

The EU in the Arab Spring: A Reinforcer Rather than a Catalyst

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A wave of popular unrest has shaken the Arab World. Since the outbreak of the first demonstrations in December 2010, the region has witnessed the fall of Ben Ali in Tunisia, of Mubarak in Egypt and of Saleh in Yemen; two monarchies (Jordan and Morocco) have advanced reform packages, and finally Libya and Syria have gone down the violence spiral towards a civil war. The so-called “Arab Springs” are clearly marked by uncertainty and civil society has sent a clear message to their leaders: there is a need for freedom, dignity and justice.

The EU has been relatively quick at responding to these changes in its neighbourhood by putting forward two Communications in March and May 2011,¹ aimed at supporting the challenges of the region through a revamped European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP). Yet this well-articulated rhetoric has not delivered any efficient strategy thus far and the blunt reality of the Arab uprisings has done nothing but underline the already apparent shortcomings of the EU policies

After all, while constantly reaffirming its commitment to upholding human rights and democracy, the EU has in practice tacitly supported for many years the very regimes and ruling autocrats responsible for the general discontent of a wide spectrum of the Arab society.² Even today, despite acknowledging the need for a greater outreach to the Arab civil society – as opposed to the traditionally government-to-government relations –, the EU continues to fail at establishing a direct and honest dialogue with the Arab societies by listening to their needs and expectations – arguably due to a lack of consensus on what “civil society” actually means and on which are its desirable components.³ In other words, the EU policies continue to mirror a mismatch between alleged goals and actual outcomes.

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1. See “A New Response to a Changing Neighbourhood: A Review of European Neighbourhood Policy” and “Partnership for Democracy and Shared Prosperity with the Southern Mediterranean”.

2. Rosemary Hollis, “No Friend of Democratization: Europe’s Role in the Genesis of the Arab Spring”, *International Affairs*, Vol. 88, No. 1, January 2012, pp. 81-94.

3. See discussion on the EU’s controversial definition of civil society in: Annette Jünemann, *Civil Society, Its Role and Potential in the New Mediterranean Context: Which EU Policies?*, 2012, IEMedObs FOCUS, in http://www.iemed.org/observatori/arees-danalisi/arxiu-adjunts/copy_of_focus/86-Junemann.pdf.

This article addresses the experts' perception of the role played by the EU in the Arab Spring and its future influence in the region, based on the results of the *2011 Euromed Survey of Experts and Actors*,⁴ in particular, it draws on a number of questions of the survey in which experts were asked to assess the international response (and in particular that of the EU) to the Arab uprisings, as well as the future role and influence capacity of the EU in the region compared to other external and regional actors, and the prospects for sustainable democracy in each of the different countries. Altogether, an analysis of the reactions of the experts to these questions should allow us to draw some conclusions about the external perception of the EU's role during the Arab Spring and the success of its policies, as well as to anticipate its relative weight in the new constellation of actors which is emerging in the region.

Considering the long-term engagement of the EU in the region, initially through the Barcelona Process and the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP), and currently mainly within the framework of the ENP and the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM), one would have expected the EU to play a prominent role in the genesis of the Arab Spring. Quite disappointingly instead, the EU is depicted by many experts of the *2011 Euromed Survey of Experts and Actors* as having been caught totally off guard by the unfolding developments in its southern neighbourhood. The EU can be seen accordingly, as it will be argued in this article, as having played at best a supportive role to the movement – but definitely not as a catalyst.

The European Union Overshadowed by Turkey as Best Response-Provider to the Arab Spring

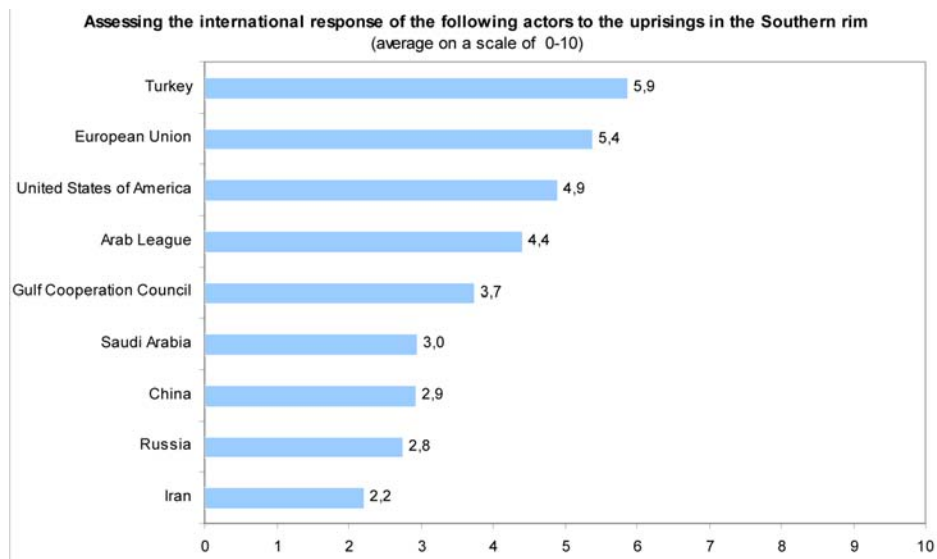
Overwhelmed by the magnitude of the events in the Arab countries, the EU responded with hesitation and incoherence, at least initially. Mixed activism and passivism⁵ were accompanied by regular displays of disunity among EU member states about what should be the strategy for this changing scenario. On the one hand, the EU failed to act in a more resolute fashion, particularly with some countries more than with others, continuing to show the drawbacks of an (un)common foreign policy which the European External Action Service has unfortunately failed to make more consistent. On the other hand, the EU did respond to the Arab Spring by advancing a broad range of measures of the humanitarian, diplomatic, military and financial kind (i.e. the SPRING programme, the Civil Society Facility, high level task-forces, the appointment of an EU Special Representative for the Southern Mediterranean, two joint Communications, etc.). However, its actions continue to be, as ever, more influenced by its interests than by its professed values and this, within a context of economic hardships, has tempered its response, precluding the mobilization of large-scale resources able to have a real impact.

4. The Euromed Survey of Experts and Actors on the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership is part of the programme "Promoting mutual awareness, understanding and cooperation between the EU and the European Neighbourhood Region (South)", co-funded by the European Union through the European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument (ENPI) regional track and conducted by the IEMed between December 2011 and January 2012.

5. Tobias Schumacher, "The EU and the Arab Spring: Between Spectatorship and Actorness", *Insight Turkey*, Vol. 13, No.3, 2011, pp. 107-119.

In spite of all these shortcomings, according to the *2011 Euromed Survey of Experts and Actors*, the EU appears in relative terms as the “second best” response-provider to the uprisings in the southern rim after Turkey (see Graph 1). However, this positive opinion needs to be nuanced, as when translated into absolute terms its performance appears as rather moderate (5.4 on average on a scale from 0-10 – where 10 stands for “very positive” and 0 for “very disappointing”).

Graph 1



Source: Own elaboration based on data from the *2011 Euromed Survey of Experts and Actors*.

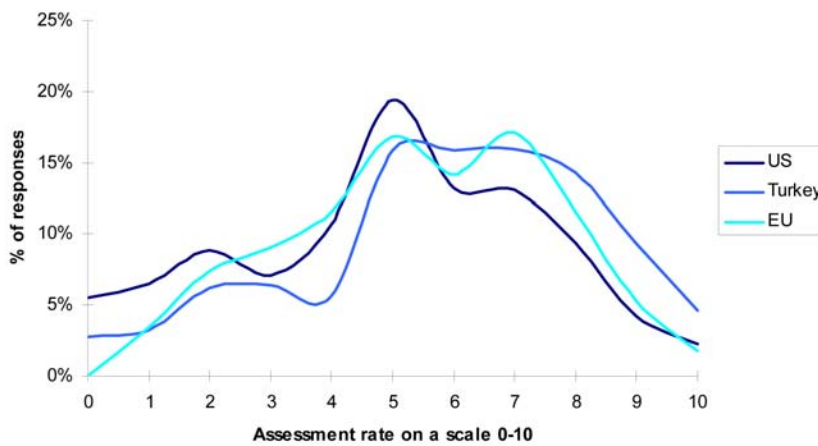
Actually, even in relative terms these findings need to be taken carefully. When looking individually at the distribution of responses assessing the response provided by the EU, the US and Turkey to the Arab Spring, we observe that the means displayed in Graph 1 – particularly in the case of Turkey and the US – are a bit biased due to the presence of extreme values (see Graph 2). 6% and 4% of respondents, respectively, have for instance assessed the US’ and Turkey’s response to the Arab Spring with a 0, while up to 5% of respondents have assessed Turkey’s performance very positively, giving it a 10.

In the case of the US, the negative values come mainly from some Scandinavian countries (3.9 and 3.6 average values from Danish and Swedish respondents) and from Palestinian and Lebanese respondents (3.5 and 3.4, respectively), while Finnish, Latvian, Maltese and Albanian respondents seem on average very satisfied with the US response (6.1, 6.7, 7.2 and 9). In the case of Turkey, the distribution has a negative skew due to fairly negative values from Cyprus (3.4), Israel (4.1) and Syria (4.4) and from some central European countries (Slovakia, 4.3 and Czech Republic, 4.2). In turn, respondents from EU countries are, in general, very positive in their assessment of Turkey’s response, and so are respondents from the Maghreb and from Palestine (most averages are either equal to or even exceed 6). Finally, the graph displaying

the responses assessing the reaction of the EU to the Arab Spring is the one resembling the most to a “normal distribution” – the majority of responses falling between 5 and 7. All in all, these figures deserve a more in-depth analysis, but the main conclusion here is that the means displayed in Graph 1 should not be interpreted without taking into account the aforementioned nuances.

Graph 2

Assessing the response of the EU, the US and Turkey to the Arab uprisings
(distribution of responses)



Source: Own elaboration based on data from the 2011 *Euromed Survey of Experts and Actors*.

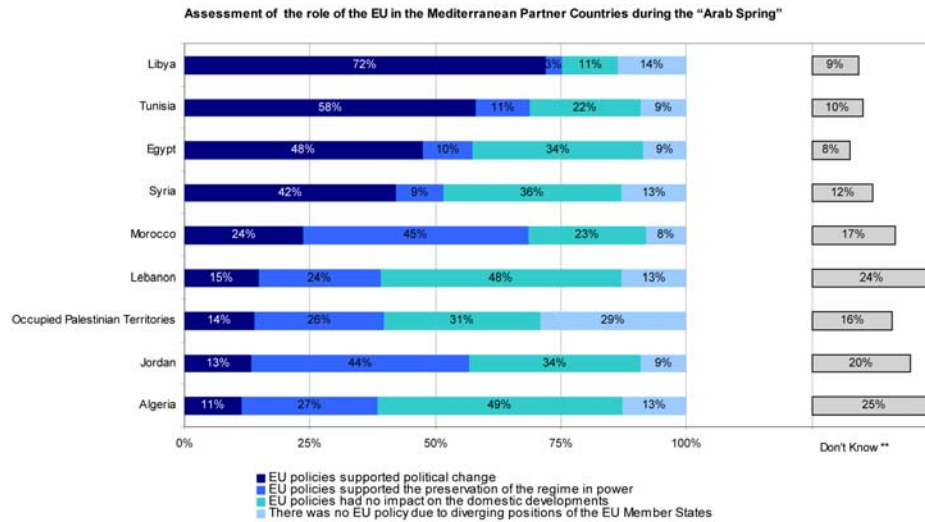
A Heterogeneous Action in the Region

The EU’s uneven strategy in the Arab Spring has given rise to a wide range of perceptions about its influence on the political events taking place in the southern shore of the Mediterranean (see Graph 3). EU policies have been regarded as supportive of political change in non-oil republican regimes such as Tunisia or Egypt (58 and 48%⁶ of respondents to the *Euromed Survey*, respectively). In the wake of the NATO intervention, an overwhelming majority of experts consider that the EU supported Khadafi’s fall in Libya (72%). Even in Syria, the EU’s hesitant stance has been interpreted along the lines of political change (42% of experts). In turn, EU policies towards non-oil monarchies such as Jordan or Morocco have been limited to the promotion of political reforms (13 and 24%), but they are largely perceived as having supported the preservation of the regimes in power (44 and 45%). Finally, experts do not perceive EU policies as having had any significant impact on Algerian and Lebanese internal dynamics (49 and 48%), and divergences among member states’ positions have diluted the EU’s approach towards the Occupied Palestinian Territories (60% of respondents, adding up those who think that there was no EU policy at all and those considering that EU policies had no impact).

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6. All the figures used in this article refer to the answers making a particular assessment or expressing an opinion, excluding the “Don’t know” replies.

Graph 3



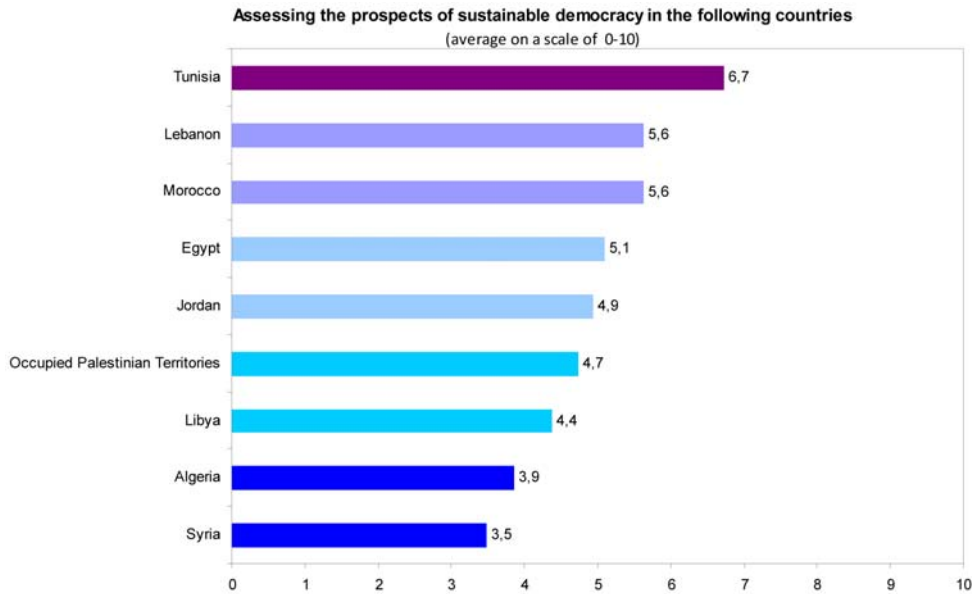
Source: Own elaboration based on data from the 2011 *Euromed Survey of Experts and Actors*.

What is interesting to note in the light of these results is that the EU's intervention in the Arab Spring, using measures ranging from a soft to a hard nature, is not automatically correlated with a more positive assessment of the prospects of sustainable democracy in the different target countries (see Graph 4). For instance, the EU has shown a constructive and continued involvement in Tunisia, Morocco and Jordan, but prospects for democracy are significantly higher in the former rather than in the latter two (respectively, 6.7, 5.6 and 4.9 on average on a scale from 0 to 10 – 10 standing for “very probable” and 0 for “very improbable”). In turn, EU member states' contribution to the NATO military intervention in Libya was able to overthrow the former authoritarian regime, but did not improve the prospects for a sustainable democracy in this country, at least in the near future (4.4). All in all, EU policies towards its Southern partners do seem to have a certain impact (in one sense or another) on the prospects of democracy in the Arab countries, but the feasibility of democratic transitions lies mainly in endogenous factors. Algeria and Lebanon are two cases in point. While EU's engagement in both countries can arguably be assimilated, Lebanon ranks second in terms of prospects for sustainable democracy right after Tunisia, whereas Algeria ranks last but with a gloomy average assessment of 3.9. An increased EU engagement in Algeria might strengthen the democratic values in this country, but the regime's reluctance to major political reforms ultimately remains the key factor explaining the pessimism of respondents about a more democratic scenario. This seems to confirm Echagüe's conclusion that transitions in the MENA region⁷ will be determined by domestic actors rather than by external actors, albeit external actors may reinforce or undermine an on-going indigenous process.⁸

7. MENA stands for “Middle East and North Africa”.

8. Ana Echagüe, *The Role of External Actors in the Arab Transitions*, “FRIDE Policy Brief”, No. 122, April 2012, pp. 1-6.

Graph 4

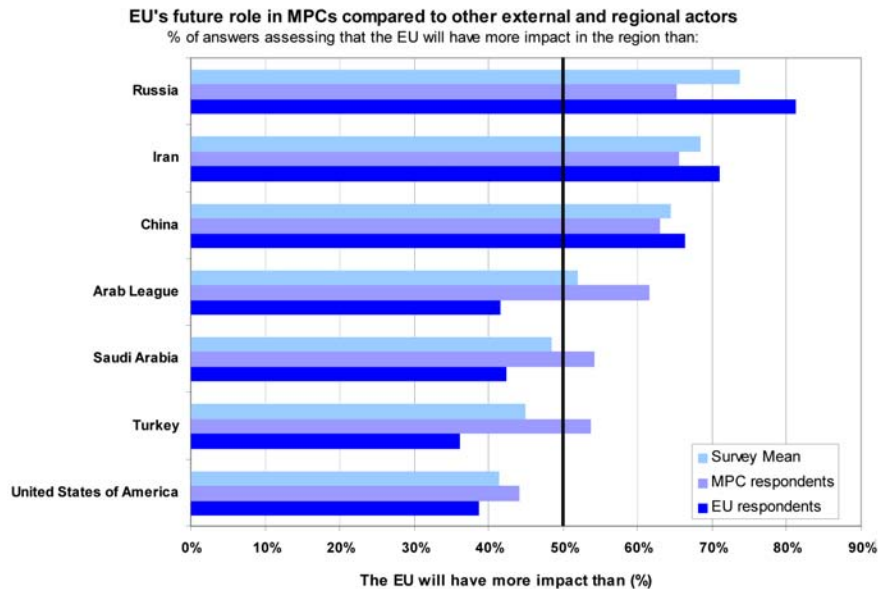


Source: Own elaboration based on data from the 2011 Euromed Survey of Experts and Actors.

North/South Cleavage over European Union’s Future Role in the Region

While ranking second as “best” response-provider to the Arab Spring according to the 2011 Euromed Survey of Experts and Actors after Turkey – bearing in mind the aforementioned nuances – (see Graph 1), the EU only appears in the fourth position when it comes to future influence in the region (see Graph 5). In contrast, despite having received a lower mark in terms of response to the Arab uprisings, the US is expected to remain the most influent actor in the MENA region in the years to come. With a second position in the ranking of influence, Turkey is expected to play an increasingly prominent role in the region and has already positioned itself before the EU. Indeed, according to several experts having responded to the 2011 Euromed Survey, this country is increasingly perceived as a “model” for the region, being a mostly Muslim country within a secular state progressively consolidating itself as a mature democracy. Alas, while Turkey’s foreign policy since the AKP’s arrival to power in 2002 seems to have paid – Turkey increasing its presence and influence in the Mashrek –, the same cannot be held about the EU. In spite of its long engagement in the region and of its relatively active response to the Arab Spring, it is deemed to maintain a secondary role, overshadowed as ever by the US, and from now on also by Turkey – and by Saudi Arabia to a lesser extent –, which has positioned itself as its main competitor for influence in the region (see Graph 5). In turn, the Arab League, Iran, Russia and China are overall expected to play a comparatively less important role, which matches the also worse assessment of their response to the Arab Spring (see Graph 1).

Graph 5



Source: Own elaboration based on data from the 2011 *Euromed Survey of Experts and Actors*.

(*) Whenever the % of answers exceeds 50%, it means that the EU is expected to have a greater impact on regional developments than the country to which it is being compared. On the contrary, if the % of answers is below 50%, it means that the EU is expected to play a comparatively less influential role.

(**) The percentages in the graph are calculated on the total number of answers expressing a particular assessment (i.e. either "less influence" or "more influence", excluding the "Don't know" answers, which account for 10-19% for the total number of replies).

However, it is worth noting, as shown in Graph 5, the divergences that come to the fore when factoring in the North/South dimension. While the US is expected to remain the most influential actor in the region, and Russia, Iran and China the least influential ones according to both experts from EU countries and MPCs,⁹ there are some notable divergences as to the relative weight of regional actors such as Turkey, Saudi Arabia and the Arab League. Experts from MPCs seem for instance overall more optimistic about the potential of the EU in terms of actorness in the region – increasing the relative prominence of the EU compared to Turkey, Saudi Arabia and the Arab League. Experts from EU countries are in turn more sceptical about the actual chances of the EU to position itself as a key actor in the region – giving more relative weight instead to other regional powers, above all to Turkey and to the Arab League and Saudi Arabia to a lesser extent. On this last point, it is worth emphasising the sharp divergence of perceptions between the North and the South regarding the role the Arab League could play in the region in the coming years. The overall hopeful perception of respondents from EU countries about the potential of this organisation stands in stark contrast with the negative opinion of Arab respondents. Such a strong divergence was also present in the responses to the question on the Arab League's stance during the Arab uprisings, with very low average

9. MPCs stand for "Mediterranean Partner Countries".

assessment values especially from Algerian, Tunisian and Lebanese respondents (respectively, 3.1, 2.7 and 2.6), as opposed to the more optimistic outlook of EU respondents (with average values between 5 and 6 or beyond). Such a positive reaction from EU experts could be partially explained by the unprecedented steps that this organisation has taken in recent times in favour of democracy and respect for human rights.¹⁰

Conclusions

The uprisings in the southern rim came as a surprise to the EU, which reacted in some cases in a hesitant and ambiguous fashion. Nonetheless, the EU did react to the outcries – as positively acknowledged by the experts responding to the Euromed Survey –, by advancing a wide package of measures to support the civil society movements in the Arab countries. Yet, as it has been argued in this article, its strategy has not always produced the expected results – the EU being more successful in promoting political change in some countries than in others. This is partly due to the lack of coherence and unity in still largely fragmented member states' foreign policies, which prevents the EU from acting in a quick and outspoken fashion, and sending clear signals backed with real measures and not just declaratory statements to its southern neighbours. But first and foremost, it is due to endogenous factors in the individual Arab countries. Whenever there is a breeding ground for democratic reforms, the EU will succeed in its supportive action, as seen in Tunisia. Unfortunately, the evidence proves that the EU cannot act as a catalyst of democracy in countries reluctant to reforms. In other words, the EU support can have a positive impact on political transitions in the southern rim, but only if the target countries are willing and prepared to take its help on board.

The second conclusion that can be drawn from this analysis relates to the future influence capacity of the EU in the region within the new mapping of actors that is being shaped. While there is an agreement among experts from both EU and MPC countries on placing the EU as the second best response-provider to the Arab Spring, there is an important North/South cleavage over the future leverage of the EU in the region as compared to other actors. Experts from MPC countries remain hopeful about the role that the EU could play in the region in the coming years, while EU experts are rather sceptical about their own influence capacity, giving more relative weight to other regional powers. Altogether, these findings give some hints as to how the regional power dynamics could look like in a few years time. However, further research needs to be done to shed more light into the factors accounting for this divergence of perceptions.

10. José Ignacio Torreblanca, "Despertares", *El País*, 6th January 2012, http://elpais.com/diario/2012/01/06/internacional/1325804404_850215.html.