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Report

Europe and Islamists' Ascension to Power in Neighbouring Arab- Mediterranean Countries

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Europe, like other global hegemony, failed to predict the 'Arab Spring'. In part their inability to foresee the uprisings is suggestive of the nature of the traditional relations between Europe and authoritarian regimes in the region. European policy has dictated a tendency towards strategic considerations - as opposed to moral ones - in their policies towards these countries. This position made Europe seem hesitant, and even confused when the uprisings erupted, and until the last moments of the Ben Ali and Mubarak regimes in Tunisia and Egypt respectively, they attempted to capitalise on the assumed steadfastness of these regimes, expecting them to weather the sweeping popular anger that engulfed the countries. Europe only recently moved to keep pace with popular demands and support the new situation emerging from the democracy-inspired uprisings. Additionally the approach and methods of responding to and dealing with the changing scene in Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region confirmed political divisions among Europeans; regarding the situation in Libya, France and Britain pursued the same approach - that is the approach generally taken by the United States. This resulted in anger amongst some who regarded France and Britain as casting a monopoly on Europe's position.

In this contribution we look to shed light on the Western perception of the vibrant Arab scene; European reaction and strategies to it, and the implications of this situation on intra-European relations - taking into account the multiplicity of opinions and positions held within the European Union (EU).

Between the Turkish and Iranian Models: The Absence of an Arab Model

How European analysts generally analyse the situation, particularly around the victory of Islamists in elections in Tunisia, Morocco and Egypt, can be understood according to typical European points of reference. Some analysts start off with the Turkish model as a political analytical reference point to conclude that there is nothing to fear with Islamists coming to power through democratic elections. They position this as the beginning of democratic throes in these countries that will eventually lead to the integration of Islamic parties into the Arab political scene. Thus, advocates of this view make a break from the discourse that portrays Islamists as a threat. Use of the 'Islamic bogeyman' recently characterised debate in Europe regarding talk of Libya looking to apply Islamic law.

Alternatively, a second camp of analysts deploy the Iranian model as its political analytical reference point. They use this to stress that Islamic law will form the foundation of these parties in the government, and that these Islamic parties will turn against democracy, replacing former nationalistic authoritarian regimes with new religious authoritarianism. This group emphasise that the Islamists are a threat to the values of democracy and Western secularism. Some of them even go so far as to state that deposed presidents Zine El Abidine Ben Ali of Tunisia and Hosni Mubarak of Egypt were better than the Islamists. In their analysis they refer to the position of Libya's National Transitional Council (NTC) on the issues of polygamy and Sharia as a compelling proof of this. Interestingly, there is hardly any talk about an Arab model that may emerge from the recent uprisings in the MENA region, despite the democratic face that characterised many of the uprisings, as well as the transitional period. Rather the uprisings and subsequent transitions have been framed by these analysts as a type of authoritarian continuum. This is in itself a sign that Europeans have received the events with a mixture of suspicion, confusion and uncertainty, almost to the extent that it became too difficult for them to deal with this Arab political and social phenomenon; as if the political rupture caused by the Arabs cannot be matched with a similar 'cognitive rupture' in the West, and how it deals with this Arab political and social phenomenon. This is due to the fact that the relative decline in the use of the Islamic 'bogeyman', politically and media-wise, has not coincided with a decline in Islamophobia in Europe.

Concerns of the European Union

To understand the positions of Europe (as both a union and in terms of individual member states) towards the rise of the Islamists to power in the southern part of the Mediterranean, and the turn of the 'Arab spring' into what some Westerners are now

calling the 'Islamic Spring' (referring to the Islamists), we have to analyse the issues that have attracted attention, as well as concerns that Europeans might hold in relation to the Islamists.

Firstly, an exploration of the socio-political situation in Europe is required. Many EU countries are involved in an intense debate, not only about Islamists, but also about Islam in general. The fact that Islam has become such an integral part of the public space in European societies has raised socio-identity-related questions. This is particularly so given that those who are socially representing Islam (that is the Muslim community) are not necessarily religious and are part and parcel of Europe itself. They speak European languages and are versed in European values, albeit having another identity tributary and subscribing to certain Islamic values. It seems that there is an undeclared fear in Europe that the success the Islamists have achieved in democratic elections may strengthen the position of Islamic trends among Muslim communities, especially since the Europeans are likely to lose points in their 'compelling proof' that Islamists are enemies of democracy. It can be argued that Islamists may have fomented this perception as democracy has not been dominant in the Arab world. Therefore, the fear is that - thanks to what in essence have been democratic-inspired uprisings and attendant victories for Islamists in ensuing elections - there may emerge Islamic extremist trends among European Muslim communities.

Secondly, there is a fear that the uprisings will spur on immigration to Europe. This is a socio-security concern within the European Union that in no ways should be underestimated. This has impacted on Europe's approach to the Arab world, particularly from the perspective of combating illegal immigration since the start of the uprisings. All European Commission discussions regarding these uprisings stress the link between immigration and security. However, the link between migration and the MENA uprisings may take on another dimension if the Islamic factor is to taken into consideration. Ironically Europe is concerned that its own anxiety around Islamists coming to power might cause mass migration of certain more secular sectors of society from the affected regions who may fear that Islamists might take an extreme position around the implementation of Islamic law, and turn their back on democracy once they are at the helm of power. This may explain the seeming self-restraint currently observed in European official circles, both at the level of the EU and amongst member states, and an attempt to avoid raising the ire of Islamists, which they feel may accelerate extremism. The logic behind Europe's more cautionary approach can be read as mainly an attempt to avoid worsening the situation, which might jeopardise the whole process of democratisation in the region. Rather the hope is that the Islamic parties are assimilated into the official political processes and structures in the countries of the region. Europe is apparently conscious that targeting or antagonising Islamists who come to power democratically may prompt extremism among some of them and will place a burden on and potentially compromise liberal and secular trends in these countries. These factors explain the decline in the use of the Islamic 'bogeyman', despite Islamists coming to power, and represents Europe's break with this phenomenon, which was dominant in the 1990s. This position emanates from a unanimous understanding among European parties that the political force of Islamists in Arab countries can no longer be ignored. Rather what is currently required is to find ways to push for the integration of these Islamic trends into the main political dispensation in their respective countries and give them space to accept the democratic enterprise. Moreover, it is believe that the Arab peoples who freed themselves from fear and rose up against authoritarian 'national secularism' would, if necessary, rise up again against Islamic religious 'authoritarianism'. In this sense the factor of internal popular change has become real a presence and represents in itself the guarantor of the democratic exercise against any potential despot.

Thirdly, the regional factor plays a role as the European fear of Islamic forces at the political helm is also determined by regional considerations, which may vary from country to country. For example, Islamists coming to power in Tunisia has no significance or potential regional implications, while in Egypt it has regional repercussions from the perspective of the West generally, particularly with regards to their relationship with Israel. It is important to recall that when Mubarak's regime was

about to fall, Western concerns shifted from ensuring the safety and security of civilians in Tahrir Square and other places, to the need for respecting 'international obligations'. This means primarily, if not exclusively, the relationship with Israel and the Camp David Accords signed between the two countries. It is interesting to note that within a few days, the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) was quick to emphasise Egypt's commitment to its international obligations in the post-Mubarak era. This move helped alleviate some of the concerns of Western powers, and this then shifted talk back to the protection of civilians and ensuring their right to demonstrate. Hence, the relationship with Israel is the main independent factor, while values and political aspects are a significantly lesser factor. In this sense if an Islamic government in Egypt took a negative attitude towards the values of democracy, but maintained its relationship with Israel, it would not face much criticism. Europe's reaction to the results of the elections in Tunisia and Egypt (both politically and in terms of media coverage) is a clear indication of the ongoing conflict between strategic concerns and moral values.

Conflict between Strategic and Moral Considerations

As the events of 11 September highlighted, the conflict between strategic and moral considerations saw strategic concerns become the dominant position. Similarly the Arab Spring has seen strategy win over the moral imperative around Europe reviewing its policies towards its southern neighbourhood. Additionally it has again revealed Europe's actual position on democratisation in the countries in the MENA region undergoing popular uprisings. Europe is faced with two choices: either to continue its traditional policy of giving priority to strategic considerations, and thus reject the results of democratic elections - particularly if those who are voted in are not pro-European, as was the case with Hamas. Alternatively it can recognise these results as a de-facto reality and thus cooperate with the new, democratically-elected powers.

The problem with the European position is the presence of a structural contradiction: the desire to establish European-style democratic regimes in the Arab world, where religion constitutes no political dilemma, and to continue considering the Arab world as the 'other' in the European collective psyche. In this sense Europe wants to be closer to the Arab world in terms of universal human values, but wants to keep an appropriate distance in order to preserve its identity. As such, the 'other' is close geographically, yet remote strategically and culturally. Through this logic, Europe condemns Arabs for being 'religious' yet looks at them with a religious lens!

Intra-European Differences

How Europe has approached the 'Arab Spring' is exacerbated by intra-European differences on three levels.

- The first is the difficulty in reaching a common European foreign policy. Some member states criticised France and Britain for having dominated the broader European political consensus by intervening in Libya. This, they felt, jeopardised attempts to take a common European politician position on this issue. In the opinion of those parties, the Libyan crisis, in particular, has shown the immense gap between interests and political positions between EU countries. The feeling was that some countries positions and policies stem from nationalistic-driven agendas.
- The second is the increase in disunity between the two traditional trends within the European Union: the eastern and southern. Germany leads the eastern trend and is joined by new EU members from the former eastern European bloc countries. France, Italy, Spain and Portugal are looking to advance European interests towards the south (Mediterranean). This tension reached a peak in the spring of 2011 when southern European countries (France, Spain, Greece, Malta etc.) suggested that a greater percentage of financial support should be channelled towards southern Mediterranean countries, arguing that it cannot be justified that Egypt receives less than 2 Euros per inhabitant of the EU budget

allocated to support neighbouring countries, and Tunisia 7 Euros, while Moldova receives 25 Euros. Eastern EU countries were outraged. Hungary considered that the support for the southern Mediterranean countries should not be at the expense of supporting eastern neighbouring countries (Moldova, Georgia, Belarus etc.). The European Commission has since adopted the demands by the southerners but further renewed its commitment to its eastern neighbourhood. However, the balance of financial power is currently in favour of the east and north of the EU with some southern members facing bankruptcy. The European strategic preferences are structural and based on a country's prospects of joining the EU, and thus support for non-candidate countries remains marginal.

The factor of Islamist currents may be deployed by each party to reinforce their positions. Those whose position is against an increase of financial support will argue that it is not logical that European money is used to support political forces hostile to European values. Those who are pro financial support will in turn argue that this support will reduce the severity of radicalism among these Islamic currents and will keep communication channels open, and even greater facilitate channels of European influence. They further state that leaving the economic situation to decline will increase the risk of large-scale migration to Europe.

- The third factor of intra-European tension is migration. Southern European states are bearing the consequences of the arrival of hordes of refugees and immigrants as a result of the uprisings. They have called on EU countries to synergise efforts and share this human and economic burden, highlighting the implications for social balance and identity within the EU. The eastern European parties have argued that they are also having to face issues of immigration from the east.

Another point of contention is around how the Islamists came to power. It is likely that the case of Libya is a further issue for dispute in Europe. With the situation in Libya having descended into civil armed conflict, the question is whether the NTC – some of whom are Islamists - came to power through democratic means. All of this is will likely result in intra-European tensions for two reasons.

- Firstly, because the European military intervention in Libya was not vociferously opposed. Germany, the economic giant of Europe, however, was in opposition to the intervention, and other European member states have intimated that France and Britain did not act in the interests of Europe. This had a negative impact around a common European policy towards the Libyan case.
- The second is that with such an intervention, European countries contributed to the Libyan Islamists, who form part of the NTC, in taking a central role in political and military decision-making in the country. Hence, unlike Islamists who have come to power in Tunisia and Egypt through a locally-managed process, what happened in Libya is the product of Western intervention. The Libyan case may remind some Europeans of the situation of Iran, where some European countries helped, in various ways, Khomeini prior to the revolution.

'More for More': A New-Old Approach

European officials say that EU aid for the Arab Mediterranean countries will be governed by the principle of 'more for more'. This means that aid and economic benefits - such as access to the European market - is linked to and contingent on democratic reforms. This is not a new approach and has been compromised by strategic considerations over moral considerations. Additionally different visions held by different countries, conflict of interests, and the bargaining power held by authoritarian Arab regimes around anti-immigration processes, energy supply and the fight against terrorism has seriously undermined the 'more for more' approach. In light of the continuing energy shortages in Europe and the dependence of all economies in the Arab region on primary oil exports, this new approach rooted in an old approach would not have changed anything had the bargaining power of Arab regimes continued. For example, it is sufficient for a Maghreb

country to halt its control over the movement of illegal immigration to force a retreat on position by Europe. Besides, access to the European market is of no value to economies without any capacity for competitiveness.

Moreover, the present situation is not suitable for such an approach. In retrospect, Europeans know from experience – more than their southern neighbours – that democracy is a complex socio-political process and that the democratic transition is a difficult process, particularly so under difficult economic conditions. Europeans are preoccupied with peaceful developments on their southern wing, so as to avoid jeopardising the democratic enterprise. Hence, Europe is not likely to impose radical conditions on the Arab countries in 'transition' hoping that things will settle down, until the transition becomes irreversible. Moreover, European democracies are going through difficult times and the rise of the far-right and its participation in power through coalition governments, such as strict authoritarianism in Hungary has become a challenge to the European Union. All of this reduces the impact and tone of Europe's cautions and its value-based discourse. Significantly, the 'occupy movement' that took root in Europe seems to have been largely inspired by the MENA uprisings.

In conclusion, we can say that with the severe financial and economic crises facing Europe, and Europe's long-standing tradition of preferring security and stability over democracy, it has no option but to accept the results of the democratic processes at play in many of the countries that underwent uprisings. It is neither currently in a position of strength nor is it able to continue turning a blind eye to the results of democratic elections that have brought political forces to power that would not be of its choosing. Having stood for decades on the side of authoritarian regimes, Europe now needs to remedy the mistakes of the past. However, its weakness is circumstantial and opposition parties are in need of Europe, especially in Tunisia and Egypt, and the economic relations to Europe and the need for EU support during this difficult period of transition cannot be overlooked. Morocco did not undergo a similar experience, but it needs Europe. Libya, however, remains an exceptional case because of the use of military force, but in the case of Egypt, the regional factor is present.

These factors determine a European strategic approach towards the Islamists in power based on a plural formula that takes into account the various national contexts and their regional extensions. Although the 'gratitude' owed to Europeans in Libya by the NTC and their Islamist members is considered to be a 'pretext' for a relationship between the two, neutralisation will be easy to achieve due to Libya's oil wealth and Europe's need for it. However, a crucial factor that cannot be ignored by either Europe or the new powers at the helm in the Arab world as a result of the uprisings is the resounding popular voice and will.

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