

Summary: Both the United States and Europe have adopted an overall cautious approach to the dramatic transformations in the Middle East and North Africa region since the 2011 uprisings. What is lamentable is the fact that neither the EU nor the United States seems to be particularly concerned about the overall lack of a long-term strategy, common or otherwise. This is especially worrisome at a moment when transitions will critically define the shape of new regimes and relations with new actors, with every vacuum of power or presence quickly occupied by regional or international actors having a completely different set of political and strategic priorities compared to those of the EU and the United States.

Convergence without Coordination: Why Washington and Brussels Must Work Together in North Africa

by Ruth Hanau Santini and Emiliano Alessandri

Introduction

Compared with the tumultuous years under the George W. Bush administration, which were punctuated by deep disagreements with European capitals over Middle Eastern issues, transatlantic relations have displayed a notable degree of convergence during the Barack Obama years. Despite dramatic transformations in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region since the 2011 uprisings, both the United States and Europe have adopted an overall cautious approach, informed by more acute awareness of the limited impact that their actions may have and dictated by an uneasiness to define their role worldwide, as well as a realistic appraisal of their budget constraints. What is lamentable is not so much the presence of contradictions in their respective tactics, nor necessarily the more limited scope they envisage for their external action in the MENA region, but rather the fact that neither of them seems to be particularly concerned about the overall lack of a long-term strategy, common or otherwise. This is especially worrisome at a moment when transitions will critically define the

shape of new regimes and relations with new actors, with every vacuum of power or presence quickly occupied by regional or international actors having a completely different set of political and strategic priorities compared to those of the EU and the United States.

Changing U.S. Approaches in the MENA Region

Throughout much of the Cold War and post-Cold War era, the United States has shown considerable continuity and consistency in its engagement in the Middle East. U.S. policies in the region have focused principally on securing three long-term objectives: the protection of Israel's security, continuing access to the region's vast energy resources, and the fight against Jihadist terrorism. The more muscular democratization policies carried out in the Middle East and North Africa under the George W. Bush administration were mainly prompted by concerns about the impact that evolving Arab politics could have on all of these three priorities in a post-9/11 context. By 2006 — well before the beginning of the Obama administration — they had already been scaled down. As

acknowledged by many, a mix of developments on the ground (notably the strong electoral results of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt in 2005 and the unexpected victory of Hamas in the 2006 Palestinian elections), together with the new makeup of President Bush's foreign policy team (the ascendancy of Condoleezza Rice and the decreasing influence of Dick Cheney) led to a more limited view of the United States' role in the region and the impact of its policies and initiatives on the political trajectories of Arab countries. In particular, the threat of an Islamist renaissance in an increasingly fluid and unstable local environment — largely an (unintended) product of Bush's transformative agenda — seriously undermined the notion that the Freedom Agenda was good in itself, as it could also serve larger strategic goals, from Israel's security to the retreat of Jihadism.

In a sense, since 2009, President Obama acted in a spirit of continuity with the last three years of the Bush administration, in prioritizing U.S. security interests while remaining ambivalent about the role the United States should play with regard to Arab democratization. Understandably focused on restoring the United States' image and moral standing after the highly controversial Bush presidency, even in his much-celebrated 2009 Cairo speech, the new president emphasized notions such as “mutual respect,” and paid tribute to the importance of freedom and other universal aspirations. Yet he did this without making these considerations the centerpiece of a proactive U.S. engagement in favor of Arab democracy. Commentators now complaining about Obama's lack of vision for the region seem to neglect the fact that he never portrayed himself as being a transformative president in the area, where the U.S. presence had become toxic almost even to U.S. allies. When the Obama administration came to power, fatigue with the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and the lack of tangible results from military-led democratization attempts, in the eyes of many, justified a natural U.S. desire to retrench. A more restrained geostrategic posture implied downsizing the military presence on the ground and showing greater willingness to engage the United States' rivals, in the name of a pragmatic assessment of the need for co-existence. Almost immediately, Obama's critics in the Republican camp labeled this attitude as defeatism. It is interesting to note how the United States under Obama, while seemingly never closer to Europe in a more nuanced approach to the MENA region,

has not done more to engage in greater coordination with Europe as a strategic ally and partner on the ground.

Europe and the Limits of its Engagement with the Arab World

Coming from a very different historical and political experience than the United States, Europeans have dropped many of their reservations about U.S. policy after the election of Obama — a president that they have immediately felt close to in terms of cultural sensitivities as well as world view. Their views of the MENA region have only grown more similar since the 2011 popular uprisings. The EU has never matched U.S. hubris in its dealings with Arab countries: with its heavy post-colonial sense of guilt, it has refrained from ever attempting to shape events in a desired direction, and has looked instead at the region as a complex patchwork of opportunities and threats it should carefully manage. In its relationship with many Arab states, the EU has struggled to portray itself as a peaceful and prosperous model to emulate, looking toward the southern Mediterranean as a slightly distorted mirror image. The most ambitious initiative to engage the region systematically and multilaterally, the 1995 Barcelona Process or Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP) was built on the intriguing but increasingly unlikely notion that the Mediterranean neighborhood could become more united as Europe itself quickly moved toward greater integration.

The Barcelona vision, however, collapsed after a decade of failed attempts to promote intra-regional cooperation on all (political, economic, cultural) levels, and with all countries at once, including Israel. The lesson learnt was not to put all MENA countries in one basket, but to engage them bilaterally through a more tailored approach, which would complement the EMP.

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The European Neighborhood Policy (ENP) was originally meant to address only Eastern European countries and was extended to the south almost as an afterthought. It acknowledged a higher degree of differentiation and specificity, though left the Israeli-Palestinian issue to the United States to manage. This new framework was essentially passive: it assumed, instead of helping to create, the “neighborhood” vision, under the false belief that these countries would recognize themselves as part and parcel of a wider European space. Since integrating these countries into the EU was never on the table, offering them a stake in the European market was thought as an acceptable second best. In exchange for increased trade and economic cooperation, Europe asked for economic liberalization and rule of law reforms, in the hope this would lead in the medium-term to greater political opening.

Against this backdrop, the focus in the early 2000s on elections by George W. Bush’s Freedom Agenda was matched by similar EU beliefs in a procedural understanding of democracy. Brussels has often times been accused of having promoted a (neo-)liberal model of democracy in the southern Mediterranean, prioritizing tangible progress in trade and economic cooperation under the assumption that the contextual features of more market-free economies would have led in the long-run to more advanced societies where more stakeholders would start asking for the respect of social and civil rights. The EU belief in modernization approaches was misplaced: Brussels opted for a technocratic and non-political policy with the region, conducting foreign economic policy, but creating, both within the EU and outside, false expectations that democratic reforms were on the agenda for real. Underestimating its capacity to translate its economic leverage into political influence, the EU has refrained time and again from implementing conditionality clauses that were, from the start, enshrined in its ENP agreements. Of course, most European countries,

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and especially those geographically closer to Arab ones (France, Spain, and Italy), put a premium on stability and internalized foreign policy fears of uncontrolled immigration from the south or radicalization of European citizens with Arab origin. They downplayed the usual EU mantra of “normative values” and power of attraction and ended up adopting minimum-common denominator approaches to the southern Mediterranean.

2011: A Wake-Up Call Europe Heard?

When the Arab revolts of 2011 broke out, the EU’s initial surprise soon gave way to self-criticism and the admission of contradictions and double standards — including acknowledgement of the less than full commitment to regional democratization. Brussels started adapting its language to the new environment. Knowing that its new stance would be brought under closer scrutiny in the region and in Europe, the EU now emphasized “deep democracy,” i.e., going beyond elections, as one of its ultimate goals. It also put forward the formula of “more for more” to condense the notion that Europe was genuinely willing to provide more support and more access to those transition countries capable of making greater progress toward meaningful democratic reform — a reaffirmation of conditionality.

However, scratching beneath the surface, the EU has not yet substantiated the new claims. While it tried to impose a higher bar in terms of democratic benchmarks within the revised ENP in the spring of 2011, following a number of rebukes from the new Islamist-led governments, it has downplayed the relevance of conditionality clauses. While the debate over the effectiveness of conditionality remains on the agenda, the EU still struggles to understand how it should capitalize on its leverage — the EU has mobilized €5 billion in grants and loans to Egypt alone for the period 2012-2013 — and translate it into political demands.

In parallel, EU reference documents have also continued to downplay the relevance of progress over social and economic rights in the region, something Europe should care deeply about given its welfare state tradition, which, despite the challenges it faces, remains one of the most defining features of European democracies. In that realm, Europe would not only have lessons to share with southern Mediterranean countries, but it would also help set resilient foundations for inclusive growth and sustainable economic

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systems. While Europe has created task forces to try to consistently deal with the transformations occurring in Egypt, Tunisia, and Morocco, the way local societies are approached has not substantially changed. In order to reach the stated goals, members of these task forces would need to include politicians, businessmen, and independent civil society representatives, and engage them on a regular rather than ad hoc basis. Tellingly, however, when the Egyptian government withdrew its invitation to local civil society organizations (CSOs) to join the first official EU-Egypt task force meeting last November, Brussels did not object.

With European and U.S. capitals increasingly embracing the new regimes and — even if to a different extent — their new Islamist leaderships, some see a new version of a (soft) “authoritarian bargain” emerging. With the 2012 developments in both Egypt and, though to a lesser extent, Tunisia, leading some to talk of an “Islamist winter” with essentialist views of Arab (nondemocratic) exceptionalism resurfacing, Western governments are torn in one of the usual dilemmas, i.e. between pushing for political democracy and thereby risk these fragile regimes’ collapse or pay lip service to the more than cosmetic but less than serious reforms undertaken and work with the current regimes with no political domestic redlines.

Democracy Assistance: Another Weak Spot of Transatlantic Cooperation

Despite pledges made by Western leaders in the wake of the uprisings, democracy assistance funding — crucial in the immediate post-uprising phase — represented another lost opportunity for meaningful democracy support, particularly for the United States. The Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI)’s budget request for 2014 is \$75 million — in the range of previous such budgets (\$65 million in 2010 and \$80 million in 2011). Since 2002, MEPI has used \$600 million to fund more than 1,000 projects in 17 Arab countries. Moreover, only 15 percent of this funding goes into local grants schemes and explicitly targets civil society organizations (CSOs) at best, the rest focusing on the private sector and some forms of government cooperation. MEPI also identifies promising key emerging civil society stakeholders and has adopted a flexible approach to how it supports them.

MEPI figures aside, the lack of a meaningful shift toward democracy goals in U.S. assistance policy is seen in the

internal composition of support to the region’s largest country, Egypt. The Obama administration is currently asking for \$1.5 billion in aid to Cairo, only \$200 million of which is earmarked for democracy-related projects (\$1.3 billion is set to be spent on military cooperation). Of the one-off special assistance for the transition promised in the spring of 2011, just \$250 million has been delivered, out of \$1 billion.

When it comes to the EU, which traditionally does not do military assistance, increased budgets for the MENA region should not be deceptive. The bulk of aid still goes to technical assistance toward goals such as “inclusive growth” and economic development. Grants aimed at democracy support account for just a fifth of the €3.5 billion budget already approved for the Partnership for Democracy and Shared Prosperity (the southern half of the ENP) for 2011-2013. The most important EU financial tools are within the ENP and derive their priorities from Action Plans that have been agreed upon with the target country and are realized in cooperation with local governments. The only EU counterpart to an instrument like MEPI is the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR), which is administered by the European Commission in Brussels and has within its mandate the possibility to directly engage with local NGOs and CSOs. Significantly, however, EIDHR was hardly used to aggressively push for political reform in Ben Ali’s Tunisia or Mubarak’s Egypt. Since the revolutions, new calls for proposals have opened but budgets have remained as negligible as before (the 2012 EIDHR budget for Egypt totaled €1.7 million euros, while that for Tunisia just €1 million).

Problems are not limited to the scale of funding. EIDHR is often praised as one of the few bottom-up instruments the EU can use to partner with potential civil and political future leaders. Procedures to get funding, however, remain complicated and counter-intuitive. As recipients complain, priorities are set from the start by the EU. Moreover, final funding decisions are not taken by EU delegations on the

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ground, but by headquarters in Brussels, where knowledge of local civil societies can only be indirect.

Given budgetary constraints and the shared interest in pushing for greater freedom among transitioning countries, the current lack of U.S.-EU coordination is striking, if only for its economic inefficiency. To date even the more limited goal of information-sharing is not being systematically pursued. Not even two similarly focused and modestly sized initiatives such as MEPI and EIDHR have been coordinated, with many leading MEPI officials even ignoring the existence of such an instrument among the EU tools.

Challenges Ahead for the EU and the United States

With the recent appointment of Ambassador Susan Rice as national security advisor replacing Tom Donilon as the closest foreign policy voice to the president's ear, the U.S. administration's Middle East and North Africa policy might shift toward a greater focus on principles. Or at least this is what many hope for in Washington (despite disappointments in the human rights community about Rice's atypically shy stance on Syria) at a time when challenges emanating from the region seem to grow by the day.

In March, Secretary of State John Kerry, during one of several Middle East trips after taking office, expressed renewed U.S. support for the Egyptian transition process and vocally spelled out the key U.S. concerns for Egypt: free and fair parliamentary elections, the need for security sector reform, protection of NGOs and citizens' rights and freedoms, and economic recovery. Since then, however, Egypt's domestic situation seems to have only further deteriorated. While elections seem as stalled as ever, NGOs have suffered twice in the past couple of weeks, first with a new draft bill imposing administrative control over NGOs, and then on June 3 with a guilty verdict for the 43 NGO workers — including 16 Americans — and the ensuing closure of offices and assets seizure of the International Republican Institute, the National Democratic Institute, Freedom House, and the German Konrad Adenauer Stiftung.

Although the United States and other international actors are still measuring the scale of this backlash and planning their next moves, official U.S. reactions have for now been tepid, refraining from issuing consequential condemnations of both acts. Many suspect that even as signs of a receding transition multiply, red lines for the United States

will remain drawn on geopolitical rather than democratic grounds: in other words as long as Mohammed Morsi provides reassurances as to the respect of the Camp David order and the repression of violent extremism, less than democratic standards in the country will not be seen as critical reasons for a shift toward a more confrontational U.S. stance (a bargain that is not too different from the one considered acceptable during the Mubarak era). Interestingly, calculations in Washington seem to ignore the fact that respecting these accords is, and has been for some time, in Egypt's own national interest. The NGOs episode however, with its U.S. domestic implications, might reverse the tide and lead to the adoption of more outspoken pro-human rights and democratization redlines.

Due to the U.S. president's worldview and continuing budget constraints, a highly selective and overall modest approach by the current U.S. administration may be here to stay, despite the often recognized potentially high long-term costs of hesitant leadership. After all, this strategy has a rationale. The United States is struggling to restore credibility in the region, it wants to reposition itself toward the East rather than the South, and therefore consistently engages in damage control and risk-averse policies to free up resources for other priorities elsewhere. Finally, but no less importantly, while the burden of excessive action in the region is now an all too well known cost, the costs of inaction are unknown and remain difficult to quantify.

Nonetheless, many argue that even against this backdrop, U.S. redlines should not just consist of foreign policy variables (Israel's security, checking Iran), but should have a progressive understanding of local developments spurring Washington to act promptly when confronted with authoritarian tendencies closing down spaces for the creation and consolidation of pluralistic arenas. Tying shares of current economic assistance to citizenship rights' progress in Egypt,

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given recent setbacks, could be an example of such greater responsiveness.

As far as the future of the European role in the region is concerned, the overall EU posture may not notably differ from the U.S. one — except that hopes are even lower for bolder engagement with new transitioning Arab governments. With its internal crisis and a track record of a normative-on-paper but status-quo-power-in-practice in the region, the EU may remain an important yet not decisive presence even as the Mediterranean becomes more fragmented and multipolar and as the United States scales down its engagement. The overall lack of strategy that characterizes EU foreign policy, which is seemingly more ad hoc than ever before and where intra-EU divergences surface with an increased visibility, is especially clear in the Mediterranean. This is particularly serious as the consequences of inaction will, as has been the case in the past, easily spill over into European domestic politics, once again securitizing the EU's reading of its southern neighborhood. Contradictions will also continue to characterize the external action of both the United States and the EU in the region. As respective strategies will be mainly focused on limiting problems rather than solving them, business as usual will, by and large, continue with countries that have preserved some stability. As is already the case, therefore, different levels of pressures will be exerted according to the pace and willingness of MENA countries to reform: the United States and the EU will likely push more strongly for sustained change vis-à-vis Egypt, and to a lesser extent, Tunisia. Much less consistent democratization policies will be adopted toward those countries slowly reforming from the top, which for now have experienced only limited internal turbulence (Morocco, Jordan). Lastly, the EU and U.S. attitudes toward reform-resisting Gulf countries will likely continue unabated.

To some extent, these contradictions and double-standards are hard to avoid. What could be avoided, however, is the current lack of communication between the EU and the United States, even as they have been forced to recognize that, alone, there is very little they will be able to achieve in the MENA region. While coordinating priorities, lines of action and modalities of economic assistance may be unrealistic if not impractical, the sharing of information about specific medium- to long-term objectives and a clear transatlantic division of labor would be mutually beneficial.

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