

## **When gravity fails...**

### **Five scenarios for the EU's southern Neighbourhood policies**

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It is now well-known that in 2011 the EU introduced a number of initiatives to revitalise its policies in the Arab countries of the southern Mediterranean. As the Arab Spring rolls with both promise and tragic violence into its second year, the EU is working hard to support incipient political change in a more nuanced, sophisticated and demand-driven fashion. As 2012 commences, Tunisia is advancing quietly; Syria is suffering its worst bout of killings yet; in simmering Egypt the army has just raided democracy NGOs; in Morocco and Jordan, promised reforms are yet to be carried through; fragile Algeria is ominously static; and post-Gaddafi Libya still awaits a stabilising government.

The fact that some new European resources have been found in the midst of such an acute economic recession is to the EU's credit. Much that sustains the EU's 'renewed' Neighbourhood Policy is admirable, in particular the commitments to dialogue with the full range of political actors in Arab states, the provision of more generous mobility partnerships, assistance in job creation and backing deeper economic integration across the Mediterranean.

Exhaustive coverage has been given to the re-energised European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) which is gradually being implemented. Inevitably, the EU's response to the Arab revolts can be judged contrastingly for its improvements or for its persistent shortcomings. Critics point out that new European funding is of limited magnitude and that promises of freer trade and more generous mobility still need to be followed through. What the EU should be doing in the immediate future to support reforms has been well-delineated for quite some time. But beyond debates over the immediate ENP policy concoction, a broader challenge looms on the horizon. As the Arab rebellions move past their first flush of innocent effusion, the EU must lift its eyes beyond immediate tactical decisions and begin to think more conceptually about what type of relationship is to be desired between Europe and the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region.

This longer term vision requires the EU innovatively to craft effective support for political openings but also to adjust its interest-calculus to the new geopolitics of the Middle East. Short-term and often prosaic policy decisions – how much money should

be made available and to whom, the format of ENP action plans, the relationship between Neighbourhood Policy and Union for the Mediterranean (UfM), the technical scheduling of trade incentives, the rules governing civil society partnerships – need to be taken with broader strategic scenarios in mind. The focus of policy activity in the immediate short-term must be made fully compatible with a clearer vision of where the EU would like its Middle Eastern relations to be in the span of a generation.

Rather than replay commentary on the current state of ENP policies and the much-dissected strategy documents introduced in 2011, this essay suggests *five scenarios* for the longer-term future of relations between Europe and the MENA region. These are offered essentially as a means of thinking about future options. Each of the scenarios represents a different type of EU-Middle Eastern pattern of governance. As it fine-tunes ENP and UfM initiatives through 2012, the EU should begin to deliberate on what kind of balance between these scenarios it seeks in the longer term.

### **Future scenario 1: Euro-Mediterranean governance**

The original vision of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP) embodied the ambition to create an area of deeply integrated governance structures. The rationale was to cultivate areas of sectoral cooperation entwined deeply enough to breed an environment of shared problem-solving and loyalty. And indeed a dense network of committees took shape across an impressively broad range of policy areas. However, practical progress towards the aim of integrated governance was halting, in large measure scuppered by tensions over the Arab-Israeli conflict and divergences over fundamental political values. But the ENP renewed the objective of replicating *de facto* the spirit of enlargement, while the Union for the Mediterranean was predicated on the principle of co-ownership. Analytically this strand of Euro-Mediterranean relations was well captured by the notion of an aspiration to create elements of a common political space or ‘regime’, not just cooperative policies. The concept of decentred governance helped reflect the aim of moving beyond a merely instrumental set of EU policies towards Arab states. The EMP was often seen as a, if not the, prime example of joint community-building.

Prior to the Arab spring, the philosophy of integrated Euro-Mediterranean governance remained well short of being realised. European commitment was insufficient, while southern Mediterranean resistance was resolute on the more sensitive political dimensions of the partnership. Outside the Europe-Mediterranean Partnership, relations remained strikingly thin with Arab states in the Gulf, Iraq and Iran. On the Arab side, governments resisted many areas of deeper cooperation. Relations with Israel remained far too fractious realistically to hope for a zone of shared governance structures. And on the European side, frustration with the paucity of progress pushed EU Member States back towards prioritising their traditional bilateral relations in the region. Whatever its other achievements, the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership had not bred significantly new forms of governance by the eve of the Tunisian revolt.

Scenario one for future EU policy is that post-2010 political changes in the MENA region open the way for a more effective implementation of Euro-Mediterranean governance. This scenario would see commitment to deepening a strongly-institutionalised pattern of cooperation across a large range of different policy areas. The EU and Arab states would enhance their degree of shared problem-solving and decision-making. Something akin to a Euro-Mediterranean polity would take shape. Euro-Mediterranean institutional structures would be of sufficient depth to develop an

identity autonomous from their Member States, to set agendas and establish problem-solving legitimacy. If the years before 2011 saw Member States drawn to bilateral modes of interaction with Arab states, the revolts may encourage increased unity between EU governments themselves sufficient to act as a basis for more integrative styles of governance across the Mediterranean too.

### **Scenario 2: EU governance prevails**

Much of the EU's international influence has derived from the transfer of its own rules and legal norms to other countries and organisations. This has been termed a form of institutionally-rooted 'external governance' quite distinct from traditional concepts of power projection. External governance refers to the EU seeking to extend the territorial scope of its own rules and regulations as a rationalised strategy of influencing policy outcomes in third countries. As such, it portrays a novel form of external strategy beyond traditional understandings of foreign policy. It posits a fuzzy rather than absolute distinction between internal and external policies. While there is some overlap here with the notion of common Euro-Mediterranean governance, external governance envisions a more instrumental and immediate usage of the EU's own processes for reasons of self-interest. While this governance model also points to deeply integrated and institutionalised forms of cooperation, the onus is on the EU exporting its own pre-existing norms rather than on collective security as such.

Many analysts see this framework as being particularly pertinent to the Mediterranean. They argue that this is an area where the 'institutional patterns' that embody the EU's own internal values have notably extended into the realm of foreign relations. Prior to 2010, some analysts argued that a significant degree of progress was being made in the export of EU governance in the southern Mediterranean. A number of Arab states had begun to incorporate EU rules governing competition, environmental, health and safety, energy and industrial policy. These moves may not have constituted democratisation, and the manner of actually implementing EU rules may have remained subject to local specificities, but they did represent some degree of convergence in governance styles. And external governance strategies pursued at a relatively technocratic level enabled advances while paralysis reigned at the level of high politics.

Notwithstanding these advances, clear limitations remained with regard to the scope of governance exported from the European Union. These limits were evident in the stalling of market integration and Arab governments' increasing resistance to uploading large sections of the EU *acquis*. Once again, the Union for the Mediterranean seemed to signal a dilution of the external governance prism.

Scenario two for future EU policies would see changes in the MENA states and in EU thinking suffice to bring external governance dynamics further to the fore. Under this scenario we would see changes in the Middle East open up more scope to successfully export areas of the EU's own governance rules. This 'governance' approach would become the leading edge of EU efforts to support democratic reform in the region.

### **Scenario 3: EU-supported cosmopolitan governance**

Prior to the Arab spring the civil society components of the EMP and ENP flattered to deceive. They were too elitist and too patchy to claim much credit for the upheavals. Regimes excelled in frustrating the participation of genuinely independent actors.

European governments meekly accepted such barriers and reverted to more government-to-government approaches. Prior to 2011, EU policy in the Arab world was far more state-centric than organised around the priority status of individual agency and rights.

Scenario three for future EU relations would see joint civil society-led initiatives become more significant relative to formal government-to-government relations. This scenario would see EU policy seeking to foster a shared community of values beyond the role of nation states. Apparently in line with such notions of cosmopolitan governance, most of the Arab revolts have been bottom-up social protests. Citizen-centred notions of governance might come to feature far more prominently in European-Middle Eastern relations.

A pre-eminence of cosmopolitan governance would involve full civil society involvement in policy frameworks, systematic inclusion and agenda-setting roles in political dialogue covering democracy and human rights, and strong civic monitoring roles over aid expenditure. Unlike the Euro-Mediterranean governance and external governance models, this would be less about formal institution-centred modes of integration than about the promotion of a citizen-focused ideational community predicated upon universal values. Under this scenario EU support for reform would take its lead from local, Arab input and demands. A civic-oriented governance route may enhance EU influence in the region, to the extent that it circumvents the tensions that have long existed at governmental level.

#### **Scenario 4: Strategic calibration**

A fourth scenario for future EU relations would see European governments tempted in the direction of carefully controlled realist statecraft by the tumultuous remoulding of the Middle East. Rather than the Arab revolts ushering in new forms of cooperative governance across the Mediterranean, this scenario would see them encouraging European governments to claim a greater role to modulate their responses to this fluidity in a way that safeguards immediate interests. The key variables would be governments rather than forms of liberal-integrated governance.

Political change in the MENA region has propelled a belated and self-regarding scramble on the part of European governments to 'side with history'. While support for democracy is forthcoming, it may be increasingly and carefully calibrated to Member States' immediate security concerns. Policy initiatives may remain under Member States' tutelage, rather than control surrendered to EU initiatives based on integrative-governance.

Crucially, the pre-eminence of geostrategy would ensure that external support for political change is pitched at very different levels between Arab states: less friendly and unsalvageable regimes are likely to be more readily abandoned, stalwart allies treated more leniently. Where such a recast geo-strategy predominates, we would above all expect to see European governments perusing the variation in reform-paths adopted by different Arab regimes since 2010 and carefully calculating how much and what type of reform to back in each case.

#### **Scenario 5: De-Europeanised governance**

A fifth and final scenario for the future would see the Arab perturbations herald a multilateralisation of EU policy efforts across North Africa and the Middle East. A governance pattern often observed to date is that of a hub-and-spokes structure existing between individual Arab states and the European Union. The assumption has often been that many individual Arab states see the EU as their main external reference point and that they have prioritised this bilateral relation rather than ties with other Middle Eastern countries. This tallies with the implied logic of the concept of a 'European Neighbourhood', a single EU hub linked by spokes to individual states around its periphery. Of course, in some cases US influence has been pre-eminent, but certainly in North Africa Europe has generally been seen as a key external interlocutor.

We might expect ongoing overarching shifts in international power gradually to have a concrete impact in the new Middle East. Instead of any revival of Euro-Mediterranean governance or stronger European civil society engagement, the most notable trend may be that of diminishing EU presence in the Middle East. Most strikingly, the political and economic reach of Gulf states into North Africa has deepened appreciably. The role in democracy support of non-Western 'rising' democracies may prove increasingly pre-eminent. This may be the case not only for Turkey, but also the likes of India, Brazil and Indonesia; these rising powers have to date engaged only sporadically in the Middle East but their transitions experiences are increasingly in demand in the region.

In some measure, a scenario of de-Europeanised governance represents the inverse of the external governance model. Instead of measuring how far the MENA region incrementally aligns itself with EU rules and norms, the key trend would be the region's turn towards non-Western powers. This scenario would see the EU working with rather than against the grain of these trends. The EU would pay less attention purely to crafting its own policy frameworks in hermetic isolation and place more emphasis on crafting joint initiatives with other Middle Eastern regional powers and international actors from outside the region.

### **Eclectic, but strategic**

At present, EU responses to the emerging Middle East are somewhat *ad hoc* measured against these ideal-type variations. Predictions are hazardous while the disturbed pieces of Middle Eastern politics are yet to resettle in any easily discernible pattern. Opting now definitively for one or other strategic-governance path would be premature. The five scenarios are offered as ways in which the EU might usefully kick-start and order its thinking about future options.

That said, a speculative hunch is that the trend should be broadly away from the first two models of governance. Most fundamentally, of course, a revival of Euro-Mediterranean governance would require resolution of the Arab-Israel conflict; this is not something which the Arab spring appears to have rendered more likely. More generally, in the Arab world the 'gravitational' model of supporting reform has negligible traction. Unlike in other regions, in the Arab world the EU is not the central force of attraction towards which reform aspirations are drawn. The design of EU-Arab relations will require something of the spirit of Copernicus: in twenty years the EU is likely to be one node enmeshed in Middle Eastern affairs but not that around which Arab politics in any essential sense revolves. This does not mean abandoning Euro-Mediterranean initiatives. Some EU rules may be 'imported' enthusiastically by post-transition Arab regimes. Some governance export may occur. But this will be on a more selective basis, where it addresses Arab states' own concrete policy objectives. The

notion of an extended 'Euro-sphere' is not one to which the EU should set its geo-strategic compass.

In contrast, the spirit of the Arab revolts surely invites far more emphasis on the civic dimension of relations than on heavily institutionalised government-to-government policy frameworks. Indeed, to stress the latter to the detriment of citizen involvement would subvert the essence of social empowerment that is the very driving force of the incipient vibrancy of the Middle East.

At the same time, it will be proper and necessary for European governments to have a 'security hold' on the shifting alliances and power balances within the Middle East. The magnitude of change is such that the EU response cannot be sensibly limited to a few worthy, upgraded ENP or UfM projects. A geo-strategic approach should not equate to old-style realist containment; to 'contain' successfully would be beyond the EU's gift even were this attempted. Nor should it be taken to invite a splintering of EU unity. Indeed, quite inversely, more rationalised diplomacy will be apposite given the extent to which the Arab spring will transmute into profoundly strategic and varied security dilemmas.

The final scenario of multilateralised international support for Arab reforms is that which is likely to require most additional attention in the medium term. With more limited material incentives at its disposal, the EU must fashion less direct forms of leverage through building broader alliances on Middle Eastern concerns. The most immediate trend is towards some Arab states engaging more influentially across the wider region. The current influence of rising powers should not be exaggerated; most still have limited engagement in the MENA region. But the EU would do well to start preparing for what is likely eventually to be a far more plural international engagement in the Middle East. EU diplomats frequently pay lip service to just such a concern; yet there is some risk that current choices are locking in a reliance on EU policy frameworks ill-equipped to fostering or reacting to such multilateralisation. The EU's failure to craft a structured alliance with Turkey specifically on Arab reform support is only the most glaring failure to adjust to a changed order.

This is perhaps, then, the overriding puzzle for EU long-term strategic thinkers to ponder: what happens when 'gravity fails' and the EU becomes but one in a constellation of many firmaments? The ambitious long-term strategy would be for the EU to move gradually from treating Arab states not so much as components of 'its neighbourhood' and more as potential partners in global challenges.