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The EU and Recent Events in the Southern Mediterranean

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The historic events underway in the Middle East took the European Union, along with many other elements and observers, by surprise. The region's European neighbors have viewed the area as generally stable. Arab rulers cooperating with EU member states made sure to realize these states' interests, chief among them the regular flow of oil, the containment of radical Islam, and prevention of illegal immigration.

Even if it is too early to assess definitively how this transition period will end, it appears that the era of ostensible stability has come to an end. In this context questions arise about the EU's contribution to the turmoil and the opportunities it may have missed in preventing it, about pan-systemic conclusions that may be drawn in response to the changes the region now faces, and about the ramifications of possible changes on Israel's relations with the EU.

The starting principle guiding the EU in its relations with the southern Mediterranean states and the Middle East posits an inherent link between security and stability in Europe on the one hand, and the regional reality on the other. As such, the security, political, economic, and social stabilization of this region is critical for maintaining European stability and security. This principle underlies the bilateral agreements signed over the years between the EU and states in the region and the November 1995 initiative by the EU's Mediterranean members (Spain, France, and Italy) to establish what came to be called the Barcelona Process, with the membership of all EU states and the non-EU Mediterranean states.

In this framework, it was decided to undertake structural changes in order to create growth and jobs on the one hand, and promote democracy, political pluralism, and individual rights on the other. The working assumption was that without democratization it would be impossible to attain political stability and economic prosperity. The year 2010 was set as the target date for establishing a free trade zone in the Mediterranean (for goods and services, though not for private citizens) that was supposed to reflect growing cooperation and integration between the EU and its neighbors to the south.

The European Neighborhood Policy (ENP), launched in 2004, was aimed at increasing cooperation in achieving the abovementioned goals by signing specific agreements between the EU and its neighbors. A close reading of the documents clarifies the commitment the participants assumed in terms of human rights as well as in terms of economy and finance. The EU was given the opportunity to suspend cooperation in the face of violations of the democratic rules of the game. In hindsight, the EU apparently failed to take advantage of this clause, even though it was clear that democratic principles and human rights were being violated. Moreover, while in the context of the European neighbors' policy certain yardsticks were established for measuring the progress of economic reforms, no similar yardsticks for undertaking internal reforms were adopted, a fact that gave rulers the option of continuing to limit political liberties and pluralism.

To complete the picture, the Arab-Israeli conflict in general and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in particular curbed progress on the agenda for which the Barcelona Process was instituted. After 13 years of the Barcelona Process, President Sarkozy decided on a new framework – the Union for the Mediterranean, or UfM – to replace it, hoping for better luck this time. This framework has also failed to overcome the obstacles that prevented progress in the past.

Any attempt to assess the pros and cons of the Barcelona Process and its offshoots cannot but conclude that the European vision has not been realized. Beyond the European rhetoric favoring economic and political reforms, the EU did not realize – despite the tools at its disposal – even a fraction of its ambitious agenda. It allowed the rulers of the Arab states to dictate the agenda, opting to ignore the lofty principles it was to have promoted in favor of maintaining and promoting its own interests, thereby, it may be said, contributing to the deterioration in the region.

In the wake of the events in Tunisia and Egypt, EU leaders rushed to make declarations whose common denominator was the need for policy change. Beyond extending emergency humanitarian aid, EU leaders decided at a March 13 emergency session on a comprehensive review of existing cooperative and assistance programs with the region's states. In the mid term, the EU intends to establish a new partnership with the nations of the southern Mediterranean called Partnership for Democracy and Shared Prosperity. The foundation of the partnership consists of giving assistance and incentives to those states choosing to work towards political and economic reforms. The intention is to have concrete proposals formulated by April 2011, when a comprehensive examination of the ENP will take place.

Alongside the efforts to cope with the implications of its policy changes, the EU is also forced to reckon with the bloodshed in Libya in light of the Libyan ruler's refusal to cede his power. The inability to make a decision on how to handle the refugees knocking at its doors, the difficulty of reaching a quick agreement on imposing sanctions on Qaddafi's

regime, Sarkozy's decision – taken without prior coordination with his EU colleagues – to recognize the Libyan Revolutionary Council as the legitimate representative of Libya, and the willingness by Sarkozy (and Britain's Prime Minister Cameron) to consider military action are expressions of the inherent difficulty of EU states to formulate a shared foreign affairs and security policy. It seems that national interests will continue (despite the unfounded hopes that the Lisbon Treaty would change the rules of the game) to guide the conduct of the large states, at least for the foreseeable future. It is doubtful that this is enough to position the EU as a serious player in the global arena.

The transformation that the EU's southern neighbors will undergo in the coming decades presents the EU with an historic challenge that demands – if the EU is truly serious – resources far beyond what it has allocated to date and a change in the patterns of cooperation that have been the norm, at the expense of interests it has so far been unwilling to forfeit. To this end, the EU must be prepared to act in a completely new way. Can the EU, which is undergoing its own economic-financial crisis whose end is not in sight, rally to the task of assisting its neighbors to create conditions that allow the establishment of democratic regimes? Only time will tell.

Because of the immensity of the task and its global ramifications, the EU would do well to examine the possibility of recommending that the G-20 assume the responsibility for coordinating the international effort on economic-financial assistance. Easing the economic burden will allow the EU to concentrate on promoting democracy.

The expected changes in the EU's Mediterranean policy will not affect the bilateral patterns of cooperation with Israel. It is too early to assess how the expected changes in the UfM may affect Israel's status. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict has more than once cast its shadow over various discussions and was one of the causes for the paralysis in action. As part of its lessons-learning process, the EU will have to find a way to neutralize this issue's ability to impede the advancement of EU goals. Without regard for the future institutional handling of the conflict, EU leaders repeatedly stress that urgent progress on the Middle East peace process is an important component in advancing regional stability. Different emphases in the assessment of the situation and the ensuing conclusions will likely heighten disagreements between the EU and Israel on a long line of political topics related to a permanent peace settlement. Thus, negative ramifications for the Israel-EU relationship may be in store.