

## The European Union and its Southern Neighbourhood

Sep 20, 2016 by [Judy Dempsey](#)

The Arab Spring of 2011 was a major shock for the European Union and all the Member States. The way these revolutions broke out across several countries in the Middle East confirmed how generations of young and old in the region could no longer tolerate the authoritarian regimes under which they had no choice but to endure. They could no longer tolerate the lack of perspective, the lack of opportunity. In some ways their rebellion was also a fundamental rejection of the West's policy towards the regimes they aimed to overthrow.

Prior to the Arab Spring, the policies pursued by the EU and most of the Member States were focused on dealing with the regimes. In most cases, European governments shied away from dealing directly with the small, courageous and genuinely independent civil society movements or groups of individuals who campaigned for human rights. The EU's interlocutor was the status quo. Moreover, the EU really had no unified, coherent long term strategy towards the region. As for the Member States, they had their own network of bilateral economic and trade ties built up over many years.

The EU's much touted Barcelona Process<sup>1</sup> (if anyone remembers it), was established in 1995 to foster some kind of regional cooperation among the Middle East and North African countries (MENA). But if it was also supposed to establish a dialogue between the EU and the countries in the region, the EU's values played no significant role, if at all. By dealing with the entrenched political elites, the EU unwittingly became a willing partner in prolonging these regimes.

The EU's policy towards the region was revamped in 2004 with the launch of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP).

At the time, the aim of the ENP was to foster stability, security and prosperity in these countries. It reflected the EU's first European Security Strategy drawn up by Javier Solana.<sup>2</sup> That document referred to establishing an arc of stability, from Europe's east around to Europe's south. Clearly for those campaigning for democracy in the MENA countries, neither the ENP nor the EU's Security Strategy addressed the underlying tensions in the region: the irreconcilability of authoritarianism and democratisation; that the kind of stability prevailing in the MENA countries was inherently unstable.

The Arab Spring could have and should have provided the EU with a new and bold opportunity to radically overhaul its policies toward the region as a whole and towards particular countries. Certainly, in the immediate aftermath of the Arab Spring, the EU did realise that its previous policies had been flawed. But because of the sheer scale of the upheaval engulfing that Syria, Tunisia, Libya and Egypt particularly, the EU scrambled for a reactive policy.

### What policy?

Consider the EU's policy towards **Syria**. The Europeans had no policy once the conflict escalated into a full-blown war. Despite attempts by some Member States, particularly Britain which with France at first suggested a no-fly zone over Syria, only for the British parliament to overrule that idea by former Prime Minister David Cameron, the EU and the United States chose inaction. Syria lurched into a deeper and more bitter civil war with major outside powers, Russia and Iran, Saudi Arabia and Turkey meddling and perpetuating the

appalling bloodshed. Neither the EU nor the Member States used all their connections to push for a political solution.

As a result, the EU has been a bystander in a war that is now directly affecting the security of Europe as well as dividing Europe because of the refugee crisis and the rise of the so-called Islamic State. It is the refugee crisis and terrorism that is now shaping the EU's policy towards the MENA countries. The refugee crisis is being linked, sometimes casually, sometimes cynically to the terrorist attacks that have taken place in Belgium, France and Germany. That linkage cannot be brushed aside. As the German interior ministry stated recently following the discovery of ISIS cells in northern Germany, those detained had fought with ISIS in Syria only afterwards to make their way to Europe with the refugees.

With European countries bitterly at odds over offering security and safety to Syrian refugees, it has been left up to Germany and Sweden, to name the two countries that have done the most to open their doors to the refugees. Other countries such as Hungary, have built iron fences to keep out the migrants.

The long term consequences of Europe's role as bystander in the Syrian war is extremely damaging. Salam Kawakibi<sup>3</sup> summed it up in a piece he wrote for Carnegie Europe. He argued that if the Europeans do not take the Syrian conflict seriously, other global actors will not take the Europeans seriously either. Indeed, one wonders if European governments now see its southern neighbourhood through the lens of security and stability in order to ensure the security of EU citizens.

Take another country in the region: **Libya**. The EU and NATO sorely contributed to its wretched state. Back in 2011, with the former dictator Muammar Gaddafi determined to cling onto power and quash the rebellion against his rule, the United Nations Security Council passed a resolution anchored to the Responsibility to Protect. It involved imposing a no-fly zone over Libya. NATO took over a mission that had very little support from all its members. Germany, for one, had abstained from the UN vote along with Russia, China, Brazil and India. Chancellor Angela Merkel got a lot of flak for her decision. Yet she had seen how the U.S.-led coalition had botched up its invasion of Iraq in 2003. Then, there was no thought about the 'day after'.

The same mistakes were made in Libya. A new report published on September 14, 2016 by the British's parliament's Foreign Affairs Committee examined the intervention and subsequent collapse of Libya.<sup>4</sup> This was the report's conclusion: '[It was] A policy which had intended to protect civilians drifted towards regime change and was not underpinned by strategy to support and shape post-Gaddafi Libya. The consequence was political and economic collapse, inter-militia and inter-tribal warfare, humanitarian and migrant crises, widespread human rights violations and the growth of ISIL in North Africa.'

No wonder that Tarek Megerisi, a long-time observer of Libya, has been highly critical of EU policy. 'If European policymakers want to help stabilize and reorient Libya, they should recall the lessons of the past five years since the country's 2011 revolution,' he wrote.<sup>5</sup> He could have added that the EU should recall their policies towards Libya before 2011 when the EU rolled out the red carpet for Gaddafi in April 2004. There was the former European Commission president Romano Prodi showering praise on Gaddafi as a cohort of female soldiers stood on the press room's podium.

The EU, particularly Italy, Libya's former colonial power is now heavily involved in trying to agree a ceasefire with all the players in Libya, so far without success. The longer the war in the country continues, the more people will try to flee or migrants from neighbouring

countries will exploit the chaos and virtual collapse of Libya's state institutions to cross into the country and then try and make their way to Europe. As a result, the EU is trying to negotiate some kind of deal to stop migrants coming from Libya. But there is no unified authority with whom the EU can negotiate unlike the deal the EU, with Germany taking a leading role, struck with Turkey.

### **Step in the Commission**

Leaving aside the lack of solidarity and fairness by EU countries in dealing with the refugees, that crisis triggered a new discussion in the European Commission about what long term policies were needed for what it called 'stronger partnerships for a stronger neighbourhood.' In November 2015, the Commission, along with the European Council and the European Parliament issued a joint communique called 'Review of the European Neighbourhood Policy.'<sup>6</sup> Briefly, with populist movements across Europe making hay from the refugee crisis and the wave of terrorist attacks, the Commission had no choice but to reassess its relationship with its MENA neighbours. The review set out quite clearly how its long term policies towards its southern neighbourhood.

'In the reviewed ENP the EU will focus on areas that matter most,' states the review. 'The stabilisation of the region, in political, economic, and security related terms, will be at the heart of the new policy. The EU's own stability is built on democracy, human rights and the rule of law and we will continue to make the case for these universal values,' it added.

In principle, stabilisation will be tied closely to security sector reform, as well as conflict prevention, counter-terrorism and anti-radicalisation policies. Of course, the Commission and Council insist that all these policies will comply with human rights. But if the EU is going to make stabilisation as its priority, won't civil society movements believe that democracy and the pursuit of human rights take second place?

Those EU officials involved in promoting this policy believe that 'in the next three to five years, the most urgent challenge in many parts of the neighbourhood is stabilisation.' This is a very short framework. Whether naïve or unrealistic, it shows a new thinking in the Commission about how to promote stabilisation. The review states that the roots of instability are injustice, corruption, weak economic and social development and lack of opportunity, particularly for young people. All these elements, the review implies, are ideal ingredients for abetting radicalisation.

In short, instead of putting human rights on top of its agenda, Brussels wants to tackle the underlying de-stabilising factors. As one EU official told me: 'it's all very well talking about environmental issues and human rights in these countries when the system is riddled with corruption or weak governance and there isn't even enough food or jobs available. You can move ahead to other issues when you have food and jobs.'<sup>7</sup>

Echoing the Commission's Review, the official insisted that the EU's policies would be able to reconcile security and stabilisation with promoting good governance, 'democracy, rule of law and human rights.' But as the Commission itself states throughout the 21-page long review, it is the security and stabilisation issues that take priority.

### **Security and democracy – a contradiction in terms?**

In June, 2015, Angela Merkel, the German chancellor, hosted *Egyptian* President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi in Berlin. German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier had earlier held talks with Sisi in Cairo to prepare the president's visit to Germany. The German business establishment was keen to enter the Egyptian market, regardless of the lack of major economic reforms and the drastic clampdown on human rights.

For many months, Merkel had refused to invite Sisi. She insisted that Egypt should first hold parliamentary elections. Elections were expected to take place in March and April 2015. They were postponed. Sisi's visit to Berlin gave him a stamp of legitimacy, even though he had ousted his predecessor, the Islamist Mohamed Morsi, in what amounted to a military coup. Since then, Sisi has run roughshod over human rights, while Morsi has been sentenced to death. Merkel's office defended the visit. Steffen Seibert, the German government spokesman, said Merkel would meet Sisi because 'Egypt is an immensely important player in the Arab world', adding that the country could help contribute to peace in the region. Essentially, it was in Europe's interests to have a stable Egypt in such a combustible environment. And so we arrive at the dilemma: reconciling values with interests. Sisi's visit sent a depressing message to the many thousands of Egyptians who fought for freedom during the heady days of the Arab Spring in 2011 – and to the many who are now imprisoned, who are being tortured, who are being sexually assaulted, and for whom justice has been hijacked by Sisi. Stability has taken priority over the transition to democracy, however messy such transitions often are.

Sisi, by the way, didn't get it all his own way in Berlin. Norbert Lammert, the speaker of the German parliament and a senior member of Merkel's centre-right Christian Democratic Union (CDU) party, cancelled plans to meet Sisi. In a statement issued by his office, Lammert laid it on the line: 'Despite expectations from Egypt to schedule a date for the long-awaited parliamentary elections, what we are witnessing in recent months is systematic persecution of opposition groups, mass arrests, convictions to lengthy terms and an incredible number of death sentences, which include former parliament speaker [Saad] al-Katatni.' Lammert continued: 'Given this situation, which contributes neither to domestic peace nor to the democratization of the country, Lammert sees for the time being no ground for a meeting with President el-Sisi.'

The statement might have added that the Konrad Adenauer Foundation which is affiliated with the CDU and supports democracy building was forced to close its offices in Cairo in June 2013, as were other foundations.

Yet neither Berlin nor, for that matter, Washington seems to worry unduly about the built-in insecurity and instability of Sisi's repressive rule. The administration of U.S. President Barack Obama welcomed Sisi's election. And Israel, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates pushed the United States to normalise relations with Sisi's government, despite the military coup and the rampant abuses of human rights.

'The EU's approach is based on false claims and assumptions; the support the union provides is disconnected and fails to capture Egypt's social and political dynamics,' Nancy Okail argued.<sup>8</sup> 'First and foremost, the Egyptian government has always justified its crackdown as part of the country's war on terror. However, the assertion that freedom and democracy have been traded in for security does not hold water in Egypt, where terrorist attacks increased threefold from 2013 to 2015.' Okail added that despite the lack of effectiveness of Cairo's counterterrorism policy, which is narrowly focused on the use of force, EU support for and cooperation with Egypt is skewed toward security and the military. The EU recently agreed to donate €17m to a programme for the promotion and protection of human rights and civil society in Egypt. The aim is to increase the capacity of Egyptian institutions and civil society organizations to bolster human rights. A further €10 million was allocated to a nationwide project to modernise the administration of justice and enhance security. The big question is how much influence the EU will really have in promoting such changes in judiciary and how security will be used to crackdown further on human rights.



Elsewhere in the region, there is a considerable scepticism that security and stabilisation can coexist without genuine political reform.

For all the EU's political, financial and economic support for **Palestine**, its policies in Palestine and Israel have confirmed the weakening influence of Brussels in two important respects. First, the EU now pays only lip service to a two-state solution. It cannot find ways to prevent Israel from continuing to build settlements in East Jerusalem or the occupied West Bank. Second, the EU has not the courage to address the weakness of Palestinian leadership in Ramallah.

Yes, one can always blame Israel for hindering the political, economic and social development of Palestinian society. But the EU's policy has been short-term and myopic. Palestinians have had to endure, beside the debilitating conflict with Israel, but they have also had to endure a corrupt, ageing leadership that has prevented the establishment of real politics, of a genuinely independent, peaceful peace movement – which incidentally is not in interests of the political elites in Ramallah nor in the Israeli government's because it would upset the status quo.

This status quo is not sustainable, either in Ramallah or in Gaza where Hamas runs its own highly repressive and corrupt regime. As for **Israel** itself, the conflict damages the society's own political fibre. It is a complex stability that is being sustained through sustained security measures.

Security and the economy are the two main issues in **Algeria**. President Abdelaziz Bouteflika, in power since 1999 is very ill. There is a big danger of a political vacuum. The regime is terrified about the possibility of terrorist attacks by radical Islamic movements. The attacks on country's energy installations in 2013 and again in March 2016<sup>9</sup> exposed the vulnerability of the regime. EU officials (rather than France, its former colonial power) have been holding a series of meetings with Algeria's top political and security officials in a bid to ensure some continuing when Bouteflika dies. The importance of Algeria cannot be underestimated. Youth unemployment is rising. The collapse of energy prices feeds into the lack of opportunity. Economic and political reforms are, so far, not on the agenda. But clearly Algiers and Brussels are extremely concerned about the future stability of this country.

### The kingdoms

In **Morocco**, for example that has managed to remain stable, civil rights activists there say the EU is simply not forthright enough in standing up for its own values. 'The EU's timid insistence on political reforms in Morocco coupled with unrelenting financial and diplomatic support might have removed the incentive for reforms,' argues Aboubakr Jamal.<sup>10</sup>

This argument could be applied to **Algeria** and **Jordan** as well. Although these two countries along with Morocco are very different from each other – from their colonial pasts to their current political landscape – they have two things in common. They have escaped the chaos of the Arab Spring. And their respective leaders have been in power since 1999. In **Morocco**, King Mohammed VI, aged 53, dodged the Arab Spring by introducing some modest constitutional reforms. The EU has thrown its weight behind the Monarch who has pledged to fight terrorism. Security and stability is the number one priority. It's difficult to know how long that will last as corruption and nepotism flourish.

In **Jordan**, King Abdullah II, aged 54, needs the maximum of social, political and economic support from the EU and from the United States to keep his country stable. The country, already hosts to 1.2 million Syrians. That's in addition to the Palestinian and Iraqi refugees. Belatedly, the EU has woken up to the fact that it has to provide the country with far more

support for helping the refugees. That, for the moment is Jordan's priority and the EU's. But that falls short of a long term policy for the country, irrespective of the refugee crisis. Ahmad Masa'deh, a Jordanian economist, points that when it comes to the EU having a policy in Jordan, it should focus on projects that lead to real political development and enhance the welfare and life quality of Jordanian citizens.<sup>11</sup>

And that, with few exceptions, is the nub of the crisis facing the MENA region. It is the lack of political development that hinders economic and social modernization. If the EU wants its new strategy on stabilization to work, it cannot afford to ignore the need for the development of politics, however difficult the challenge but also the necessity for that to be part of the equation.

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<sup>1</sup> [http://eeas.europa.eu/euromed/barcelona\\_en.htm](http://eeas.europa.eu/euromed/barcelona_en.htm)

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.eeas.europa.eu/csdp/about-csdp/european-security-strategy/>

<sup>3</sup> <http://carnegieeurope.eu/strategieurope/?fa=62548>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/foreign-affairs-committee/news-parliament-2015/libya-report-published-16-17>

<sup>5</sup> <http://carnegieeurope.eu/strategieurope/?fa=62967>

<sup>6</sup> [https://eeas.europa.eu/enp/documents/2015/151118\\_joint-communication\\_review-of-the-enp\\_en.pdf](https://eeas.europa.eu/enp/documents/2015/151118_joint-communication_review-of-the-enp_en.pdf); [http://ec.europa.eu/enlargement/neighbourhood/consultation/index\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/enlargement/neighbourhood/consultation/index_en.htm)

<sup>7</sup> Interview with EU Commission official involved in writing the Review.

<sup>8</sup> <http://carnegieeurope.eu/strategieurope/?fa=62891>

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.wsj.com/articles/statoil-says-algeria-project-hit-with-explosives-1458295882>

<sup>10</sup> <http://carnegieeurope.eu/strategieurope/?fa=63120>

<sup>11</sup> <http://carnegieeurope.eu/strategieurope/?fa=62736>; <http://www.wsj.com/articles/statoil-says-algeria-project-hit-with-explosives-1458295882>