

# **UACES 43<sup>rd</sup> Annual Conference**

**Leeds, 2-4 September 2013**

Conference papers are works-in-progress - they should not be cited without the author's permission. The views and opinions expressed in this paper are those of the author(s).

**[www.uaces.org](http://www.uaces.org)**

# **THE WINTER OF OUR DISCONTENT? EUROPE AND THE ARAB SPRING**

**Sven Biscop**

**Paper presented at the UACES Annual Conference  
Leeds, 1-4 September 2013**

**Contact:**

**Egmont – Royal Institute for International Relations  
Rue de Namur 69, 1000 Brussels, Belgium  
Tel. +32 2 223 41 14 – Fax +32 2 223 41 16  
[www.egmontinstitute.be](http://www.egmontinstitute.be)  
[s.biscop@egmontinstitute.be](mailto:s.biscop@egmontinstitute.be)**

## Introduction

In the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) the European Union (EU) had an elaborate strategy for its southern neighbourhood – it just never implemented it. Through bilateral partnerships and by offering the proverbial carrot (mostly access to the European market) in return for reforms (“positive conditionality”), the ENP purported to promote more equal access to security, prosperity and freedom for all people in the region as a way to durable peace and stability. It did so in direct application of the 2003 European Security Strategy (ESS), according to which the best way to guarantee European security is to stimulate governments outside the EU to provide for their citizens like we do for ours, to the mutual benefit of all.<sup>1</sup> For where governments do not, tensions will arise, instability, repression and conflict will follow, and citizens will eventually revolt and regimes implode, violently or peacefully. In other words, European interests are best served by promoting respect for the universal values that underpin our own model in the rest of the world. This core phrase summarizes the ESS:

“The best protection for our security is a world of well-governed democratic states. Spreading good governance, supporting social and political reform, dealing with corruption and abuse of power, establishing the rule of law and protecting human rights are the best means of strengthening the international order”.

Unfortunately the EU abandoned its principles and strategy and settled for the semblance of stability by supporting any regime in the Middle East and North Africa willing to help us fight terrorism and illegal migration, even by dubious methods, and regardless of its domestic record. That included all three regimes that have been ousted since the “Arab Spring” began in 2011, in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya. Member States’ reluctance to jeopardize privileged bilateral relations did not help. Europe having thus become a status quo power, the “Arab Spring” happened in spite of, not thanks to it.

That greatly handicaps our leverage. Not surprisingly, after half a century or more of supporting the local dictators, our lessons in democracy are not now well-received. Yet our vital interests are obviously at stake and our values do not allow us to watch passively as human tragedies unfold on our doorstep. Europeans must engage and attempt to influence the region. Not for our neighbours to look up to us, but as the Gulf states, China and others are gaining influence we cannot afford them to look away from us either: they should – also – see Europe as a partner.

### “More for More” or More of the Same?

Already in the spring of 2011, the EU announced its initial response to the “Arab Spring” – but it is a classic example of the programmatic approach to foreign policy for which the EU is often criticised.<sup>2</sup> Many policy decisions amount to extending or adding to existing budget lines, without setting clear objectives or even assessing the effectiveness of past programmes.

---

<sup>1</sup> European Council, *European Security Strategy. A Secure Europe in a Better World*. Brussels, 12 December 2003.

<sup>2</sup> Though it only holds sway because too many Member States are too exclusively focused on their national foreign policies and do not sufficiently invest in making the collective EU instruments and institutions (that they have themselves created) work.

And so under the heading of “More for More”, extra means have been allocated in order to provide more support (the “three Ms”: money, mobility and market access), on a differentiated basis, to the countries that undertake more reforms. Does that not read like an exact summary of the “positive conditionality” envisaged by the ENP when it was launched in 2004? How is “more of the same” to make a difference?

The extra money (€1.2 billion on top of €5.1 billion for 2011-2013, and a 40% increase to €18.1 billion for the budgetary period 2014-2020, for all 16 eastern and southern neighbours) could only be generated at the EU level, not by any individual Member State, but is not of an order that will allow us to determine the future of a country like Egypt.<sup>3</sup> The economic challenge, in combination with the demographic situation is of such an enormous scale that Europe simply does not have commensurate budgets to spend, especially now, in the wake of the financial crisis. Ironically our leverage is handicapped by a lack of means just at the moment when the United States is shifting its strategic attention to Asia (the “pivot”) and expects Europe to play a much more prominent role in what is after all its own periphery. Meanwhile, other players, notably from the Gulf, have funds available that are far greater than anything Europe can muster.

What is more, more European money will in any event not produce more results if the European policy that is funded itself continues unaltered. But in spite of its meagre results before the “Arab Spring”, the EU remains reluctant to fundamentally review the ENP. That means that the EU continues to make policy *for* rather than *with* its southern neighbours. The existing ENP is based on paternalism rather than partnership, which fundamentally limits its attractiveness. As Isaiah Berlin notes, paternalism

“is an insult to my conception of myself as a human being”, as a result of which people often “prefer to be bullied and misgoverned by some member of my own race or class, by whom I am, nevertheless, recognised as a man and a rival – that is as an equal – to being well and tolerantly treated by someone from some higher and remoter group, someone who does not recognise me for what I wish to feel myself to be”.<sup>4</sup>

Even if the EU would suddenly start implementing the ENP as originally intended (which is unlikely), Brussels would do better to accept that conditionality will not work in a part of the globe where what it preaches is not perceived as universal, as having been briefly enjoyed once and to be regained in the future, as for a Cold War dissident in Poland or the Baltics, but as foreign and emanating from the former colonial powers. People in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya rose up in a genuine popular movement against oppressive regimes, at great peril to their lives, to recover their dignity. Simply embracing a foreign model (from Europe, Turkey, the Gulf or elsewhere) is felt to jeopardize that dignity once more, especially as their own history and culture offer a rich source of inspiration to legitimize a new regime of their own.

Europe should rejoice in this popular awareness, for the revolutions in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya do in effect prove the universality of the aspiration to equality in terms of security, prosperity and freedom, on which the ESS it based. That people have become citizens, actively participating in politics, voicing their priorities and concerns, and protesting when their rights are violated, is the most effective safeguard against a return to authoritarianism.

---

<sup>3</sup> And it pales in comparison to the €280 billion that the EU through various mechanisms has committed to bail out Member States since the financial crisis hit us in 2008.

<sup>4</sup> Isaiah Berlin, “Two Concepts of Liberty”, in Henry Hardy and Roger Hausheer (eds.), *The Proper Study of Mankind. An Anthology of Essays* (London: Pimlico, 1998) p. 228.

The mass movement resulting in the army bringing down the first post-Spring Egyptian president, Morsi, in July 2013 highlighted how much power the armed forces still hold, but also demonstrated the power of the people.

Far from leading the EU to abandon its value-based grand strategy, the “Arab Spring” should thus bring it to reconfirm it – but in the full realisation that the tactics must change. Short of invasion and regime-change, outside intervention will not deliver sweeping change, as the ENP vainly promised. A more equal society cannot be mechanically engineered from the outside, by sticks and carrots. It can only emerge as the result of a genuine domestic movement, which external actors cannot create, but can help to foster, support and consolidate, as long as the local actors perceive that they control events and not the foreign well-wisher, no matter how benevolent.

This requires a very different ENP. Without money and without Americans, what can Europe do?

### **Diplomacy First**

Wage a much more active diplomacy, is the first part of the answer. Before thinking about programmes and projects, the EU should consider classic diplomacy: to engage with all actors on the now unfrozen political scene, as the European External Action Service (EEAS) has begun to do, permanently and incessantly, on an equal footing, to create mutual understanding and to reinforce the climate in which a democratic and human rights discourse appears natural and inevitable. Seen from secular Europe, the rising role of religion in politics understandably and justifiably causes concern, though in a region where religion plays a pervasive role in public life it should not have come as a surprise (secular, western-oriented groups command but marginal domestic influence in most countries). “Political islam” comes in many guises. If the “Arab Spring” leads to the creation of Muslim-Democratic Parties as one political family among others, Europe, where Christian-Democracy at the time of writing provides both the President of the European Council and the Chancellor of the largest Member State, ought to welcome it.

To further this end, Europe has to engage in a very public dialogue with all the players that matter (not just with those who we would like to see in a position of influence), to oblige them to speak out in full view of their own public opinion. That includes religious parties in power, as in Tunisia, or having just lost power, as in Egypt, as well as the Egyptian army that has openly assumed power again. Public opinion is our greatest asset: it is precisely because it is concerned first and foremost with political and economic equality rather than with a religious agenda per se (as the massive criticism of the governments led by the Muslim Brothers in Egypt and Ennahda in Tunisia has proved), that where new players have entered the political scene or have even come to power, they speak the language of democracy and human rights, or at least feel compelled to do so.<sup>5</sup> In view of the force of public opinion, a priori there is no reason why the normal political cycle of majority and opposition should not apply, or why we should not treat new incumbents as a political family like any other while they acquire the experience of governing.

---

<sup>5</sup> As the author experienced at a conference organized by Carnegie-Brussels and the Egmont Institute, *Understanding Political Islam: Views from Within*, European Parliament, 6 May 2013.

When things go wrong however, as in Egypt when the ousting of Morsi led to armed clashes between his supporters and opponents and heavy repression by the armed forces, diplomacy also includes crisis diplomacy. The EU's High Representative Catherine Ashton's meeting with deposed Egyptian President Morsi was quite a coup. The joint mediation attempts by the EU and the United States were the right initiative at the right moment. If in the end the parties did not want to concede, they are to be blamed before the mediators. But the mediators should not abandon their efforts and continue to speak with all parties.

## **Expertise and Investment**

Europe does have a lot of technical expertise to offer. Reform of the justice and security apparatus (and the legal framework), adapting it to serve a democratic polity, is of evident importance; the EU has plenty of experience in deploying its judges, police officers and other civil servants to that end. Another priority area is the media: training and exchanges can help consolidate free media and dispel the temptation to over-regulation in the face of an extremely varied and lively and therefore not invariably responsible post-censorship media landscape. Private investment in the media sector by European groups could help ensure independence and plurality.

Expertise should be offered, but not imposed, for that would minimise its impact. Even when the EU rightly feels that a government needs more support than it is willing to admit and should act more resolutely, the interests of that government will eventually lead it to decisions, as in the case of border security in Libya. Where the willingness to accept an offer of support exists, the EU should grasp it and be generous with personnel and funds as well as ambitious qua objectives. The border assistance mission to Libya can now count on 100 deployed personnel and €30 million for its non-executive role, but both Brussels and Tripoli should ask themselves whether these means and this mandate are sufficient. The question must also be put whether the EU is not missing opportunities in training the new Libyan armed forces.

The biggest challenge that all of our southern neighbours face is the economic one: how to provide prosperity to surging populations? The region has seen little real development, due in no small part to an absence of investment, although the ENP created an elaborate legal framework. This is not to wonder given rampant corruption and crony capitalism. It is striking that in an era of delocalisation of European firms, few if any have opted to invest in the Middle East or North Africa. EU funds are best allocated to generate more funds, from Europe's private sector (including through private-public partnerships) and from other states and international organisations, to invest in the region. Major infrastructure projects, notably in transport and (renewable) energy are particularly promising and will benefit Europe and the region alike. But establishing the rule of law and halting corruption, at least where foreign investments are concerned, are indispensable; perhaps the Asian experience can be helpful in this regard.

While Europe's own means are insufficient to meet the economic challenge, it does have a strong interest in how other players, especially the Gulf countries, spend their means. Here too diplomacy has a major role to play, in convincing other players to join efforts with us in mutually beneficial investments. The EU could take the initiative to propose to other major

investors and donors a framework to coordinate all investment in and aid to the region.<sup>6</sup> Channelling private investment to the region is something that, once the EU has created the framework, only the governments of the Member States can really do.

## **Security and Defence**

The “Arab Spring” should have taught Europe at least one unambiguous lesson: no successful European policy for the region is conceivable unless it incorporates security and defence. The EU cannot preach democracy and prosperity and then pass the buck whenever a security problem arises. Especially as the US, to whom we usually pass the buck, is increasingly looking the other way...

Europe should thus more fully integrate security and defence policy in a revamped ENP. Regime change, the massive involvement of external players, and on-going war are drastically changing alignments within and between the states of the region. It is in Europe’s immediate interest to avoid new regimes having recourse to a confrontational foreign policy as a way of distracting attention from domestic challenges, as it is in the interest of all states in the Middle East to avoid escalation of the Syrian civil war, which has already turned into a proxy war between Saudi-Arabia and Iran, into a full-blown international sectarian war. Similarly, all states in the Sahel face the same challenge of roving militias in that vast territory. Both these threats demonstrate that Europe’s “real” neighbourhood, where its vital interests are at stake, extends beyond the ENP area (Eastern Europe, the Caucasus, the Maghreb and the Middle East), into the Sahel, the Horn of Africa, and the Gulf (and Central Asia). There is thus ample scope for joint foreign policy initiatives with governments in the “broader neighbourhood” – the prerequisite is that the EU decides what its foreign policy objectives are. There remains one imperative: Europe cannot hope to make a fresh start with its neighbours if it does not change its stance on Israel and fundamentally reviews its posture in the Middle East Peace Process.

Europeans should also know when and where they are willing to consider military action. Spurred on by the US “pivot” to the Pacific and by the need to step up collective capability development as national defence budgets are under heavy pressure, EU Member States have also begun to think, for the first time, about Europe’s collective priorities as a security provider. At its December 2013 meeting, the European Council is expected to adopt the first elements of political guidance in this regard. For sure, the “broader neighbourhood” will be among the priorities. While the US will undoubtedly continue to play a role, Europeans will increasingly define the strategic and operational priorities. It really is up to Europe to take the lead in maintaining peace and security in this broad region.

In order to prevent or to make an end to humanitarian catastrophes and simultaneously to safeguard our vital interests, in this region Europe (with partners if possible and alone if necessary) must be able and willing to intervene militarily. If there is no other option *and* if it is feasible – the latter factor tends to be overlooked. Military intervention in Libya and later in Mali was “simply” feasible. In Syria it is not. In Egypt it most certainly is not. Diplomatic pressure and financial sanctions, and preventing spill-over to neighbouring countries (if necessary by preventive deployment) are the only course open to us then. The impact of sanctions is handicapped by our relatively limited means, however: in the case of Egypt, Gulf

---

<sup>6</sup> The author thanks Marc Otte (Egmont) for raising this idea.

States promised to compensate any loss of funds resulting from potential EU sanctions. European and especially American military support is more difficult to replace. Even so it would do better not to push away the Egyptian government, but to continue the dialogue, in concert with other regional players if possible, to convince it to take into account the concerns of all of the population and to refrain from the excessive use of force, in order not to further taint the opposition and its rightful grievances against the policies of the Morsi government by more bloodshed (which risks to rehabilitate the Muslim Brotherhood in the eyes of many, whereas now its overly religious agenda while in government has been discredited).

## Conclusion

Effective diplomacy and real partnership in these various fields, i.e. truly *joint* policy-making and action, will hopefully enable Europe to build a more fruitful and equal relationship with the new regimes in the “broader neighbourhood”. But what of the regimes that are continuing in power? While some have gently started out on the path of reform, others remain more intransigent to change. The EU can difficultly carry on as if nothing has happened, condoning the authoritarian traits of one regime while supporting the revolution that brought down another. The fate of those regimes too will depend on its citizens though, not on the EU. Europe can only make clear that it would extend the same equal partnership to a reformed or a new regime as (it should do) to those new governments already in place. Meanwhile in these countries too European diplomacy should create a permanent dialogue with all political players.

Conditionality cannot be entirely abandoned. For both old and new regimes it must be clear that Europe has red lines, that if a certain threshold is crossed there will be consequences for the relationship. This *negative* conditionality should be an ultimate resort, the system’s emergency brake. But after the “Arab Spring” *positive* conditionality can no longer be its gearbox or our relations would quickly come to a standstill.

Because of our track record, the limits on our financial means, and the increasing presence of other players, Europe’s leverage is much more limited than before. That forces us to be realistic, but not to abandon all ambition – the interests and values that are at stake are simply too compelling. Acting together through the EU, Europeans are well-placed to play a major diplomatic role:

- To involve all political players in a permanent public dialogue, so as to strengthen their commitment to the equality, prosperity, freedom and democracy that their publics desire.
- To act as a neutral mediator between political players, in order to prevent political disputes from becoming violent.
- To propose joint initiatives with our neighbours and other regional and international players to address common security concerns.
- To propose a framework for coordination of all aid and investment in the region, especially with the Gulf States.

The question should be put in the end whether such a very different ENP should still be called that: the ENP. Perceptions matter greatly in international affairs. In order to make a clean break, perhaps the EU would do well to abandon the ENP brand.

The way things have turned out since the “Arab Spring” started in Tunisia is far from satisfying. But it is not hopeless. The permanent change in the region is that people have become active political players. That awareness cannot be undone; it is the seed which some spring or other will come to fruition.

*Prof. Dr. Sven Biscop is Director of the Europe in the World Programme at the Egmont – Royal Institute for International Relations in Brussels, and teaches at Ghent University and at the College of Europe in Bruges.*