

The Arab Uprising six years on: Rethinking the EU's role

Expert roundtable's Report

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Trumps' presidency, the Brexit, Russia and Turkey's role in the Syrian conflict are some of the many challenges facing the European Union (EU) in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). An expert roundtable taking place on 9th March 2017 has debated the EU's achievements six years after the Arab uprisings and its future prospects as a foreign policy actor. Hosted by the Center for European Research at Queen Mary University of London, the roundtable, moderated by Sarah Wolff, from QMUL, brought together leading experts to rethink EU's role in the Arab World.

Bill Park visiting professor in the department of defence studies at Kings College London discussed the current situation in Turkey and the future of EU relations with Turkey. Francesco Cavatorta, Associate Professor in the Department of Political Science at Université Laval in Quebec, Canada, argued that the rise of Salafism was one of the most interesting consequences of the Arab awakening that could not be ignored by Europeans. Michelle Pace Professor with Special Responsibilities (MSO) within The External Relations of the European Union with special emphasis on the relations with the Middle East at Roskilde University in Denmark reviewed EU's problematic regional vision of Euro-Mediterranean relations as well as the EU's limited ability to affect the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

6 years post-Arab uprisings: shifting EU narratives

6 years ago, the Arab uprisings were the very first major foreign policy crisis for European diplomacy since the creation of the European External Action Service (EEAS). People on Tahrir square, in the streets of Tunis, Yemen or the 20 February movement were aspiring to a Western type of democracy, and its inherent secular and liberal characteristics. The revolutionaries suddenly became sympathetic to European opinions and policy-makers. Although some EU member states took some time to realize what was going on, the EEAS and the European Commission quickly issued a number of documents calling for 'Partnership for Democracy and Shared Prosperity'¹ and the 'revised European Neighbourhood Policy'.² The EU had planned to engage with the region through two main axes First, it was about 'Building a deep democracy', i.e. not only writing democratic constitutions and conducting free and fair elections, but creating and sustaining an independent judiciary, a thriving free press, a dynamic civil society and all other characteristics of a mature functioning democracy. Second, it was about ensuring inclusive and sustainable economic growth and development, without which democracy will not take root. A particular challenge is to ensure strong job creation'.³

However, the initially promising changes in the region took different trajectories, providing a picture of an extremely complex phenomenon toward which the EU's response proved not

¹ European Commission and High Representative (2011) Joint Communication. *A Partnership for Democracy and Shared Prosperity with the Southern Mediterranean*. Brussels, 8 March 2011

² European Commission (2013). *EU's response to the Arab Spring: The State of Play after two Years*, Brussels 8 February 2013.

³ European Commission (2011) *The EU's response to the Arab Spring, Brussels 16 December 2011*. Accessed on 21 March 2017 at http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_MEMO-11-918_en.htm

to be always coherent and concrete. 6 years later, the situation in the region is mixed. Except for the fragile democratic transition in Tunisia, authoritarianism has returned to Egypt, Turkey is not a democracy anymore, Libya and Syria's future are pretty uncertain and have seen an increased interest from Russia and a loss of influence of Europe. The 'Tunisian miracle' is fragile due to the very unstable economic situation, the difficulties of the public sector and job creation. Lebanon and Jordan are experiencing extreme societal pressures with the inflow of Syrian refugees and the EU due to its migration policy has put the onus on its Southern neighbours. The EU sees the MENA region as an 'arc of crisis' where 'sectarianism' and ISIS constitute important threats. But this is also a convenient narrative to avoid speaking about the failure of EU neo-liberal and democracy promotion policies. Most recent opinion poll survey in the MENA region show indeed that what matters to Arab citizens are their socio-economic rights and corruption (Arab Trans, 2016), an area where the EU has been doing very little.

Not everything is negative though and the EU managed to have some achievements. The EU has managed to conclude the Nuclear deal with Iran in 2015, it has provided substantial humanitarian aid and financial support for refugees and migration as well as to support the Tunisian transition (4.6 billion euros to Jordan and Lebanon). Terrorist attacks in Europe and EU internal security interests seem however to drive one more time the EU's policy. The roundtable however debated three main challenges that the EU should take into account in its foreign policy: (i) dealing with illiberal Turkey (ii) acknowledging the politicization of Salafism (iii) the EU's problematic regional vision of the Mediterranean.

The Turkish demise: from regional model to illiberal regime

Although in the immediate aftermath of the Arab uprisings, Turkey and its Islamist party the AKP (the Justice and Development Party), incarnated the model of an Islamist democratic model for the region, six years later, and after the summer 2016 'coup', Turkey is no longer vested with this primacy. Professor Bill Park, King's college Defense Studies department, spoke about the changing trajectory of Turkey's regional policy and the internal political developments of the last 10 years, providing the picture of a "transactional country" that has radically reviewed its positions *vis à vis* the EU membership in the last years.

According to Park's, back in 2006 "the AKP, the party ruling the country, could not expect the context of evolution that happened after the Arab uprisings" and the first reaction was to support the Muslim Brotherhoods in the region. In Syria, Turkey pushed hard to impose Muslim Brotherhood partners to the Syrian National Council pursuing an anti-Assad tactic. Following the overthrow of Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, Turkey became isolated in this sectarian strategy. The Democratic Union Kurdish Party in Syria (PYD) which dominates the Kurdish politics in northern Syria added another level of concern for Turkish's regional security. Given the PYD affiliation with the Turkish PKK (the Kurdish Worker Party), this represented for the Turks a threatening expansion of the PKK influence in Syria that needed to be tackled. Domestic politics became quickly the main driver of Turkey's role in the Syrian conflict, before overthrowing Assad and defeating the Islamic State. Turkey's interests have thus been at odds with the US and European concern to fight the Islamic State. Instead, following the Russian's jet shooting down of late 2015 Erdoğan's decided to increase its cooperation with Russia, with the view of having more leeway to fight PYD in northern Syria.

Although before 2005, the AKP has maintained good relationship with the EU and cooperated on the Cyprus issue, domestic policies then started to shift, according to Park. Erdoğan started to turn against secular and liberals movements and the 2013 repression of the Gezi protests constituted the first real example of the internal illiberalism. The illiberal nature of the government culminated with

the coup attempt of July 2016 and could be endorsed by the 16 April 2017 constitutional referendum. The 18 constitutional amendments, if successfully approved, and held in a state of emergency, will concentrate executive, legislative and judiciary powers in the hands of Erdoğan, thus completing the Turkish president's internal autocratic strategy.

Turkish illiberal path has not affected greatly EU's stance that still sees Turkey as a strategic partner. Debates on human rights remains mostly confined to the European Parliament that voted in 2016 [a resolution on freezing accession talks with Turkey](#). Bill Park noted that there is no longer an impetus, from either the EU or Turkey perspective, for the Turkish EU membership⁴. Turkey is pursuing a *realpolitik* and pragmatic foreign policy looking for the best possible trade partners. What seems clear however is that Erdoğan is no longer committed to an Europeanization of the country, he is rather interested in his family, his followers, and to push for authoritarianism.

In concluding his speech professor Park expressed to the audience that, at present, there are no good news when considering a democratic future for Turkey. The only perspective is that a section of civil society, those liberals, secularists and young people that have been victims of recent Turkish policies react against the *status quo*, thus leading the country toward what professor Park labelled a "Turkish Renaissance".

Salafism as a Key feature of Post Arab Uprisings.

The EU has never been very enthusiastic in dealing with Islamists. Yet the Arab uprisings have seen a new phenomenon: the politicization of Salafism in some Arab countries. In his book *Salafism after the Arab awakening: Contending with people's power* co-edited with Frederic Merone,⁵ Francesco Cavatorta argues that the post Arab uprising literature falls short in providing answers related to the Salafists political moments and their shift from quietism to political participation. It is therefore important to have a better insight of this new political reality, in order to change a common European discourse that tends to relegate Salafists only to political violence while as Cavatorta stressed: "the majority of them are not violent". There are three main features to the rise of Salafism.

The rise of Salafism and their politicization has been sudden but circumscribed to some countries like Egypt, Tunisia and Yemen. Their rise was made possible in countries where political systems were to be constructed from scratch after the fall of the authoritarian regimes. Salafists joined politics not individually through engagement in existing parties, but rather creating new political movements. This radical shift from the usual absence of Salafists from politics to a real engagement is, according to Cavatorta, follows rational calculations. First, the Salafists felt the need to run against the Muslim Brothers due to an ideological and political rivalry that found practical terms in the control of the mosques. Second, in countries where transitions succeeded and democratic elections were to be held, Salafists had to be a political alternative for the conservative portion of electorates. After authoritarian overthrows Salafists realized that "now that votes matter, we have to be present". The central point, however, is that those Salafists political actors are not supporting democratic principles and individual rights, rather they entered the political spectrum only to prevent Muslim Brotherhood and secularists from sharing the power amongst themselves.

In countries however where no great political and institutional changes happened, for instance in the case of Jordan, Salafists refrained from supporting the revolts and remained outside the political

⁴ Turkish first accession talks date back to 1987 and in 1997 the country was considered eligible for membership. The Accession negotiation started in 2005. Source: ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood

⁵ Cavatorta, F. and Merone F. (2017), "Salafism After the Arab Awakening: Contending with People's power", Hurst & Co Publishers.

scene. As Cavatorta noted this pragmatic behavior was due to the certainty of revolt's failure. Another difference is that while some Salafists chose arm struggle, others renounced violence. They made different choices depending on the domestic political situation. One common feature though was that all Salafist movements had the urgency to deal with the Arab Rebellions and to take positions, for the first time, on the aspirations and desires of ordinary people thus shifting from pure theological practices. Salafist movements throughout the region share however a commitment to restricting individual freedoms following a strict interpretation of religion. There is also a continuity on sectarianism anti Shia discourse, as Cavatorta posited, in Syria as well as in Tunisia: "the sectarian virus infected also countries where there are no Shia, like in the Tunisian case and this is a great part of the Salafi ideology, propaganda and political activity". Lastly, the book also address the continuous importance played by Saudi Arabia even after the Arab Uprisings. Saudi Arabia is still embodying a pivotal role in dictating the Salafist's actions, together with the importance and the contamination that is directed through transnational links and networks where lectures are given between Salafists belonging to different countries.

The different reactions revealed by Salafist movements are to be acknowledged by European policy makers. In particular, as stressed by Cavatorta it is important to notice that: "Salafists constitute an important social actor in the Arab World and even if the EU might not like them in terms of ideology and illiberalism they are relevant actors", being aware of their differences as well as their pivotal role in some political realities might represent a good starting point for reframing Western action toward the Arab region.

The structural weakness of the EU's Regional vision of the Mediterranean

The EU's tendency to denial differences and structural factors constituting the Arab World is one of the main themes addressed by Michelle Pace. This is quite visible when analyzing the EU's presuppositions and judgments toward the Arab region. In the past 20 years, since the creation of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP), the EU has engaged in practices that aim at constructing a "region" between the EU and MENA countries, thus *de facto* not considering important structural features that separate North Mediterranean countries from southern countries.

Another structural weakness of EU action is that it tends to consider its own actions toward MENA countries as those of an unitary power, while it has been widely showed how member states legacies hinder the EU from speaking with one voice when dealing with third countries. The so-called refugee crisis is a case in point, that saw Sweden and Germany preferring to follow a humanitarian approach while Hungary reacted in more reactionary manner.

EU's level unity in policy formulation and implementation has been low, leading to a lowest common denominator preference for security over democracy. Instead, realism characterizes EU relations with Southern Mediterranean countries and human rights seem to have reached the bottom of European foreign policy. Academics and experts, stressed Pace, analyzed the EU's establishment of economic partnerships with authoritarian regime as a reaction to the Chinese investments in MENA countries. From a governance perspective, however, this shift from a Normative agenda to an economic and pragmatic one is also attributed to the supremacy of intergovernmentalist over multilateral decision making in EU's foreign policy. Since 2011, the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership became a stability union where the EU provided Arab regimes with legitimacy in exchange for their cooperation on economic, security and migration issues.

In the case of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict this explains why although the EU's position still matters, it is ineffective. Although economical and cultural links have been tightened with Israel through initiatives such as Horizon 2020, a two states solution is far from being realized as Israel is

increasing settlements buildings. The EU has not been able to speak up against settlements and the absence of recognition of the 2006 Palestinian elections, which saw the democratic election of Hamas, was, according to Pace, a false step in the direction of finding a solution. Therefore, the EU should take an “hardcore decision” in order to be more assertive in finding a solution to the Israeli-Palestinian crisis. What we are seeing, suggested Pace, is the EU’s primal focus on the refugee crisis that does not leave any space for the Palestinians, the only viable alternative is for the EU to rethink about its actions and have a say in the Israel-Palestinian relations.

Overall, the discussion with the audience projected a rather pessimistic outlook of EU’s role in the region. Three main conclusions were drawn that can serve as a basis to rethink EU’s foreign policy more generally. First, if ‘Europeanization’ has not enough to avoid illiberal tendencies, and that the EU, for instance in the case of the Israeli-Palestine conflict violates human rights, the erosion of democracy is a global phenomenon. Second, it is high time to account for the impact of post-colonial legacies and the fact that the West tends to address the region according to its own values. More work could be done about memory in the Mediterranean. Third, regarding the role of political Islam in the region, again the Arab world is not unique and religion is often used in different regions of the world by politicians to address citizens’ concerns.

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