

# When gravity fails...

## Five futures for Euro-Mediterranean relations

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»» As the Arab spring unfolds with both promise and risk, the EU is working hard to support incipient political change in a more nuanced, sophisticated and demand-driven fashion. The fact that some new resources have been found in the midst of such an acute economic recession is to the EU's credit. Much that sustains the EU's renewed Neighbourhood Policy is admirable, in particular the commitments to provide more generous mobility partnerships, assist in job creation, back deeper economic integration across the Mediterranean and dialogue with the full range of political actors in Arab states.

Exhaustive coverage has been given to the re-energised European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) now being implemented. Inevitably, the EU's response to the Arab revolts can be judged contrastingly for its improvements or for its persistent shortcomings. Critics point out that new European money is of a limited magnitude and that promises of freer trade and more generous mobility still need to be followed though. Many have suggested what the EU should be doing in the immediate future to support reforms. But beyond debates over the near-term ENP policy concoction, a broader challenge looms on the horizon. As the Arab rebellions move past their first flush of innocent effusion, the EU must lift its eyes beyond immediate tactical decisions and begin to think more conceptually about what type of relationship is to be desired between Europe and the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region.

This longer term vision requires the EU innovatively to craft effective support for political openings but also to adjust its interest-calculus to the new geopolitics of the Middle East. Short-term and often prosaic policy decisions – how much money should be made available and to whom, the

### HIGHLIGHTS

- The EU must craft its near-term policy initiatives in the Middle East with longer-term scenarios in mind.
- The Arab spring could deepen any of five different governance patterns in Euro-Mediterranean relations.
- The EU will need to rely less on its own heavily institutionalised frameworks of cooperation and more on a wider plurality of partnerships in support of Arab reform.

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»»»»» format of ENP action plans, the relationship between the Neighbourhood Policy and Union for the Mediterranean (UfM), the technical scheduling of trade incentives, the rules governing civil society partnerships – need to be taken with broader strategic scenarios in mind. The focus of policy activity in the immediate short-term must be made fully compatible with a clearer vision of where the EU would like its Middle Eastern relations to be in ten or twenty years.

In an effort to move beyond commentary on the current state of ENP policies, this essay suggests five scenarios for the longer-term future of relations between Europe and the MENA region. These are offered essentially as means of thinking about future options. Each of the scenarios represents a different type of EU-Middle Eastern pattern of governance. As it fine-tunes ENP and UfM initiatives through 2012, the EU should begin to deliberate on what kind of balance between these scenarios it seeks in the longer term.

**SCENARIO 1:  
EURO-MEDITERRANEAN GOVERNANCE**

The original vision of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP) embodied the ambition to create an area of deeply integrated governance structures. The rationale was to cultivate areas of sectoral cooperation entwined deeply enough to breed an environment of shared problem-solving and loyalty. And indeed a dense network of committees took shape across an impressively broad range of policy areas. However, in the early 2000s practical progress towards the end of integrated governance was halting, in large measure scuppered by tensions over the Arab-Israeli conflict and divergences over fundamental political values. But the ENP renewed the objective of replicating de facto the spirit of enlargement, while the Union for the Mediterranean was predicated on the principle of co-ownership. Analytically this strand of Euro-Mediterranean relations was well captured by the notion of an aspiration to create elements of a common political space or ‘regime’, not just

cooperative policies. The concept of decentred governance helped reflect the aim of moving beyond a merely instrumental set of EU policies towards Arab states. The EMP was often seen as a prime example of the EU’s predilection for joint community-building.

Prior to the Arab spring, the philosophy of integrated Euro-Mediterranean governance remained well short of being realised. European commitment was insufficient, while southern Mediterranean resistance was resolute on the more sensitive political dimensions of the partnership. Outside the Europe-Mediterranean Partnership, relations remained strikingly thin with Arab states in the Gulf, Iraq and Iran. On the Arab side, governments resisted many areas of deeper cooperation. Relations with Israel remained far too fractious realistically to hope for a zone of shared governance structures. And on the European side, frustration with the paucity of progress pushed EU member states back towards prioritising their traditional bilateral relations in the region. Whatever its other achievements, the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership had not bred significantly new forms of governance by the eve of the Tunisian revolt.

Scenario one for future EU policy is that post-2011 political changes in the MENA region open the way for a more effective implementation of Euro-Mediterranean governance. In this scenario we would see commitment to deepening a strongly-institutionalised pattern of cooperation across a large range of different policy areas. The EU and Arab states would enhance their degree of shared problem-solving and decision-making. Something akin to a Euro-Mediterranean polity would take shape. Euro-Mediterranean institutional structures would be of sufficient depth to develop an identity autonomous from their member states, to set agendas and establish problem-solving legitimacy. If the years before 2011 saw member states drawn to bilateral modes of interaction with Arab states, the revolts may encourage increased unity between EU governments themselves sufficient to act a base for more integrative styles of governance across the Mediterranean too.

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## SCENARIO 2: EU EXPORTED GOVERNANCE

Much of the EU's international influence has derived from the transfer of its own rules and legal norms to other countries and organisations. This has been termed a form of institutionally-rooted 'external governance' quite distinct from traditional concepts of power projection. External governance refers to the EU seeking to extend the territorial scope of its own rules and regulations as

a rationalised strategy of influencing policy outcomes in third countries. As such, it portrays a novel form of external strategy beyond traditional understandings of foreign policy. It posits a fuzzy rather than absolute distinction between internal and external policies. While there is some overlap here with the notion of

common Euro-Mediterranean governance, external governance envisions a more instrumental and immediate usage of the EU's own processes for reasons of self-interest. While this governance model also points to deeply integrated and institutionalised forms of cooperation, the onus is on the EU exporting its own pre-existing norms rather than the on collective security as such.

Many analysts see this framework as being particularly pertinent to the Mediterranean. They argue that this is an area where the institutional patterns that embody the EU's own internal values have notably extended into the realm of foreign relations. Prior to 2011, some analysts argued that a significant degree of progress was being made in the export of EU governance in the southern Mediterranean. A number of Arab states had begun to incorporate EU rules governing competition, environmental, health and safety,

energy and industrial policy. These moves may not have constituted far-reaching political change, but they did represent some degree of convergence in governance styles. And external governance strategies pursued at a relatively technocratic level enabled advances while paralysis reined at the level of high politics.

Notwithstanding these advances, in the years before the Arab spring clear limitations remained to the scope of governance exported from the European Union. These limits were evident in the stalling of market integration and Arab governments' increasing resistance to uploading large sections of the EU acquis. Once again, the Union for the Mediterranean seemed to signal a dilution of the external governance prism.

Scenario two for future EU policies would see changes in the MENA states and in EU thinking suffice to bring external governance dynamics further to the fore. Under this scenario we would see changes in the Middle East open up more scope successfully to export areas of the EU's own governance rules. This 'governance' approach would become the leading edge of EU efforts to support democratic reform in the region.

## SCENARIO 3: COSMOPOLITAN GOVERNANCE

Prior to the Arab spring the civil society components of the EMP and ENP flattered to deceive. They were too elitist and too patchy to claim any credit for the upheavals. Regimes excelled in frustrating the participation of genuinely independent actors. European governments meekly accepted such barriers and reverted to more government-to-government approaches. Prior to 2011, EU policy in the Arab world was far more state-centric than organised around the priority status of individual agency and rights.

Scenario three for future EU relations would see joint civil society-led initiatives become more significant relative to formal government-to-government relations. This scenario would see



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»»»»» EU policy seeking to foster a shared community of values beyond the role of nation states. Apparently in line with such notions of cosmopolitan governance, most of the Arab revolts have been bottom-up social protests. Citizen-centred notions of governance might come to feature far more prominently in European-Middle Eastern relations.

A pre-eminence of cosmopolitan governance would involve full civil society involvement in policy frameworks, systematic inclusion and agenda-setting roles in political dialogue covering democracy and human rights, and strong civic monitoring roles over aid expenditure. Unlike the Euro-Mediterranean governance and external governance models, this would be less about formal institution-centred modes of integration than about the promotion of a citizen-focused ideational community predicated upon universal values. Under this scenario EU support for reform would take its lead from local, Arab input and demands. A civic-oriented governance route may enhance EU influence in the region, to the extent that it circumvents the tensions that have long existed at governmental level.

**SCENARIO 4:  
STRATEGIC CALIBRATION**

A fourth scenario for future EU relations would see European governments tempted in the direction of carefully controlled realist statecraft by the tumultuous remoulding of the Middle East. Rather than the Arab revolts ushering in new forms of cooperative governance across the Mediterranean, this scenario would see them encouraging European governments to claim a greater role and to modulate their responses to this fluidity in a way that safeguards immediate interests. The key variables would be government calculations rather than forms of liberal-integrated governance.

Political change in the MENA region has propelled a belated and self-regarding scramble on the part of European governments to 'side

with history'. While support for democracy is forthcoming, it may be increasingly and carefully calibrated to member states' immediate security concerns. Policy initiatives may remain under member states' tutelage, rather than control surrendered to EU initiatives based on integrative-governance.

Crucially, the pre-eminence of geo-strategy would ensure that external support for political change is pitched at very different levels between Arab states: less friendly and unsalvageable regimes are likely to be more readily abandoned, stalwart allies treated more leniently. Where such a recast geo-strategy predominates, we would above all expect to see European governments perusing the variation in reform-paths adopted by different Arab regimes since 2011 and carefully calculating how much and what type of reform to back in each case.

**SCENARIO 5:  
DE-EUROPEANISED GOVERNANCE**

A fifth and final scenario for the future would see the Arab upheavals herald a multilateralisation of EU policy efforts across North Africa and the Middle East. A hub-and-spokes governance pattern still exists between individual Arab states and the European Union. The assumption has often been that many individual Arab states see the EU as their main external reference point and that they have prioritised this bilateral relation rather than ties with other Middle Eastern countries. This tallies with the implied logic of the concept of a 'European Neighbourhood', a single EU hub linked by spokes to individual states around its periphery. Of course, in some cases US influence has been pre-eminent, but certainly in North Africa Europe has generally been seen as the key external interlocutor.

We might expect on-going, over-arching shifts in international power gradually to change this pattern and have a concrete impact in the new Middle East. Instead of any revival of Euro-Mediterranean governance or stronger European

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civil society engagement, the most notable trend may be that of diminishing EU presence in the Middle East. Most strikingly, the political and economic reach of Gulf states into North Africa has deepened appreciably. The role in democracy support of non-Western 'rising' democracies' may prove increasingly pre-eminent. This may be the case not only for Turkey, but also the likes of India, Brazil and Indonesia; these rising powers have to date engaged only sporadically in the Middle East but their transitions experiences are increasingly in demand in the region.

In some measure, a scenario of de-Europeanised governance represents the inverse of the external governance model. Instead of measuring how far the MENA region incrementally aligns itself with EU rules and norms, the key trend would be the region's turn towards non-Western powers. This scenario would see the EU working with rather than against the grain of these trends. The EU would pay less attention purely to crafting its own policy frameworks in hermetic isolation and place more emphasis on crafting joint initiatives with other Middle Eastern regional powers and international actors from outside the region.

### ECLECTIC, BUT STRATEGIC

At present, EU responses to the emerging Middle East are somewhat ad hoc, measured against these ideal-type governance variations. Predictions are hazardous while the disturbed pieces of Middle Eastern politics are yet to resettle in any easily discernible pattern. Opting now definitively for one or other strategic-governance path would be premature. The five scenarios are offered as ways in which the EU might usefully kick-start and order its thinking about future options.

That said, it would seem reasonable to hazard that the trend should be broadly away from the first two models of governance. Most fundamentally, of course, a revival of Euro-Mediterranean governance would require resolution of the Israel-Palestinian conflict; this is not something which the Arab spring appears to

have rendered more likely. More generally, in the Arab world the familiar 'gravitational' model of supporting reform has negligible traction. Unlike in other regions, in the Arab world the EU is not the central force of attraction towards which reform aspirations are drawn. The design of EU-Arab relations will require something of the spirit of Copernicus: in twenty years the EU is likely to be one node enmeshed in Middle Eastern affairs but not that around which Arab politics in any essential sense revolves. This does not mean abandoning Euro-Mediterranean initiatives. Some EU rules may be imported enthusiastically by post-transition Arab regimes. Some governance export will occur. But this will be on a more selective basis, where it addresses Arab states' own concrete policy objectives. The notion of an extended 'Euro-sphere' is not one to which the EU should set its geo-strategic compass.

In contrast, the spirit of the Arab revolts surely invites far more emphasis on the civic dimension of relations than on heavily institutionalised government-to-government policy frameworks. Indeed, to stress the latter to the detriment of citizen involvement would subvert the essence of social empowerment that is the very driving force of the incipient vibrancy of the Middle East.

At the same time, it will be proper and necessary for European governments to have a 'security hold' on the shifting alliances and power balances within the Middle East. The magnitude of change is such that the EU response cannot be sensibly limited to a few worthy, upgraded ENP or UfM projects. A geo-strategic approach should not equate to old-style realist containment; this will be beyond the EU's gift even were it pursued. Nor should it be taken to invite a splintering of EU unity. But it does mean that more rationalised diplomacy will be apposite given the extent to which the Arab spring will transmute into profoundly strategic and varied security dilemmas.

The final scenario of multilateralised international support for Arab reforms is that which is likely to require most additional attention in the medium



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»»»»» term. With more limited material incentives at its disposal, the EU must fashion less direct forms of leverage through building broader alliances on Middle Eastern concerns. The most immediate trend is towards some Arab states engaging more influentially across the wider region. The current influence of rising powers should not be exaggerated; most still have limited engagement in the MENA region. But the EU would do well to start preparing for what is likely eventually to be a far more plural international engagement in the Middle East. EU diplomats frequently pay lip service to just such a concern; yet there is some risk that current choices are locking-in a reliance on EU policy frameworks ill-equipped to foster such multilateralisation. The EU's failure to craft a structured alliance with Turkey specifically on Arab reform support is only the most glaring failure to adjust to a changed order.

This is perhaps, then, the over-riding puzzle for EU long-term strategic thinkers to ponder: what happens when 'gravity fails' and the EU becomes but one in a constellation of many firmaments? The ambitious long-term strategy would be for the EU to move gradually away from treating Arab states as components of 'its neighbourhood' and more as potential partners in global challenges.

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