

Nº 158 - JUNE 2013

The EU and the Palestinians: anticipating the third Intifada

Romana Michelon

>>> The Palestinian Territories are a noticeable absentee in the European Union's (EU) official response to the Arab spring. Indeed, neither the 'Partnership for Democracy and Shared Prosperity with the Southern Mediterranean' nor the 'New Response to a Changing Neighbourhood' devote much attention to the Territories or the Palestinian question more generally. Despite the EU's numerous commitments to promoting democracy, the rule of law, and human rights, consistently stressed also within the context of the Arab spring, it has failed to do so in Palestine.

The EU's renewed normative discourse has avoided suggesting any link between the Arab spring and the Palestinian people's right to self-determination. This seems to stem from a general conviction that policy adjustments can be limited to states that have already undergone regime change or are currently affected by large-scale popular uprisings. From this perspective, it makes sense to address the likes of Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Syria, while not discussing countries such as Algeria, Morocco, Jordan, or the Palestinian Territories.

This document assesses the EU's limited approach to the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). It argues that to focus only on states in which the Arab spring has triggered or is likely to lead to regime change is to miscalculate the structural and irreversible impact of the Arab uprisings across the entire region. Particularly, it regards the outbreak of a third *Intifada* as likely, and in light of the Arab spring's potential spill-

HIGHLIGHTS

- So far the EU's response to the Arab spring has largely sidelined the Palestinian Territories.
- The increased incidence of Palestinian protests cannot be dismissed as a nationalist conflict unique to the Israeli-Palestinian context.
- When dealing with Palestine, it is imperative for the EU to learn from ongoing processes of change elsewhere in the region.

»»»»» over effects, it argues that it cannot be dismissed as a nationalist conflict unique to the Israeli-Palestinian context. When engaging with the Palestinian Territories – where so far any form of protest has been successfully quelled by the Palestinian Authority (PA) or Israel – it is imperative for the EU to learn from ongoing processes of change elsewhere in the region. In this context, three central lessons from the Arab spring could be particularly relevant to the Palestinian context: the effectiveness of ‘people power’; the importance of supporting democracy; and the way in which the inclusion of Islamism in mainstream policy-making can constitute a step towards pragmatism and compromise, and may temper actors generally suspected of excessive zealotry.

THE EFFECTIVENESS OF ‘PEOPLE POWER’

The Arab spring has illustrated how effective people power can be and how leaderless movements can successfully overthrow old regimes. Most MENA protests started spontaneously and were largely unorganised. They were mainly the product of popular discontent over socio-economic and political malaise, and were not orchestrated by the Islamist opposition, which initially remained reluctant to join mobilisations. Importantly, their widespread dissemination cannot be attributed to centralised leadership, but to the deep-felt impact that highly-publicised cases of martyrdom had on an equally desperate population opposed to authoritarianism. The real heroes of the Arab spring were thus the leaderless victims of the old regimes.

In terms of structural grievances, the abysmal socio-economic situation in the Palestinian Territories far supersedes that of pre-revolutionary Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya. Particularly, given its underdeveloped economy, corruption, and lack of government response to popular demands, Palestine constitutes a fertile ground for civil unrest. Additionally, the Israeli occupation and the limitations imposed on freedom of movement deprive the Palestinian Territories from 85 per

cent of its estimated annual GDP, making it completely dependent on international donor assistance.

Palestinian discontent has recently resulted in multiple attempted self-immolations and a slew of protests across the West Bank. Spontaneous and unorganised in nature, dissatisfaction has been expressed over Israel’s occupation, disagreement between Hamas and Fatah, and Fatah’s corruption, which is generally perceived as a betrayal of Palestinian interests. The increased incidence of Palestinian protests appears to be indicative of an imminent third *Intifada*. As happened in 1987 and 2000, Palestinian frustration seems to be a small step away from inflaming population centres in Ramallah, Nablus, and Hebron.

Aside from the historical context, certain dynamics indicate that a potential third *Intifada* will differ from its two predecessors. First, whereas the previous *Intifadas* constituted highly isolated events which were not mirrored elsewhere in the region, today’s Palestinian demonstrators appear to be inspired by the revolutionary results achieved in Tunisia and Egypt, in particular. Second, whereas the international community dismissed the first two *Intifadas* as nationalist conflicts unique to the Israeli-Palestinian context, the Arab spring’s legacy demands a different assessment today. Particularly, the international community’s support to the Arab uprisings, especially in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya, would rhetorically entrap it also to recognise the legitimacy of a potential future ‘Palestinian spring’.

The probability of a third *Intifada* has greatly increased after the recent resignation of Salam Fayyad and the appointment of Rami Hamdallah as prime minister. Generally regarded as a respectable figure that contained Palestinian

**It is imperative
for the EU to
learn from
ongoing
processes of
change
elsewhere in
the region**

terrorism from the West Bank and that promoted political and economic transparency, Fayyad's departure negatively impacts upon Palestinian grievances. Indeed, the sense of reassurance about a future Palestinian State he provided especially in Israel and the United States is now shattered. This constitutes a severe blow to the peace process and prolongs Israeli occupation. Also, given President Mahmoud Abbas's opposition to many of Fayyad's initiatives, a return to nepotistic economic governance and increased political authoritarianism is not unthinkable. Finally, Hamas's immediate condemnation of Hamdallah's appointment significantly threatens the agreement signed last month to form a Palestinian unity government. In and of themselves, these developments constitute additional sources of discontent that hasten the outbreak of renewed civil unrest similar to previous *Intifadas*. Inspired by protests elsewhere in the region and strengthened by international support, the likelihood of today's protests effectively leading to the collapse of the PA in the West Bank has highly increased.

DEMOCRACY AS A KEY FACTOR

The Islamist victories in Egypt and Tunisia initially seemed to indicate that a long period of Islamist domination of MENA party politics would ensue. Indeed, *Ennahda* and the Freedom and Justice Party (FJP) were generally well-organised and enjoyed years of experience as opposition forces under dictatorial leadership, whereas their competitors often lacked the necessary organisation and expertise to win elections. However, by 2013, their moment of opportunity is starting to fade, as Islamist actors face enormous challenges and expectations that are proving too difficult to live up to.

Two years after the outbreak of the uprisings, Tunisia and Egypt, for instance, continue to register negative economic growth and high unemployment rates of 17 and 13 per cent, respectively. Also, unrealistically-high expectations of swift socio-economic recovery are proving too

difficult to meet and have sparked new waves of protests. Islamist governments have increasingly resorted to autocratic measures to control unrest. President Morsi's recourse to Mubarak-era measures to quell popular unrest and Ennahda's selective repression of protests while turning a blind eye to crimes perpetrated by hard-line Islamists against Tunisia's secular middle class contribute to the governments' declining legitimacy. Democracy can thus no longer be ignored.

This is of particular relevance to the Palestinian context. The 2006 electoral victory of Hamas to the Palestinian Legislative Council – a Muslim Brotherhood local affiliate created in response to the First *Intifada* in 1987 – was dismissed by the PA and politically and economically boycotted by Israel and the Quartet. The decision to isolate Hamas was driven by the fact that the group continues to operate a militant wing, still engages in rocket launches against Israel, and is classified by Israel and the Quartet as a terrorist organisation. Importantly, however, the Arab spring has given way to specific dynamics that make the sustainability of such containment unlikely.

First, the FJP's rise to power in Egypt has implied increased political support for Hamas. Egyptian President Morsi headed the negotiations that successfully led to the ceasefire between Hamas and Israel in November 2012, has organised meetings between Hamas' Khaled Meshaal and Fatah's Mahmoud Abbas in early 2013 to restart negotiations for Palestinian unification, and offered in April to host the elections of Hamas' leadership in Cairo. By engaging in these efforts, Egypt has pro-actively pulled Hamas out of its political isolation, and thereby strengthened its political position *vis-à-vis* Fatah.

Egypt's political support has also contributed to Hamas withdrawing from alliances with regimes such as that of al-Assad in Syria. For many years, the international boycotts rendered Hamas dependent on resources from Iran and Syria, but today it receives most of its funds from Egypt and

Qatar, which allows it to distance itself from such regimes. As Hamas is increasingly incorporated into the mainstream Palestinian political spectrum, it appears increasingly plausible not only that the Arab spring may reach Palestine, but also that Hamas is in a position to emerge as its main victor.

THE POLITICAL INCLUSION OF ISLAMISM: A STEP TOWARDS MODERATION?

Although Islamist actors play a key role in post-revolutionary MENA states, their adaptation to democratic standards and the rule of law will require a lengthy process of transformation. Islamists' transition from oppositional forces to centre-stage policy-makers awards them unexpected authority which can be easily abused to suit partisan interests. Nonetheless, many have argued that Islamists will increasingly recognise the importance of pragmatism and strategic decision-making, and that they will engage in a process of negotiation and compromise with a wide range of parties, institutions and associations.

First, as much as Islamist rulers may want to stay in power, Middle Eastern civil society, which has come to include major pro-democracy groups and well-established political parties, will increasingly demand the upholding of democratic principles and standards and object to any attempts to prevent this. According to most estimates, popular support for Islamist movements in Tunisia and Egypt stands at 15 and 25 per cent, respectively. Moreover, Islamists are suffering from internal divisions between progressive and more conservative elements, which may diminish their capacity to enforce autocratic rule. Finally, Islamist movements themselves have been adjusting their rhetoric to accommodate democracy. Ennahda has undergone an ideological transformation that limits the state's duty to creating jobs, providing education, and healthcare. Similarly, the FJP has declared its intention to prevent Egypt from becoming another Iran or Afghanistan, and has committed, at least in theory, to democratic principles.

Naturally, it remains to be seen how sincere these assertions are and whether Islamists would in fact give up power if they lost an election. Nonetheless, the Arab spring has significantly increased the possibility that democratisation processes and the inclusion of Islamism in mainstream policy-making might constitute a step towards pragmatism and compromise, and temper actors generally suspected of excessive zealotry.

In the Palestinian context, the Arab spring appears to have provided impetus to Hamas's process of moderation. First, in February 2013 Egypt pumped water into the underground tunnels that Hamas used to smuggle weapons into the Gaza Strip, and tightened security controls at the Egyptian-Gazan border to minimise such activities. By taking these measures while simultaneously providing support to the Hamas political leadership, Egypt is encouraging Hamas to suppress its militant activities in favour of political ones. Additionally, Khaled Meshaal's re-election as leader of Hamas reflects the movement's turn to moderation. Meshaal is well-known for his relatively moderate stance toward Israel and has been quoted saying that he wants to give peace with Israel a chance. He fundamentally differs from Hamas's more radical leadership by openly endorsing non-violent popular protest over armed resistance.

Despite these developments, Hamas has not formally broken ties with Iran and could still be receiving military arms from Tehran through its traditional smuggling routes. Additionally, the escalation of violence with Israel in November 2012 reveals that Hamas is far from disarming its members and focusing solely on Palestinian party politics. Nevertheless, there is a strong sense that the Arab spring provides Hamas with a sense of validation that is gradually replacing the siege mentality resulting from international boycotts and blockades. In this regard, arguably, the political inclusion of Hamas can further strengthen its pragmatic and strategic side, discourage its recourse to violence, and contribute to its transformation into an internationally-recognised Palestinian political party.

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR THE EU?

The Arab spring has not led to regime change in the Palestinian Territories yet. However, the Arab uprisings have fundamentally and irreversibly affected the Territories' internal dynamics. Particularly, they have increased the odds of the outbreak of a third *Intifada* and rendered unsustainable the continued containment of Hamas.

The EU's engagement with the Palestinian Territories has so far failed to acknowledge such developments. Its unconditional support for the Fatah-led Palestinian Authority and boycott of Hamas disregards popular Palestinian demands for change in the West Bank, and misses an opportunity to support Hamas's possible development into an increasingly pragmatic actor. In addition, in the same way that it tacitly tolerated authoritarianism in countries such as Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya, in the Palestinian Territories the EU is contributing to the entrenchment of the PA in spite of the latter being much criticised for its authoritarian tendencies, a reality that is increasingly a source of civil unrest. It thereby ignores the three lessons of the Arab spring outlined above.

In order to increase the effectiveness of EU foreign policy, Europe should acknowledge the direct relevance of the central lesson of the Arab spring – the unsustainability of authoritarian governance – for the whole region, including the Palestinian Territories. Also, by officially opening talks with Hamas's political wing, the EU might contribute to the movement's process of moderation, a development which is compatible with the EU's interest in seeing the Israeli-Palestinian conflict resolved. The Arab spring has introduced new political dynamics that the EU will have to address. It is thus up to the EU to choose between responding to developments in the region post-factum, or pro-actively recognising ongoing changes and adjust its external engagement accordingly.

Romana Michelon is member of the Department of Middle East and Mediterranean Studies at King's College London.

**e-mail: fride@fride.org
www.fride.org**