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Europe and the US in the Middle East: a convergence of partiality

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›› The Arab spring has presented the United States and the European Union (EU) with a severe foreign policy test, an acutely delicate challenge but also an opportunity for both actors to regain some of the credibility they had both lost in the Middle East in the years preceding the revolts. Two years on from the Tunisian revolution, US and EU responses merit a mixed evaluation. During the years of the Bush administration, much debate focused on the evident divergence between US and European approaches to the region. Since 2009-2010, the two actors' policies have converged in substance. While tactical discrepancies persist, it is no longer fully convincing to talk of the EU adhering to a fundamentally different approach to human rights and democracy compared to that pursued by the United States. However, if US and EU policies have usefully converged, they have done so around a notably partial response to the Arab spring. US and EU policies currently exhibit many of the same strengths and weaknesses; while this represents a useful platform for more effective transatlantic coordination, it is also a sobering reflection on the limits to both actors' influence.

US RESPONSES TO THE ARAB SPRING

Hesitation, confusion, and a desire to stay in the background have characterised US responses to the momentous changes in the Arab world since early 2011. The United States has done little to try to influence the course of the Arab transitions, partly due to

HIGHLIGHTS

- The Arab spring is both a challenge and an opportunity for the EU and the US.
- While transatlantic differences remain, EU and US policies are strikingly similar in the wake of the Arab uprisings.
- Modest upgrades in US and European policies are insufficient in light of the momentous changes afoot in the MENA.

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preoccupation with its own internal economic and political troubles, but largely due to President Barack Obama's reluctance to play a forceful role in world affairs and the failure of his administration to match stirring rhetoric with meaningful policy follow-up.

When President Obama entered office in January 2009, he never expected to face profound political change inside Arab countries. His administration de-emphasised President George W. Bush's 'freedom agenda', decreased democracy promotion efforts and returned to a more traditional state-to-state form of diplomacy.

With the outbreak of revolution in the Arab world in early 2011, the US administration realigned its priorities. However, while President Obama made an important rhetorical shift, his administration was uneven at best in implementing the stated commitments to prioritise human rights and political reform. Policy toward Syria has been the most glaring and tragic example; more than 60,000 Syrians have been killed while the United States has steered clear of arming rebels or organising a no-fly zone. The US has so far not found a policy mix capable of bringing about the departure from power of President Bashar al-Assad, which Obama said publicly was a necessity from August 2011 onward. The United States contributed to the failure of the Syrian National Council by refusing to support the opposition bloc fully, and repeatedly confused and frustrated its Arab and European allies by failing to articulate any clear strategy forward.

Bahrain proved another difficult issue for the US administration, torn between a sense of the legitimacy of Bahraini protesters' grievances and US security interests – namely, the presence of a US naval base on the island and the insistence of Saudi Arabia that there be no political change in Manama. In the uncertain period following the overthrow of Ben Ali and Mubarak, President Obama equated the Bahraini demonstrations with those in Libya and Yemen, condemning the use of violence by all three governments and calling on them to 'respect the rights of their people'. Yet when troops from Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries helped to crush the uprising in March 2011, the United States stood by largely silent, calling vainly for dialogue and protesting against human rights abuses without attaching any consequences. Members of Congress objected strongly enough to a proposed arms sale to Bahrain in late 2011 to hold up the deal, but the administration proceeded with the sale in May 2012 despite their objections.

Egypt, with which the United States has enjoyed a close military and economic assistance relationship since the late 1970s, has proved a particular challenge. President Obama made the rhetorical shift from supporting former President Hosni Mubarak to saying that 'the transition must begin now' in less than one week after the uprising began on 25 January 2011. Changing actual US dealings with Egypt, however, has proved more difficult. The US administration appeared at first relieved to find the Egyptian Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) in charge of the country after Mubarak was forced out. But it became increasingly dismayed by the SCAF's poor management of the politics and economics of transition, not to mention its tolerance of continuing human rights abuses against peaceful demonstrators and its failure to contain sectarian violence. After elections produced an Islamist-dominated parliament and a president from the once-banned Muslim Brotherhood, the United States found itself with few levers to influence the new leaders.

One area in which the United States adapted more nimbly to a changing environment was regarding its contacts with Islamist political actors, for example the Brotherhood and Salafists in Egypt and the Nahda party in Tunisia. US Embassies began to cultivate contacts with such groups after the uprisings but before they won elections, finding a receptive partner in Islamist groups eager to prove that they could be responsible leaders. The failure to galvanise adequate economic assistance for the elected governments, however, left US diplomats in

touch with Islamists but without many levers of influence over them. Moreover, US concerns over Salafists' influence may now be growing.

The United States stumbled repeatedly in efforts to reformulate the assistance relationship with Egypt, consisting of $1.5 billion in military and some $250 million in economic aid annually before the revolution. The US continued to deliver the military assistance on schedule, but had significant difficulty figuring out the economic side. Then Secretary of State Hillary Clinton offered $150 million in emergency assistance on her trip to Cairo in March 2011, most of which was reprogrammed funding already allocated to Egypt. The SCAF and Mubarak-era holdovers in the cabinet objected strongly to the assistance and actually prosecuted US non-governmental organisations trying to deliver it, generating much ill will in both countries. Subsequent US plans to grant $1 billion in the form of a debt swap did not come through due to the inability of a series of transitional Egyptian governments to agree terms, and the US Congress objected to a later plan to provide $450 million in cash transfers. Repeatedly, US officials argued among themselves for so long about potential assistance packages that their plans were overtaken by rapidly changing developments in Egypt, including a growing polarisation between President Morsi and the secular opposition. In March 2013, new Secretary of State John Kerry offered Egypt $190 million in cash assistance and $60 million to start an enterprise fund, but he cautioned that further disbursements would have to await the building of greater political inclusivity and consensus on economic reforms.

Neither Europe nor the US can expect to determine political outcomes in the region, but both can realistically aim to facilitate change

Regarding Libya, the United States initially played a decisive role by joining France, Britain, and other allies in a UN-sanctioned military intervention to protect civilians, thereby enabling rebels to overcome forces supporting former leader Muammar Gaddafi in September 2011. But Washington's subsequent inattention to a chaotic security situation in the heavily armed country led to the assassination of Ambassador Christopher Stevens (the first US ambassador to be killed in the line of duty in three decades) in Benghazi on 11 September 2012. A report by the US Senate's Homeland Security Committee condemned as a 'grievous mistake' the US government's failure to take adequate notice of the strong security threats in the country, including the danger to US diplomats.

The United States was somewhat more successful in increasing assistance to Tunisia and Yemen to accommodate the changing needs of these two countries. In Tunisia the United States modestly increased military assistance after the revolution, but concentrated primarily on a diverse assistance package to the economy and the private sector, including paying off $100 million in Tunisian debt to international financial institutions, providing sovereign loan guarantees, and initiating a Millennium Challenge Corporation threshold programme that might in time result in a larger grant for economic development. In Yemen, the United States provided some $346 million in security and economic assistance in the 2012 fiscal year, an increase of about 15 per cent over what it provided in 2010, before the uprising.

EU RESPONSES: BOUNDED CHANGE

This summary overview of US responses to the Arab revolts provides a basis for comparison with European policies. It is still widely assumed in Europe that the EU benefits from a distinctive and qualitatively different approach to human rights and political reform, setting it apart from heavy-handed US power projection. ››››››

The EU-US divide became something of an all-encompassing abyss during the Bush administration. While transatlantic differences undoubtedly remain, the mixed picture in US policy development since 2010 is strikingly similar to the ways in which EU strategy has evolved in the wake of the Arab uprisings.

Prior to 2011, the EU's Middle Eastern policies were treading water. Since early 2011 a plethora of new initiatives, policy documents and funding mechanisms have come on stream, through both EU institutions and member states' national policies. The EU has committed to supporting incipient political change in a more nuanced, sophisticated and demand-driven fashion. The fact that new resources have been found in the midst of the euro zone crisis and economic recession indicates the priority attached to the Arab revolts. The EU's 'renewed' Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) has inched forward commitments to dialogue with the full range of political actors in Arab states, provide more generous Mobility Partnerships, assist in job creation and back deeper economic integration across the Mediterranean. These initiatives have been detailed in other FRIDE policy briefs, as has the limited follow-through on trade and migration agreements and on the principle of positive conditionality. The pertinent point here is that their broad features and fraught, only partial implementation resonate closely with the predicaments of US policy.

The EU and US have converged on the question of engagement with Islamist parties, although American diplomats tend to be slightly more open on this question than most of their European counterparts. For example, several EU member states remain formally reluctant to talk about engagement with the Justice and Charity movement in Morocco, over which the US has been less restrained.

Like the US, the EU has injected several hundred million euros/dollars of additional aid into the Middle East since 2011. In both cases these constitute generous accretions, but an insufficient basis from which conditionality policies can hope to wield substantial leverage. Arab civil society berates both actors for still channelling most of their aid through governments or non-governmental organisations (NGOs) that are not fully independent.

Just like the Obama administration's ambivalence, the EU's enthusiasm for change in the Middle East has exhibited clear limitations. In overall terms, European support for democratic change has remained partial and has been offered largely after-the-fact. In private, most member states' diplomats still express scepticism about attempting to exert tough diplomatic pressure or conditionality. In the cases of Libya and Syria, the EU has showed itself willing and able to pursue tougher forms of diplomacy and operational engagement. However, beyond Syria, the EU has been reluctant to impose punitive measures. Non-reforming states have benefitted from increased aid. The EU has struggled just as much as the US to gain traction in Egypt, caught between a perceived lack of influence and growing concern at the strategic effects of sustained domestic turbulence. Egypt has been judged largely resistant to coercive pressure or conditionality.

Despite raising concerns, member states upgraded security and commercial cooperation with Bahrain in the aftermath of the democracy uprising; like the US, they pushed the regime to open a national dialogue but declined to exert any punitive pressure. Similarly in North Africa, the January 2013 conflict in Mali and hostage crisis in southern Algeria has pushed human rights even further into the background, as both the US and European governments have sought a tightening of traditional security cooperation with the Algerian *pouvoir*.

It is often remarked that geographical proximity gives the EU the kind of deep economic, social and people-oriented stakes in the Middle East that are absent from US policy. The EU offered deep and comprehensive free trade agreements

(DCFTAs) to four Arab states and Mobility Partnerships to grant greater access for North African workers to European labour markets. However, more than two years into the Arab spring, neither the DCFTAs nor the Mobility Partnerships have moved beyond an early stage of discussion. The EU's failure to offer attractive trade and free movement incentives to Arab partners has long been an Achilles Heel of European strategy; the Arab spring has not yet prompted member states entirely to correct this constriction on European influence.

In similar vein to the Obama administration, the EU's cautious guideline has been to be in listening mode and take the lead from local actors. What this means in practice remains uncertain in many policy areas. Arab democratic activists most commonly judge the EU to have under- rather than over-played its hand. While counter-terrorism has ceased to be quite so heavily the leading-edge of European policy in the Middle East, security officials have worried that precipitous change might stoke greater dangers in the long term. A traditional security logic is as evident in many European policies as it is within US strategies. In the Gulf, Algeria and Lebanon, a preference for the status quo still colours European foreign policies. The UK and France have been active in supporting the Syrian opposition, but like the US have eschewed direct intervention against the Assad regime, fearing that the regional consequences would be profoundly destabilising.

One way in which the EU does set itself apart from the US approach to human rights is in its export of the inter-state rules and regulations that form the bedrock of the Union's own integration. There is no strict equivalent to such 'external governance' in US democracy and human rights support. However, the EU itself now often ponders a more flexible approach to such exported governance. Critics within Arab states complain that the EU still depends too much on exporting its own rules and regulations; local actors in the region today plead for a more flexible set of European responses not so heavily predicated on the EU's own institutional templates or so heavily formalised as the ENP and the parallel Union for the Mediterranean. Arab regimes have become more selective in deciding which aspects of the EU's model of governance they are willing to import; and they now negotiate far more assertively with the EU to resist the rules they deem inappropriate. This may presage a less 'institutionalised' European approach to the Middle East that could bring EU policies even closer in character to those of the United States.

CONCLUSION

The West's impact on the nascent shaping of the new Middle East has so far been relatively marginal. The EU and US have changed their policies in a pro-reform direction just when their own power has begun to diminish more notably. While the EU and US have offered many initiatives to help reformers, in the region these are judged to have been too limited significantly to condition elite choices. Where reform has remained blocked, US and European policies have played a modest role in tempering the worst excesses of regimes' repression but have not been clear enough in direction or resolve to unlock genuine democratisation. US and European elites share a preference for very carefully-managed processes of 'liberalisation-lite' rather than democratisation, where the latter is not already unequivocally unfolding.

US and European policies towards the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) have been modestly upgraded but not fundamentally redesigned in a way that is fully commensurate with the momentous changes afoot. Many aspects of Western policy have improved and lessons from the past have been internalised. But the EU and US have eschewed a qualitatively different strategy to match reconfigured Middle Eastern dynamics, and both actors still treat the MENA region as something to protect themselves against rather than an area of positive opportunity. Neither Europe nor the United

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States can expect to determine political outcomes in the region, but both can realistically aim to facilitate change and avoid rendering democratisation more difficult. While they have made some progress in meeting this criterion, their policies still fall short in many crucial regards.

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A longer version of this paper is due to appear in a new book on the Arab spring edited by Nathan Brown, Abdulwahab Alkebsi and Charlotta Sparre to be published by Routledge in 2013.

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