

The EU's External Action towards the Middle East: Resolution required

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Few in Brussels or member state capitals saw the Arab uprisings coming, yet ever since 2010 European foreign policy-makers have had to devote much time and attention to deciding what or what not to do in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and the Middle East. No list of foreign policy priorities for 2013 could possibly encompass all the challenges ahead, and the EU will certainly be called upon to deal with agenda items that no one had anticipated.

That said, one can foresee certain foreign policy challenges that the EU will have to address this year. Cultivating workable ties with Ukraine, Russia and other neighbours in the east, reviving the transatlantic partnership in trade, rebalancing alliances with Asian countries, and pooling and sharing defence capabilities will all command the attention of those who shape the EU's external action. But the number one challenge that will take up most of the Foreign Affairs Council's time is the Middle East.

This troubled region presents the EU, and indeed the rest of the international community, with a conundrum of interconnected foreign policy challenges: i) overcoming continued Arab upheaval; ii) ending the civil war in Syria; iii) the quest for peaceful coexistence between Israel and Palestine; (iv) Iran's nuclear enrichment programme. Other critical variables in the region include the fragmentation of Iraq, the emergence of radical Islamist governments, and the long-term stability of the House of Saud.

Overcoming continued Arab upheaval

The Arab world is in the grip of major upheaval, which is likely to produce governments that are more responsive to popular sentiment than their predecessors were. They may not be perfect democracies, but political leaders will worry more about popular opinion than the autocrats who ruled before them. But this process will take time – measured in years, not months. As we have seen in Tunisia, Libya and Egypt, these events raise vexing questions for the EU: are they an opportunity to strike a blow for democracy and further marginalise anti-EU forces? Or does the collapse of the old order undermine traditional European friends and allow Islamic extremists (and anti-EU sentiment) a greater voice in the region's politics? What if Jordan, Lebanon, and the Kurds get drawn into the vortex? As High Representative Ashton and Commissioner for the ENP Füle have discovered, the EU does not have a lot of leverage over these events, and few appealing policy options. Among these options are the legally binding multilateral frameworks such as the energy and transport community

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treaties, for example. Including southern ENP countries in the existing treaties will send a real and positive signal that the EU is serious about giving the countries concerned a stake in the internal market and about projecting stability and prosperity in its southern neighbourhood.

Ending the civil war in Syria

First, the EU will have to get off the fence about whether or not it lends its military support to end the bloody stalemate in Syria. Whereas heads of state and government at the December 2012 European Council summit agreed that the EU should consider “all options” to help Syria’s opposition in their fight against the “illegitimate” regime of President Bashar al-Assad, they side-stepped the question of military support for the opposition. The EU currently bans the sale and supply of arms to either side in the conflict. This embargo expires in March. France and the UK have been at the forefront of efforts to move the EU beyond the limits of its policy of sanctions, political support for the opposition and humanitarian aid for civilians. Together with Italy, they persuaded Germany, Spain, the Benelux countries and other member states to recognise the newly unified *National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces* as “the sole representative of the Syrian people”. But their calls have not led the Council of the EU to move beyond the recognition of it as the “legitimate representatives of the aspirations of the Syrian people” (emphasis added), or to comment on the programme of the Syrian opposition coalition, or to reconsider the arms embargo that has prevented the EU from supplying weapons to groups seeking to topple the Assad regime. Sweden and Germany are opposed to the prospect of arming the coalition for fear of contributing to an ethnic civil war long after Assad’s departure. Unless these deep divisions among member states are overcome in favour of a more assertive approach, the EU will not be able to create the necessary tipping point in this protracted conflict where neither party seems willing to concede or able to prevail. As a consequence, the negative spill-over into neighbouring Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey is mounting.

The most troubling scenario may also be the most likely one: protracted chaos and sectarian conflict, leaving a security vacuum and an opportunity for terrorist organisations like Iran-backed Hezbollah to harvest Syria’s large stockpiles of chemical weapons. A prolonged period of uncertainty, with regional powers like Iran, Israel, Saudi Arabia and Turkey trying to maintain their own interests in Syria, highlights the limits of unilateralism in the Middle East.

The search for peaceful coexistence between Israel and Palestine

The EU also has to face up to the fact that there is not going to be a two-state solution between the Israelis and the Palestinians, at least not in the way envisaged before Palestine received overwhelming support in the General Assembly for its request to be recognised as a non-member observer state at the United Nations. The Israeli political right has no interest in the two-state solution, the Palestinians are too weak and divided to put meaningful pressure on them, and the US is too compromised by the Israeli lobby to be an effective mediator. The mantra of a two-state solution has become a convenient fig leaf for politicians, while realities on the ground make it less and less likely by the day. At their December 2012 summit in Brussels, the EU and Russia fired the first shot across the bows by calling for “bold and concrete steps towards peace” to be taken by the parties “in direct and substantial negotiations without preconditions in order to achieve a lasting solution to the conflict”. The EU and Russia indicated that they “will not recognise any changes to the pre-1967 borders, including with regard to Jerusalem, other than those agreed by the parties”. In 2013, the EU and the other members of the Quartet will have to do some serious soul searching about

what an alternative policy should be to address such prickly questions as how to ensure safety for all, 'one person, one vote', and how to end the current state of apartheid.

Iran's nuclear programme

This year is unlikely to see an armed attack by Israel or the US against Iran because Iran will not trigger such a reaction by crossing any 'red lines', meaning that it is not going to try to fabricate or test a nuclear weapon or start enriching uranium to 90%. Also, the stakes and costs of a preventive strike on Iran are simply too high. Most of the US national security establishment thinks that Iran is nowhere near building a bomb anyway. At the same time, consensus is emerging that the US, as indeed the entire international community, will have to gradually adjust itself to a nuclear-capable (but not nuclear armed) Iran. With its ineffective sanctions policy, the West is running out of options to force the Iranian regime to abandon its pursuit of a nuclear capability. We are thus likely to see a new push for some sort of diplomatic deal with Iran this year. It has been reported (and denied) that US President Obama intends to engage with the Iranians directly, but until the latter agree to this, the EU remains in the driving seat of the E3+3 negotiations. The EU, through its High Representative and supported by the European External Action Service, will have to work towards a formal diplomatic deal; one that allows Iran to enrich uranium to low levels in return for dropping its nuclear weapons aspirations, thereby opening the way for the EU to gradually reduce sanctions and strengthen economic ties. This step will also mean negotiating security arrangements with other countries in the region in a period where regional politics are already fairly volatile. This is a tall order for the EU and will need the continued support of all member states for the High Representative's leading role in the E3+3, as well as the backing of non-European permanent members of the UN Security Council. It is to be hoped that the presidential election in June 2013 will bring to power a less incendiary president than Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and allow the EU to strike up credible new negotiations with Iran.

Grand bargain

The violent implosion of Syria and the recent war between Israel and Gaza have underscored the marked deterioration of the strategic environment in the Middle East. It is also clear that the challenges to peace and security in the region are largely interconnected, and neither the EU nor the international community as a whole can maintain the status quo. The EU must review and recalibrate its neighbourhood policies, and member states must realise that the EU cannot pursue an effective humanitarian or political strategy without invoking the military component; neither can it do so without its NATO allies, Russia and China. Forging a stronger international partnership is therefore crucial to all sides. After months of half-baked, unilateral attempts at resolving the foreign policy challenges posed by the Middle East, the time has come for a grand bargain. In this highly volatile environment, and with its own credibility as a foreign policy actor on the line, the EU cannot afford to remain sitting on the fence. The EU itself has to be prepared to take bold and concrete steps to secure peace and stability in the Middle East.