

# The EU and the Arab Spring: Between Spectatorship and Actorness

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## ABSTRACT

*Throughout the first seven months of the Arab Spring, starting with the self-immolation of Mohammed Bouazizi in the Tunisian town of Sidi Bouzid on December 17, 2010, the EU clearly revealed itself as both an actor and spectator by resorting to both activism and passivism in a seemingly erratic fashion. Against this background and based on the EU's recently adopted Partnership for Democracy and Shared Prosperity with the Southern Mediterranean, this article aims at understanding this dualism more precisely and shedding some light on the EU's rather anachronistic foreign policy behavior in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) in recent months. The article identifies five dichotomies, all of which contribute to the situation in which the EU continues to be torn between being a relevant political actor in the MENA region and a simple spectator that continues to be overwhelmed by local and regional political developments.*

During the last seven months, area studies and thus academic disciplines covering Middle East politics were exposed to substantial criticism, mainly by Western media, for their failure to predict what was, in fact, unpredictable, namely the fall of Tunisian President Zine El-Abidine Ben Ali and his Egyptian counterpart, Hosny Mubarak. At the same time, both print and audiovisual media provided platforms for an impressive and somewhat inflammatory display of reactive policy prescriptions by both Arab and Western scholars, as well as by a considerable number of self-proclaimed experts. Interestingly, apart from being purely normative, these recommendations mainly focused on domestic politics, above all in Tunisia and Egypt, and the steps to be taken ahead of potentially free and fair elections, as well as to some extent on the civil war in Libya and the pros and cons of NATO's military engagement there. To a

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large extent, however, they neglected the external and international dimensions in which these processes took place and hence it was almost a logical consequence that surprisingly little attention has been paid to the role of the European Union (EU). A similar observation is in order with respect to the lack of academic and more systematic studies of Europe's action – or rather inaction – in the context of the current democratization efforts in Tunisia and Egypt (the outcome of which is highly uncertain), the uprisings in Yemen, Bahrain, and Syria, and the occasional outbreaks of civil unrest and protest in Algeria, Morocco, Jordan, and Mauritania.

A few notable, though rather policy-oriented, studies by European<sup>1</sup> and Arab<sup>2</sup> scholars have examined the EU's policies towards the region and criticized some of the existing multilateral policy tools available, such as the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP), the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM), and its predecessor, the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP). Almost all studies offer a variety of ideas on the future course of, above all, the ENP and the UfM: in fact, the "Partnership for Democracy and Shared Prosperity with the Southern Mediterranean," recently adopted by the European Commission and the European Council, absorbed some of these recommendations.

Throughout the first seven months of the Arab Spring, starting with the self-immolation of Mohammed Bouazizi in the Tunisian town of Sidi Bouzid on December 17, 2010, the EU clearly revealed itself as both an actor and spectator by resorting to both activism and passivism in a seemingly erratic fashion. Against this background, it is the goal of this article to understand this dualism more precisely and shed some light on the EU's rather anachronistic foreign policy behavior in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) in recent months. On this basis, the sections below identify five dichotomies, all of which contribute to the situation in which the EU continues to be torn between being a relevant political actor in the MENA region and a simple spectator that continues to be overwhelmed by local and regional political developments. These dichotomies are: new vs. old paradigms, benchmarks vs. policy goals, advanced status vs. ordinary association, sub-regionalism and bilateralism vs. inter-regionalism, and the strained relationship between particular interests and common interests.

It is argued that in order to show itself more effectively as a full-fledged political actor and hence display less spectatorship, a more active, coherent, and sustainable effort has to be made by EU governments to narrow and finally overcome the divide that characterizes each of the dichotomies identified.

## New vs. Old Paradigms

In early March 2011, following up on the conclusions of the European Council of February 4, 2011 and the conclusions of the Foreign Affairs Council of February 21, 2011, in which the governments of the EU member states expressed their explicit support for the transition processes in the region,<sup>3</sup> the European Commission and the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (HR) presented the EU's "Partnership for Democracy and Stability with the Southern Mediterranean." Conceived as the EU's strategic response to the uprisings in the Arab southern Mediterranean, this partnership is centered around a renewed emphasis on democratic transformation and institution-building, envisages targeted people-to-people contact, and focuses on urban and rural economic development underpinned by an improvement in educational and health systems. Further areas of engagement are fundamental freedoms, constitutional reform, reform of the judiciary and the fight against corruption.

The underlying rationale of this "more-for-more" approach<sup>4</sup> reflects a rather simple logic: the more Arab Mediterranean governments undertake relevant reforms, the more support they can expect from the EU. At the same time, the communication outlining this partnership stipulates explicitly that "support will be reallocated or refocused for those who stall or retrench on agreed reform plans."<sup>5</sup> While such rhetoric of "less for less" breaks with past traditions and points to greater determination on the part of the EU to no longer ignore governmental renegeing, the logic of "more for more" is nothing new at all. In fact, by referring to key terms such as "incentives," "compliance," "positive conditionality," "differentiation," and "upgrading of relations," the new partnership not only uses the same jargon as the ENP but also maintains one of the latter's key weaknesses. This is the in-built notions that southern governmental partners are indeed interested in and willing to follow an externally prescribed and, in fact, vaguely defined reform path and that the relevant rewards – the carrot – outweigh the potentially negative consequences – the stick – of non-compliance. However, as the first seven years of the ENP have shown, authoritarian Arab Mediterranean governments have hardly considered the "carrots" as sufficiently attractive to undertake wide-ranging reforms that would affect the overall nature of the polity in question in a positive and thus more democratic way. Instead, during that time, most regimes simply resorted to the practice of "upgrading authoritarianism."<sup>6</sup> In other words, in response to the external pressure to democratize, which has increased in recent years, and the requirements of the ENP, regimes utilized inclusionary and exclusionary practices simultaneously, in different fashions and to differ-

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ing degrees. This allowed them to either disguise authoritarianism under a wide variety of quasi-democratic facades and market-economy reforms or take a few highly limited inclusionary measures that left the political arena, by and large, as the exclusive domain of the ruling sub-groups. As a consequence, the ENP's underlying objective, i.e. to break the pattern of "stubborn authoritarianism"<sup>7</sup>

and contribute gradually to a transition towards representative and liberal democracies, was systematically bypassed. That this practice is likely to continue in the context of the newly established partnership is not only due to the self-preserving nature of Arab Mediterranean regimes; it is also because the partnership cannot rely on a powerful enforcement mechanism, since the EU rid itself of a potentially effective tool to sanction non-compliance by systematically ignoring, over the years, the principle of negative conditionality – one of the cornerstones of the EMP – and focusing on project-based cooperation in the context of the UfM.

Recent events in Tunisia, Egypt and Morocco have undoubtedly increased the room for maneuver of civil society actors in the three countries. Moreover, the new partnership pays tribute to this development by envisaging the creation of a "Civil Society Neighborhood Facility," which is destined to develop "the advocacy capacity of civil society organizations and [increase] their ability to monitor reform and participate effectively in policy dialogues."<sup>8</sup> This step finally takes into account studies that, some years ago, identified the need for more focused and determined support for non-governmental actors.<sup>9</sup> It promises to complement the increasingly influential role that civil society is playing in shaping domestic political developments, at least in these three countries. Yet, this effort fails to address the reference to and use of the underlying principle of non-interference that was included in the Barcelona Declaration in 1995 by all those governments in the South that systematically continue to deny their citizens civic and political liberties.

Furthermore, the fact that the new partnership continues to rest on the old paradigmatic foundations of both the ENP and EMP is reflected in its continuing over-reliance on neoliberal, capitalist market-economy recipes, economic growth, and an almost sacred belief in liberalization and privatization measures, with occasional recourse to financing arrangements with the IMF and the World Bank. If there is only one lesson that policy-makers in Brussels, Washington and elsewhere should have learned from the uprisings in Egypt and Tunisia it is that the

neoliberal prescription for macro-economic development, in conjunction with the persistence of authoritarian rule, has exacerbated the problems of developing and newly industrializing countries instead of solving them. Issues such as social justice, fair income distribution, convergence around economic and social priorities, and demands for an appropriate development model that takes into account both micro-economic realities and national material and non-material resources, were at the core of the recent revolts in the Arab southern Mediterranean and preceded the political upheavals. However, like the EMP and the ENP, the new partnership omits any constructive and forward-looking engagement with any of these issues and thus misses yet another opportunity to address some of the main socioeconomic problems that have been affecting all Arab Mediterranean societies for decades.

### **Benchmarks vs. Policy Goals**

Labeled a “fundamental step [towards] change in the EU’s relationship with those partners that commit themselves to specific, measurable reforms,” the EU’s new partnership offers southern Mediterranean governments closer political cooperation provided the latter achieve progress “towards higher standards of human rights and governance.”<sup>10</sup> According to the Commission and the HR this progress will be measured against a “set of minimum benchmarks.” These stipulations are interesting for two reasons.

First, the fact that the Commission and HR refer merely to “higher standards of human rights and governance” and simultaneously to a “set of minimum benchmarks” is important. It seems to imply that progress in all other issue-areas subject to ENP Action Plans, progress that at least on a formal level is still benchmarked in the context of the ENP, is no longer a precondition for partner governments’ access to potential rewards. This notion is further substantiated by the explicit reference that a “commitment to adequately monitored, free and fair elections should be the entry qualification for the partnership.”<sup>11</sup> Though it can be argued that the vague and rather obscure reference to a simple “commitment” would enable almost all electoral dictatorships in the Arab Mediterranean to qualify as participants in the partnership, the remaining paragraphs of the communication, which suddenly consider the ENP Action Plans as the main point of reference, reveal that the EU itself is not clear about the linkage between the new partnership and the ENP and, most importantly, what the objects of measurement and the measurement criteria should be. Undoubtedly, this lack of clarity shows a considerable lack of coherence between the main elements in the tool kit of the EU’s foreign policy towards its southern neighborhood and generates confusion among southern partners with

respect to what precisely they should consider as the structural basis of their relations with the EU.

Second, the new partnership continues to uphold a major conceptual flaw as it follows the ENP tradition and confounds benchmarks with mere policy goals. As was discussed extensively elsewhere,<sup>12</sup> a true benchmarking exercise requires clear and predefined indicators, which serve as quantitative and/or qualitative measurement criteria. It must be based on detailed and transparent timetables, and on ex-ante decisions with regard to the measurement and data collection methods, as well as on a firm commitment by all actors involved. Like the ENP, the new partnership does not comply with any of these requirements – and policy goals such as “higher standards of human rights and governance” and a “commitment to adequately monitored, free and fair elections” at best qualify as superficial pseudo-benchmarks. The arbitrary selection, yet again, of these pseudo-benchmarks and thus the omission of other equally important benchmarking areas, in conjunction with the EU’s rather blatant lack of commitment towards its own policies to promote democracy in its neighborhood in the past,<sup>13</sup> indicate that any evaluation of future progress towards the establishment of consolidated democracies in the southern Mediterranean in the context of the new partnership will most likely continue to be conducted on the basis of intuition and superficiality and, most of all, mere political considerations.

### **Advanced Status vs. Ordinary Association**

The new partnership stipulates rather nebulously that all the regimes that carry out the “necessary reforms” can expect to “resume negotiations” on association agreements with the objective of achieving “advanced status.”<sup>14</sup> While the use of the term “necessary reforms” simply substantiates the rather unspecific nature of the partnership’s policy goals, the EU has missed yet another opportunity to shed light on the actual meaning of “advanced status,” which was first granted to Morocco in late 2008 and then to Jordan some two years later.<sup>15</sup> The communication outlining the partnership solely stipulates that this status will allow for significantly strengthened political dialogue and increased links between the respective partner country and EU institutions. This description is, however, rather insufficient, as it fails to clarify the practical implications and the delimitation of the “advanced status” compared to the original offer in the ENP of “everything-but-institutions” and the offer of a stake in the single market.

If the logic of the ENP as well as the above-mentioned description of “advanced status” are taken seriously, the latter does currently seem to represent the ulti-

mate reward that the EU can grant to any southern Mediterranean government in exchange for full compliance with the demands of the ENP Action Plans and, now, the partnership. The fact that this interpretation does not, however, correspond to political realities is exemplified by the granting of “advanced status” to Morocco and Jordan. Not only have the regimes of both countries not complied with the ENP Action Plans;<sup>16</sup> what is worse, political rights and civil liberties in both Morocco and Jordan continue to be systematically violated, arbitrary arrests and torture still occur, the judiciary continues to be subject to executive influence, and the freedom of expression, assembly, and association are still severely hampered. Against this rather sobering backdrop, in the light of the desirable symbolism that obtaining “advanced status” implies for every non-democratic government, and in view of the fact that negotiations about such status were already under way with the regime of ousted Tunisian President Ben Ali, it is not unlikely that other non-democratic regimes in the region will sooner or later demand – and probably obtain – the same status. This however runs counter to the notion of differentiation, enshrined in both the new partnership and the ENP, and is detrimental to the underlying objective of maintaining more than just a symbolic difference between “advanced” partners and merely associated partners. As a consequence, the uncritical and eventually inflammatory use of this concept renders it obsolete and even further jeopardizes the EU’s already limited leverage on current and possibly future democratization processes in its southern neighborhood.

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### **Sub-regionalism and Bilateralism vs. Inter-regionalism**

Twenty-three years after the admittedly superficial institutionalization of relations with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) – without forgetting 16 years of experience with a multitude of rather complex and multifaceted Euro-Mediterranean cooperation frameworks – the creation firstly of the UfM and now of the new partnership have not contributed to a greater understanding of local and regional specificities, the numerous inter-relations that exist among the countries and societies of the entire region or, in fact, their many commonalities. The failure of the UfM and the awakening of Arab civil society have provided the EU with a unique opportunity to rethink the artificial compartmentalization of its policies and finally develop a single regional framework. This should not only posit its short and long term strategic interests and objectives in its southern neighbor-





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*The EU has sent many rather mixed messages in recent months to various regimes, ranging from praise and support to outright condemnation of the different regimes' responses to growing public demands for greater political, economic and social rights.*

hood – here understood as the area encompassing the countries of the Maghreb, Mashreq, and the Gulf – but also accommodate precisely these links and commonalities, substantiated by the principle of differentiation. Instead, by initiating yet another “partnership” that includes some countries but excludes others, the EU is reinforcing rather than diminishing the existing fragmented nature of its policies and maintaining the inexplicably simultaneous use of the principles of *regionality*, as is apparent in the EMP, *different bilateralism*, which underpins both the ENP and the new partnership, *project-based cooperation in sub-regional* and politically non-sensitive settings in the context of the UfM, and *inter-regionalism*, which has been guiding EU-GCC relations for so long.

It is obvious that the mere continuation of such practices is problematic and no longer sustainable: almost 40 years after the then EC first institutionalized its relations with the southern Mediterranean countries under its Global Mediterranean Policy, the EU is still in search of a policy that withstands the test of time. The fact that approaches, initiatives, partnerships, policies and so on are replaced over and over again merely reflects the shortsightedness and disagreement that still exist among EU governments with regard to the role the EU should play in its “near abroad” – in spite of all the treaties that were supposed to elevate its actorness to a higher level. Secondly, the divisive architecture of EU policies towards the countries of the MENA just shows how outdated the EU’s understanding of intra-Arab dynamics



is. Particularly at a time when GCC countries' political and economic ties with Arab southern Mediterranean countries (and Turkey) have greatly increased, and with Morocco and Jordan possibly joining the GCC shortly, it is almost natural for any supposedly forward-looking policy, which the new partnership claims to represent, to take such developments into account. Yet again, however, the partnership's narrow geographical focus perpetuates the under-use of its many opportunities to generate, with all the relevant actors, political synergies and economies of scale that go beyond just a few countries in North Africa.

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### **Particular Interests vs. Common Interests**

The reactions of both the EU and EU governments throughout the first six months of the Arab Spring have confirmed the endurance of the strained relationship between individual and common interests that has characterized EU foreign policy since its inception and the repercussions of this dichotomy on EU actorness in general and in the MENA in particular.<sup>17</sup> What Gordon called the "logic of diversity,"<sup>18</sup> i.e. the absence of common interests among EU member states' governments, continues to dominate EU foreign policy-making in spite of the gradual supranational advances since the adoption of the Lisbon Treaty.

During the Tunisian uprising the EU already displayed an image of a rather fragmented and heterogeneous spectator. While the majority of EU governments opted for a wait-and-see approach in order not to offend the Tunisian regime in the event that the uprising turned out to be unsuccessful, France even offered the Tunisian security forces material support and expertise on crowd control, through the then Foreign Minister Alliot-Marie. A similar pattern emerged with the dynamics in Egypt, during which the EU's position was characterized by hesitation and occasional and rather weak demands for an end to the violence. France, whose Prime Minister proved to have accepted personal favors from Egyptian President Mubarak before the latter was ousted, spearheaded a group of southern European countries, joined by the EU President Hermann Van Rompuy and HR Catherine Ashton. They considered Mubarak a bulwark against Islamic extremism and believed that a democratic transition with Mubarak remaining in power was possible. Only when, in early February 2011, British Prime Minister Cameron

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criticized the Egyptian regime and called attention to state-sponsored violence did the EU slightly change its tone. On February 4, i.e. one week before Mubarak resigned, it published a European Council declaration in which “it condemned in the strongest terms the violence and all those who use and encourage violence” and “called on the Egyptian authorities to meet the aspirations of the Egyptian people with political reform not repression.”<sup>19</sup> However, this declaration stopped short of demanding the resignation of Mubarak and stood in sharp contrast to the more outspoken approach of U.S. President Barack Obama who, on the same day the European Council declaration was published, conveyed a clear indication that the Egyptian President Hosny Mubarak should step down immediately.

As far as the EU’s position towards the Libyan regime is concerned, member states’ governments, following a German-British initiative, agreed rather quickly and without any major disagreements that “the EU and its member states will not work or co-operate with Gaddafi and that he has to step aside to allow for a true democratic transformation of the country.”<sup>20</sup> Yet, the European Council emergency summit of March 10, during which this agreement was reached, failed to adopt further measures, as member states’ governments refused to follow French President Nicolas Sarkozy’s unilateral recognition of the Libyan National Transition Council. Moreover, the subsequent discourse within Europe over the establishment of a no-fly zone over Libya and Germany’s de facto refusal to participate in the UN-mandated and NATO-led upholding of such a zone illustrate the intra-EU divisions.

These were also the reasons why the EU failed to respond in a more determined, outspoken and speedy fashion to the bloody crackdown on demonstrators that is occurring across Syria since March 2011. For weeks, the governments of Estonia and Cyprus, and to some extent Germany, expressed strong reservations about sanctions that would target Syrian President Bashar Al Assad directly. Eventually they gave up their opposition, but only once the situation on the ground had escalated. Yet this did not prevent the European Parliament’s Human Rights Committee from issuing serious warnings that the EU could be accused of applying double standards with the pro-active support of many of its member states for military intervention in Libya and, in contrast, the EU’s different and more cautious non-military response to Syria.<sup>21</sup>

In fact, the EU has sent many rather mixed messages in recent months to various regimes (be they in Tunis, Cairo, Tripoli or Damascus or, again, in Amman, Manama, Sanaa, Rabat or Algiers), ranging from praise and support to outright condemnation of the different regimes' responses to growing public demands for greater political, economic and social rights. They exemplify to a considerable extent how the "community of interest," the criterion that, in 1977, Sjöstedt regarded as a key precondition for the then EC to be considered an international actor,<sup>22</sup> continues to be characterized by divergence rather than a convergence of interests. As can be seen by the limited impact that EU policies have hitherto had on political developments in the MENA in general and the Arab Spring in particular, the imbalance between divergence and convergence of interest is bound to remain the key impediment to greater EU actor capability or, to put it differently, continues to epitomize the main source of EU spectatorship.

## Conclusions

The uprisings in the majority of countries in the Middle East and North Africa in the first half of 2011 offered the EU an unexpected and rather unique opportunity to put its foreign policy system, the upgrade of which it celebrated with much pomp and fanfare in December 2009 in Lisbon, to the test. However, in spite of considerable institutional and supranational advancements, as well as the attainment of legal personality, it failed to go beyond past patterns of political behaviour. Seemingly overwhelmed by the magnitude of developments in its southern neighborhood, the EU responded with hesitation before it resorted to a rather incoherent mix of activism and passivism. This was accompanied by regular displays of disunity among EU member states' governments over how best to react and finally led to a policy response that reaffirmed, yet once more, the different degrees of importance the EU attaches to the southern Mediterranean and the Gulf countries. Recourse to mere declaratory statements as far as the condemnation of violence in Bahrain and Yemen are concerned stand in sharp contrast to the adoption of a more wide-ranging policy response towards Maghreb and Mashreq countries that was even substantiated by the creation of the "partnership for democracy and stability in the southern Mediterranean." Destined to adjust the ENP to the constantly evolving political dynamics and to elevate the EU's relations with reform-minded Arab Mediterranean regimes onto a supposedly higher level, the newly designed partnership, like the EU's declaratory response to events in parts of the Gulf, confirmed however the continuous absence of a commonly shared understanding of the EU's strategic interests in the entire region and deepened, rather than narrowed, the gap that exists between its self-proclaimed ambi-

tion to become a fully-fledged political actor and its oft-assumed role as a passive spectator.

## Endnotes

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