islamist ones, and reassess its current policies, starting from the largely failed (and flawed) Union for the Mediterranean. But who will steer this exercise?

EEAS. The European Council sets the guidelines for EU foreign policy, but the High Representative has a new tool at her disposal that can produce new ideas on how to deal with the changing neighbourhoods. The timing of the events was unfortunate for a new service in which most staff do not know yet what their tasks may be. But there is relevant knowledge and experience in the EEAS: special tasks forces of officials (most working until recently in the Commission and

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Council) can produce fresh thinking. The EEAS needs to make concrete proposals that take short and long term scenarios into account and pave the way for a new approach towards the region, tapping into the multiple tools and levers the EU still has.

Know-how. Last but not least, the events in the Southern Mediterranean have highlighted how far European capitals are from the political dynamics in the region and how unprepared they are to deal with them. This deplorable knowledge gap should be the first task the new EEAS should confront, through the strengthening of EU Delegations (which need to be staffed with ‘the best and the brightest’) as much as the headquarters in Brussels. Political intelligence gathered on the

ground needs to feed into renewed strategies, and Delegations must be allowed to coordinate the local embassies of EU members - as the Lisbon Treaty foresees.

It is not just the face of EU foreign policy that needs changing; the substance, too, needs recasting. If the EU wants to make its mark, it needs to develop new strategies - and the EEAS could be the point of departure to review Europe’s misguided policies towards the Mediterranean.

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