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The Arab Spring in 2012

The Arab Spring continues in 2012. Yet, its character and impact differ. In addition to the political and socioeconomic challenges for the transformation countries, it presents wider geopolitical implications for the Middle East. Power-constellations and regional conflicts are evolving as Turkey gains reputation, Iran loses influence and Israel becomes more isolated. To support the transformation countries, the EU must translate the 2011-redraft of its European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) into political practice. Moreover, it must revisit its policy vis-à-vis the Middle East as a whole and adjust it to these new geopolitical realities.

On January 14, 2011, the long-standing Tunisian dictator Ben Ali fled the country after four weeks of anti-regime demonstrations. This event sparked a dynamic of protest and political change across the entire region. The consolidation of new political systems requires the transformation of diverse protest movements into political actors capable of reforming national institutions, rewriting constitutions and addressing socioeconomic grievances. A new political elite is emerging and Islamic parties play a major role. Moreover, the impact of the Arab Spring is transcending national systems and affecting the political order of the Middle East as a whole.

Political developments

After twelve months of protests and suppression, reforms and revolutions, the region's political landscape is more complex than ever. Tunisia held its first free election and is building a new political system. The country seems to be on the way to becoming a prime example of democratisation in the Arab world. Egypt also holds elections, but the old military establishment has proven to be very resistant to political change and is attempting to obstruct democratic processes. Libya and Yemen are struggling to re-establish order after civil war-like conditions and the fall of longstanding dictators. The monarchies of Morocco, Jordan and Oman embarked on courses of cautious reform to keep their rule stable. Although differing on socioeconomic levels, Saudi Arabia and Algeria continue to buy off their citizens' political demands with economic benefits. In Kuwait, not even this helps in keeping the people from protesting against government corruption and nepotism. Bahrain has yet to overcome the legacy of human rights violations emerging from the government's crackdown on the protest movement. In Syria, the Assad regime uses unrestrained

force and intimidation tactics to suppress the public uprising that has spread across the country.

Against this background, a number of developments and challenges for the Arab Spring can be identified for 2012:

The massive use of force by the Syrian government led to a radicalization of the opposition resulting in a situation where civil war seems more and more likely. The Arab League's latest attempts to deescalate have proven futile; nevertheless, there is no alternative to political engagement and mediation under Arab leadership with international support – only regional players will be able to put enough pressure on the Syrian regime to stop the violence.

A key task for the North African transformation countries will be to settle post-revolutionary disputes and bridge existing or newly emerging political divides. Conflicts about the future of the political systems and their respective roles within them emerge between secular politicians and religious parties, between liberal reformers and cultural traditionalists, between urban centres and rural areas, between majority population and minorities. In order to accommodate these disputes, the revolutionary dynamics must be translated into inclusive political processes and institutions that offer all stakeholders the opportunity to make their voices heard. In this regard, the professionalization of the new political parties, the building of legitimate political institutions, as well as a strengthening of the political culture of civic engagement, is a difficult but necessary imperative.

Moreover, the strong showing of Islamic parties in the elections in Tunisia, Egypt and Morocco indicates that

religious groups will have a major say in shaping the new constitutional orders and political systems. The election results so far indicate that moderate groups have the upper-hand within the religious camp. As leading parties in Tunisia and Egypt, they must play a constructive role and show responsiveness towards other political groups to ensure the political sustainability of the newly emerging political systems.

On the other hand, status quo countries like the monarchies of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and the Republic of Algeria face the challenge of reconciling their conservative domestic agendas with the region's political dynamics. After the initial shock following the fall of Ben Ali and Mubarak, the GCC countries seem to have accepted that political change in North Africa might be inevitable. Within their own domestic realms however, the GCC countries seek to preserve the stability at all costs and through every means. Nevertheless, particularly populous countries like Saudi Arabia and Algeria face similar problems as the transformation countries, such as high youth unemployment, lack of opportunities for professional and political participation as well as problems stemming from corruption and nepotism. Without genuine efforts to address these deficits, their political systems might be severely challenged – despite revenues from the energy sector.

The socioeconomic environment

Most Arab states suffer from a lack of economic dynamism, decrepit educational systems, corruption, nepotism and an excessive bureaucracy. The youth is threatened by unemployment or precarious underemployment. Poor economic development and immense social antagonisms were a decisive reason for demands of change. These fundamental socioeconomic factors will remain a central handicap for a successful transformation in the region. There will be no economic “revolution dividend” in 2012. Even worse, a further deterioration of the economic and social situation due to political instability could have a terribly negative impact on the medium and long-term perspectives of real change.

A major problem involves the widespread adoration of the state and its central role in the Arab world. The state is expected to provide jobs and affordable basic goods. In countries such as Morocco, Algeria or Egypt, goods like flour or butane gas are heavily subsidized by the state. In a difficult economic situation, these subsidies become a heavy, expensive burden. There is the

danger that the state is not able to meet social expectations, especially among the poor and middle classes, and thus creates disappointment, which in turn could strengthen radical political forces.

2012 will be another bad year for the region's tourism industry. Even stable countries are affected by the general distrust of tourists towards the region. Actually, only generous discounts help fill the hotels in Tunisia or Egypt. With a negatively impacted tourism industry, a particularly labour-intensive sector is hit. Also, the export oriented industries, such as the textile industry, suffered in 2011. Especially wild strikes or demands for pay rises as well as logistical problems due to political instability may threaten the competitiveness of the export industry. As a consequence of all these negative effects on local business, tax revenues and hard currency inflows will also decrease.

“There will be no economic ‘revolution dividend’ in 2012.”

A more fundamental problem of the whole region is poor economic integration. Trade between

every given North African country and the EU is by far more important than its trade with its North African neighbours. However, the recent developments could, in the long run, contribute to more regional cooperation that has thus far been blocked by the authoritarian regimes for reasons of internal policy. In addition, there is a general, newfound public sentiment of pan-Arabism among the people in the transformation countries. Moreover, the companies and state funds from GCC countries, as major investors in the region, have an interest in a stable environment with a transparent legal system. They could be agents of socioeconomic stabilization and regional economic integration.

Geopolitical implications

Iran had gained the most from the geopolitical changes that went along with the fall of Saddam Hussein in Iraq and the toppling of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan. However, the Arab Spring runs counter to Tehran's efforts to expand its influence in the Middle East. Despite Iranian claims, the secular protests are not in the tradition of Iran's 1979-revolution and the regime in Tehran has damaged its reputation with its still on-going support for Syria's Bashar Assad. If Assad falls, Iran will lose a major ally. Also, as Arabs are now proud of their own revolutionary achievements, with Iran losing its popularity as an Anti-Israeli and Anti-American regime. For Tehran, the fall of Egypt's Mubarak, a staunch member of the anti-Iran coalition, is the only real positive outcome of the Arab Spring so far.

Turkey on the other hand, had to revisit its inter-governmental “zero-problem” policy vis-à-vis Arab countries. After some initial hesitation it adjusted its strategy and distanced itself quickly from the Arab dictators as they started to tumble, engaged the new political movements and used its reputation as an economically successful Muslim country to become a key partner of the transformation countries. Turkey received a positive response from the new leaders as well as the Arab public who regard Turkish politics and its AKP-government as a paramount example for an efficient and democratic political system based on Islam – despite Prime Minister Erdogan’s repeated references to the secular character of the Turkish state.

Israel’s right-wing coalition government missed the opportunity to embrace the secular protests of the Arab Spring as a chance for re-ordering regional affairs. It’s relationship with the transformation countries is still uncertain, and the increased influence of Arab public opinion on foreign policies will negatively impact Israel’s regional position. The governments of Arab transformation and status quo countries alike will fear disgruntling their respective publics with a conciliatory stance vis-à-vis Israel. In addition, Israel’s relations with Turkey, one of the main strategic profiteers of the changes in the Arab world, have drastically worsened over the last years. Israel’s regional isolation is likely to intensify in 2012.

Conclusion and Recommendations

For the EU, the most immediate challenge is to start implementing its new European Neighbourhood Policy supporting change in the Arab world; this also requires a refocusing of the Union for the Mediterranean on actual projects, as had been originally planned, and not on creating inter-governmental structures.

The transformation countries need European support for reforming their administrative capacities and their rule of law sectors. Moreover, given the considerable socioeconomic challenges, practical coopera-

tion in the economic and educational sector, on rural development and the management of water and arable land should also become a priority. Another concrete gesture indicating EU goodwill would be a facilitation of the EU’s visa practice for citizens of the transformation countries. At the same time, Europeans have to revisit their relation to Political Islam and engage political parties that enjoy widespread support in emerging democratic systems. Efforts to support civil society and decentralise relations should also guide Europe’s policy vis-à-vis all countries of the region.

“The Arab Spring has a major impact on regional power constellations.”

Conversely, the EU should expect from the leaders of status quo and transformation countries

alike an understanding that respect for human rights and democracy is a key towards deepening of relations.

With regard to the wider geopolitical implications of the Arab Spring, a general review of the EU Middle East policy seems in order. This includes strengthening European relations with the Arab League and support for its mediation efforts in Syria. Moreover, the EU should encourage the transformation countries to conduct a cooperative foreign policy, for example with regards to the resolution of inner-Arab disputes, the Israel-Palestine conflict, and regional economic cooperation. As far as Turkey is concerned, the EU should use its ties to coordinate regional policies in order to create complementarities and avoid contradictory visions between Brussels and Ankara. With regard to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, as well as the dispute

about Iran’s nuclear programme and regional role, Europeans, in cooperation with their transatlantic partner, must evaluate and adjust their strategies to the new geopolitical environment.

The fall of Ben Ali and the ensuing political dynamic has shown that change is possible in the Arab world. It is up to the regional actors and the international community to ensure that the transformation process results in a more democratic and more peaceful Middle East. The EU should resolutely support this transformation through recalibrating its position and increasing its involvement.

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