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DIIS POLICY BRIEF

Growing Jasmines: What Should the EU do in Tunisia Now?

January 2011

The EU misread the situation in Tunisia. However, the fact that the EU approach did not work as expected should not lead now to a hasty overhaul of the existing policy frame-work. But the EU will have to be clearer, smarter and stricter about how its policy instruments are implemented.

The 'Jasmine Revolution' has caught Europe off-guard. European Union institutions, member states and influential southern European governments supported the Tunisian regime up until the very day, on 14 January 2011, when President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali was forced to flee the country. On the website of the Italian foreign ministry, for one, Tunisia is still praised for its "political and social stability." So rosy was the assessment of the Tunis regime that, according to EU Commissioner Stefan Füle who is in charge of the Union's flagship *European Neighbourhood Policy*, ENP, (including Tunisia as its partner country): "Tunisia is an important and reliable partner for the EU, with which it has forged strong relations based on shared values and mutual respect and understanding." Accordingly, in May 2010 the EU was prepared to grant Tunisia 'advanced status', which would have ensured a more intense political dialogue and included the prospect of a deep free trade agreement.

The popular uprising that ousted Ben Ali has shattered this optimism. With events still unfolding in Tunisia, the EU policy-mix in the Mediterranean region is now being seriously questioned. Why has Brussels' existing policy frame-work underperformed? How should the EU relate to popular Islamist forces in Tunisia and the region? What should the Union and its Member States now do, both in the immediate future and in the medium term? Ahead of an EU Foreign Affairs Council on January 31st, which will also discuss Tunisia, this policy brief seeks to address some of these questions.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- **The ongoing European Neighbourhood Policy Review process and the forth-coming Commission Communication on the subject should now include an explicit reference to the Tunisian events and elicit a frank reflection on EU priorities and how EU values are reflected in its policies.**
- **The EU should freeze talks on 'advanced status' and hold out that prospect should the new Tunisian authorities consolidate their power peacefully and elections be held freely.**
- **The EU must stand ready to activate the suspension clause enshrined in the Association Agreement with Tunisia, in the event that documented cases of repression and human rights abuses by the new Tunisian authorities should arise.**
- **EU Member States must refrain from launching parallel bilateral initiatives at this stage. In the immediate future they should provide political and diplomatic support to a common EU consensus and channel this through the role of HR Ashton.**
- **Islamist parties must be allowed to join the political process and stand in elections and Western governments should engage these parties.**

WHAT WENT WRONG: A CRITICAL APPRAISAL OF EU POLICIES

When it comes to furthering democratic reforms in the Mediterranean and the Middle East, the EU has several instruments and policies at its disposal. However, despite the Union's self-image as a normative power, its democracy promotion policies in the region over the last two decades have been marked by ambivalence and hesitancy. The now former Barcelona Process (EMP) launched in 1995 was to help bring "stability, peace and prosperity to the region" through political and economic liberalization. Long before September 11 and the Bush Administration's push for democratization in the Middle East, the EU had linked security and political reform, realizing that if stability were to be secured in the long run, the authoritarian Arab states would need to engage in reform.

In principle the Barcelona Process did indeed allow the EU to use its economic muscle to push for reforms. The EU was – and still is – the main donor and trading partner for most Mediterranean countries. A clause in the Association Agreements opened up the possibility of suspending European trade and aid if a particular Arab government grossly violated human rights. However, despite obvious cases of abuse in Algeria and Egypt in particular, the EU has never used this conditionality measure. In the end the EU put more emphasis on the economic than on the political side of the partnership, and proved unwilling to rock existing authoritarian regime structures.

The EU's Neighbourhood Policy was launched in 2004 in part to correct some of these flaws. The EU seemed to acknowledge that it had dragged its feet on reform in North Africa for too long and changed track from a negative to a positive conditionality approach. The EU now offered economic and political benefits and, potentially, a stake in the internal market in return for democratic reforms. Through so-called Action Plans the EU and individual Mediterranean governments were, ideally, to agree on specific targets for reform. Progress and willingness to reform were, in turn, to be rewarded with further cooperation and aid.

Seven years on the ENP has fared no better than the Barcelona Process. The Arab governments remain unwilling to undertake any real change that could lessen their grip on power. They have tacitly engaged in political reform initiatives and cooperation programmes with the EU, liberalizing with one hand, while repressing with the other. The EU has, to a large extent, turned a blind eye to this tactic of engagement. The ENP framework ultimately embraces the regimes' gradualist argument about the need for under taking reforms at their own pace, and the Action Plans have accordingly ended up as rather vague and uncommitted documents that have easily sustained the Arab governments' façade of liberalization.

The launch of the Mediterranean Union in 2008 only exacerbated this tendency. With its emphasis on mere techno-economical cooperation, the EU sent the wrong signal to the incumbent Arab leaders. The Jordanian Secretary General of the Mediterranean Union has now declared his resignation on the grounds that the Mediterranean Union has been unable to address the real political problems of the region.

THE ISLAMIST CHALLENGE

One key reason behind European (and American) caution about reforms in North Africa and the Middle East has been the rise of Islamism. Islamism has been perceived potentially as leading to terrorism both in the Arab countries and in the West. Throughout North Africa moderate Islamist parties, groups and movements are very popular forces. Both Arab regimes and Western actors perceive them as a threat – the former to Western values and the latter to regime survival.

North African regimes have at the same time instrumentalized Islam in a quest for legitimacy, attempting to counter violent Islamism. Arab regimes tend to control religious education, mosque construction, the appointment and remuneration of imams and the content of their sermons. Moralization of behaviour in the name of a conservative version of Islam is on the regimes' political agenda. Islamism as a political tool for shaping future politics has been repressed, whereas Islam as a tool for channelling and relieving the populations' despair has been promoted.

Under this general agenda the actual management of Islamist opposition on the part of North African regimes has oscillated between selective repression and controlled integration of Islamist participation in the political system. In Tunisia the Ben Ali regime never attempted to co-opt Islamists by controlling their entry into the politicalsystem. The successful Tunisian Islamist party *Al Nahda* ('Renaissance') has been banned and repressed since elections in 1989, when the party gained 14% of the vote.

In the past days the western media have been quick to zoom in on Tunisian Islamists and Al Nahda in particular, speculating what role they will, or should, play in the Tunisian transition. The Al Nahda leadership has been in exile for many years and lacks an operational party machine. Unlike in Egypt, Algeria, Morocco and Libya, the Tunisian opposition is not coming from Islamists but from secular intellectuals, lawyers and trade unionists. If general elections are going to be held in the near future – two-to-six months are the options more frequently being mentioned – there might be parties that present themselves as Islamist. While it is desirable not to rush towards

popular consultation during the present turmoil, the confused circumstances that persist on the ground make it hard to judge whether there is potential for Islamist parties. However, the participation of Islamists in the elections will be a crucial test of the democratic credentials of the uprising and of the new Tunisian authorities.

Just as importantly, the inclusion of Islamist parties will represent a test for EU and the US policy. The Tunisian events should make EU and US policy-makers reconsider their axiomatic linkage between marginalization of Islamists in return for stability. Open societies, political and civil liberties, and the rule of law are the foundation of Western polities and, accordingly, of Western policies in the region. From this follows that the credibility of these policies is inextricably bound to accepting the full inclusion of moderate Islamist parties in any discussion about the future of their respective countries.

Inspired by the Tunisian revolt, the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt has called on the government to end the state of emergency, dissolve the new Parliament and conduct free and fair elections and for the entire government to be dismissed. At a time when the popular protests are spreading to the streets of Cairo and beyond, the region is likely to pose yet another test to the West with the 2011 Egyptian Presidential elections – if not before.

WHICH WAY AHEAD?

Along with all other Western actors, the EU misread the situation in Tunisia. However, the fact that the EU approach did not work as expected should not lead now to a hasty overhaul of the existing policy framework.

When confronted with daunting arrays of challenges such as those now arising from North Africa, conventional wisdom among independent observers would have it that the EU has tough choices to make. Brussels should either 'pull' the partner governments more decisively by relaxing its restrictive visa regime and opening up its market, especially in sensitive areas. Alternatively, the argument goes, the EU should 'push' more vehemently for democratic reforms by imposing its rules.

We believe that a more effective EU policy, however deeply desirable, should not be based on such stark choices. The EU's policy toolbox is comprehensive and detailed enough to ensure a strong support for the reform process. The guiding principles of governance reform such as accountability, the ability of a government to implement policies and the quality of the public services, are all enshrined in the existing policy framework. These standards are applicable to any new government sitting in Tunis.

The EU's policy toolbox is comprehensive and detailed enough to ensure a strong support for the reform process

At the same time the EU will have to be clearer, smarter and stricter about how its policy instruments are implemented. Any talk of penalties or even sanctions is associated throughout the region with the complex historical legacies that tie North African states to the past of European exploitation and colonization. However, negative conditionalities are nevertheless important means to send signals to governments that are moving away from their commitments. Just as importantly, the political and economic interests of some EU member states have hampered stricter implementation of the EU policies.

In these hectic days pundits are forcing analogies between the Central European velvet revolutions of the late 1980s or the 2004 Orange Revolution in Ukraine and the Tunisian situation. These analogies are misguided in a number of historical and geopolitical respects, but above all in the fact that the EU had treated the Ben Ali regime as a poster-child of its policy in the region. If nothing else, this blunder should lead the EU to temporarily freeze any talk of 'advanced status' for Tunisia. The opportunities enshrined in that status should however be dangled in front of the new Tunisian authorities, if and when their grip on power is consolidated in a peaceful and orderly manner and legitimized by free and fair elections.

The dramatic events in Tunisia should elicit a profound reflection within Europe about how the EU portrays itself as an actor, and how it is perceived by its counterparts

This also leads to our central recommendation. The dramatic events in Tunisia, whose contagion is now spreading to other North African countries such as Egypt, Algeria and Mauritania, should elicit a profound reflection within Europe about how the EU portrays itself as an actor, and how it is perceived by its counterparts. This is not about repeating the inward-looking exercise that has characterized the EU institutional debate over the past half-decade. The reflection should primarily be about the priorities and values that the EU aims to promote, and about how these should be promoted. The ongoing review process of the European Neighbourhood Policy is the most immediate occasion to begin such reflection. The review, which will culminate with a new Commission document in the spring of 2011, should explicitly acknowledge the Tunisian events and detail which aspects of the existing EU toolkit should be emphasized and if necessary strengthened, to support post-Ben Ali Tunisia.

The reflection should primarily be about the priorities and values that the EU aims to promote

The ongoing review of the ENP should explicitly acknowledge the Tunisian events

Demonstrations in Tunis, 17 January 2011 (© Niels Hougaard/POLFOTO)

Moreover, EU policy-making, especially its foreign policy, is never a purely technocratic exercise. Even negligible technical measures are inherently political, as they are tied to what the European integration project is supposed to stand for. The governments of all EU Member States should contribute to this goal by supporting politically and diplomatically the measures that the European Commission will propose, and refraining from launching parallel initiatives. Following the Foreign Affairs Council of January 31st, they should channel this support and delegate action to High Representative Catherine Ashton. Also, in this respect, Tunisia may well end up becoming the first test case for post-Lisbon EU foreign policy.

Tunisia may well end up becoming the first test case for post-Lisbon EU foreign policy.

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