

## Europe in North Africa: New Assertiveness or Interminable Decline?

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*European geopolitics cast a long shadow in North Africa. Due to its political, economic and strategic interests in a 'stable' neighbourhood, Europe has for long discouraged a process of uncontrolled political change in North African countries. However, in the spring of 2011, mass demonstrations by Arab youths broke the prevailing deadlock in the region and swept away a number of long standing Arab dictators. The question that remains unanswered is to what extent the 'Arab Spring' will affect geo-political relations among Europeans and Europe's standing as a whole in the global pecking order. Will Europe's belated support for the Arab revolutions renew its geopolitical importance and international mission, or will it precipitate its interminable decline? In this article, this question is being scrutinised by looking at the historical development of European relations with North Africa and how Europe is trying to preserve some of its former influence despite domestic challenges and competition from new, non-Western actors.*

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### INTRODUCTION

The current turmoil in the Middle East has deeply unsettled the ossified post-Cold War international system. The rise of the disenfranchised and impoverished Arab Street has once and for all shattered the seemingly immutable domestic and regional order of the Middle East. But with the ultimate outcome of the current unrest still far from certain, the region remains locked in a moment of geopolitical suspense. The resulting power

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vacuum has sent external actors spinning, eager to reassert their influence and hatch alliances with the region's potential future leaders. Predictably, national instincts and interests dominate this geopolitical game of musical chairs. But for European countries, more is at stake than a race for oil concessions and patronage in the future Middle East. The current crisis represents nothing less than a make-or-break moment for the post-Cold War liberal international system that has been dominated by the West. Moreover, its outcome is also likely to determine Europe's place in the future global pecking order.

Following a round of wavering and hesitations during the first few months of regional unrest, European countries are rallying to reassert their traditional leadership role in North Africa. Led by the former colonial-powers of Britain and France, an alliance of European countries has engaged on the side of the Libyan rebels in an all-out bid to overthrow the Qaddafi regime, despite the limitations imposed by UN Security Council Resolution 1973. European leaders have been outspoken in their criticism of the repressive methods used by President Bashar al-Assad and are progressively tightening the sanctions screw on the Syrian leadership.<sup>1</sup> At the G8 meeting in Deauville, European delegations also promised substantial financial support for the political transitions of the region. Meanwhile, the EU issued a new southern neighbourhood strategy for "Democracy and Shared Prosperity", pledging more money, market access and mobility to its North African neighbours than in the past.<sup>2</sup>

In ideational terms Europe seems to be in a strong position to claim the lead. After all, democracy-promotion, the rule of law and advocacy for human rights and universal freedoms have for long represented an important part of the European discourse on foreign affairs.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, a large number of European pundits and social media activists are now urging the EU to take charge of the process of political change in North Africa in order to cash in on its long-term normative investments. In typically Euro-centric fashion, they argue that at last the "hour of Europe" has arrived.<sup>4</sup> After decades of repression, the argument runs, North African people have finally thrown off the yoke of dictatorship driven by their craving for those very same universalistic European values that EU policies and discourses so long

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1 See EU Council Decision 2011/273/CFSP of 9 May 2011 and Council Decision 2011/488/CFSP of 1 August 2011 on restrictive measures against Syria.

2 European Commission (2011), A Partnership for Democracy and Shared Prosperity with the Southern Mediterranean, Brussels COM(2011) 200 final

3 For a critical discussion of the EU's self-image as an ethical power see the special issue of *International Affairs* on 'Ethical Power Europe?', *International Affairs* 84(1), 2008

4 Álvaro de Vasconcelos, ed. (2011), "The Arab Democratic Wave: How the EU can seize the moment", EU ISS report, no.9, March 2011

have encouraged. Europe, in other words, appears in a prime spot to grasp the extended hand of the Arab masses in order to guide them to a peaceful future, while at the same time reviving its own international mission.

A closer look at both shores of the Mediterranean, however, provides a somewhat more mixed picture. Despite a good amount of grand-standing, Europeans continue to apply two different standards in the region. While they are eager to bestow the blessing of democracy on those erstwhile trouble-makers like Syria and Libya, they have suggested a more gradual evolution for their more submissive partners in Morocco, Jordan and Bahrain. Moreover, Europeans have been characteristically divided when it comes to the region. Britain and France, in particular, have been eager to claim a leading role in order to guide the transition of their former colonies. This has meant that Europe's "common" foreign policy has mostly been reduced to *ex post* endorsements of decisions taken by Europe's two "Great Powers", with little space remaining for communal decision making. Finally, despite its ambitions, Europe's capacity to guide and control developments in North Africa are open to scrutiny. All of this suggests that the current crisis could ultimately reduce European influence in its near abroad.

### OVERCOMING EUROPE'S DILEMMA

For decades, European policies in North Africa have aimed at keeping a difficult balance between promoting political pluralism and maintaining regional stability. While Europe's normative ambitions have tended to favour the promotion of democratic values and human rights, its commercial and security interests, as well as its dislike for North African immigrants, have tipped the balance in favour of stability.<sup>5</sup> North African dictators skilfully played on European concerns by habitually asserting that Europe had a choice between supporting gradual regime-led reforms and aiding the rise of Islamic theocracy and regional instability. European leaders, fearful of strengthening radical Islam, chose for what they regarded as the lesser evil. Mesmerised by this democratisation-stabilisation dilemma, European policies have therefore been reduced to supporting a regime-led process of economic liberalisation in several North African countries.<sup>6</sup> However,

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5 The concept of Europe as a normative power was first coined in Ian Manners, "Normative power Europe: a contradiction in terms?", *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 40 (2) 2002, pp. 235-258. For a critique on this concept, see for example Andrew Hyde-Price, "Normative Power Europe: a Realist critique", *Journal of European Public Policy* 13 (2), 2006. On Europe as a democracy promoter, see Richard Gillespie and Richard Young (eds.), *The European Union and democracy promotion: the case of North Africa*, Routledge, 2002

6 Eberhard Kienle (2005), "Political Reform through Economic Reform?", in Haizam Amirah Fernández & Richard Youngs, *The Euro-Mediterranean Partnership: Assessing the First Decade*, Madrid: FRIDE.

rather than serving as a catalyst for greater freedom and democracy, these policies reinforced the political status quo and forced Europeans into an ever greater dependency relationship with North African dictators.<sup>7</sup>

Europe's initial incapacity to (re)act to the uprisings on the southern shores of the Mediterranean exemplified this paradox. While undemocratic and repressive, the authoritarian regimes in Egypt and Tunisia were long-standing and important regional allies. Many European leaders believed Hosni Muhammed Mubarak and Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali to be important bulwarks for regional stability, economic liberalisation, and the secular state. Importantly, they also adopted a moderate position towards Israel and trailed the Western line on Iran. After the 2001 Al Qaeda attacks on New York and Washington DC, the US was willing to include the former enemy-state, Mu'ammer el-Qaddafi's Libya, among the list of respectable allies in the struggle against global terrorism. European states followed suit, not in the least in order to reap the commercial opportunities generated by Libya's "conversion." Having toiled with the idea of George Bush's freedom agenda, the disastrous Iraq intervention, and the outcome of the 2006 Palestinian elections only solidified Europe's preference for stability in its neighbourhood.

Europe's initial reactions to the uprisings in North Africa finally laid bare this painful discrepancy between preaching and practicing. Far from considering the initial Tunisian protests as a "cry for freedom" emulating Europe's own 'colour revolutions,' most European leaders regarded these disturbances as a challenge to regional stability. Some, like France, even offered assistance to the Ben Ali regime in order to fend off this challenge to a long-standing client. Other European countries, however, appeared more ambivalent and closely trailed US policies on this issue. Only when the heart-wrenching scenes from Egypt's Tahrir Square protests began to flicker across television screens did European politicians spring into action – by trying to beat each other to photo-op at the scene. As protest began to snowball throughout the region and the long expected Islamist take-over failed to materialise, Europe, at last, seems to have been freed from its democratisation-stabilisation dilemma. No longer are the two opposed.

The first to anticipate an end to the 'dilemma' were Europe's erstwhile stalwarts of Arab regional stability, namely, Britain and France. Both stepped into the limelight when drawing up UN Resolution 1973 imposing a "no-fly zone" over Libya. This resolution caught several European nations by surprise and left many dissatisfied. Accepting grudging US support and

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7 Behr H, Berger L, "The challenge of talking about terrorism: The EU and the Arab debate on the causes of Islamist terrorism," *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 2009, 21(4), 539-557.

muting German opposition, Britain and France eagerly led NATO into a military intervention “aimed at protecting civilians” which then quickly morphed into an all-out bid to topple the Qaddafi regime. While not all European countries participated in the intervention, many called for the removal of Colonel Qaddafi and recognised the Libyan Transitional National Council as a legitimate interlocutor. The policy of military and political intervention in Libya was a watershed moment that transformed Europe’s participation in the Arab spring. Henceforth, Europe would seek to lead the political transformation of the Arab world by picking winners in the Libyan civil war, enforcing sanctions on the Assad regime in Syria and endorsing Morocco’s half-hearted political reforms. However, rather than being solely driven by normative considerations, power politics and national prestige have come to define this realignment. All the while, European attempts to proactively mould the transformation process in the Arab world seem increasingly out of sync with regional realities.

#### THE LONG SHADOW OF THE EMPIRE

While difficult to quantify, the long shadow of Europe’s imperial past remains an ever present factor in European relations with North Africa. All of North Africa was subject to Europe’s historical “scramble for Africa,” an effort driven by a mixture of military adventurism, economic exploitation, political prestige and religious zeal. In the Mediterranean basin, France did well in the west (Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia), while Britain asserted itself in the east (Egypt, Palestine). Britain’s aim was to control the waterways connecting the British islands with the colonial crown jewel, India, by controlling the Gulf of Aden, the Suez Canal, Cyprus, Malta and the Strait of Gibraltar. France, on the other hand, cared more about the horizontal routes connecting its West African Empire, through North Africa and the Mediterranean, with the French hexagon. As a third contender, Italy was left with the scraps, and in 1911 grabbed a section of land tying the Mediterranean to the remaining North African shores (now Libya). Rome’s hope was that by joining the colonial game, Italy would be lifted to being a first rank European power.<sup>8</sup>

When Europe’s imperial states exhausted themselves by fighting two World Wars, they were forced to give way to a new global power constellation. A new power equation emerged based on a bi-polar, global rivalry between the US and the Soviet Union – the new “Superpowers”. At the same time, European weakness sparked a wave of nationalism and demands

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<sup>8</sup> See for example Richard Bosworth, *Italy: the least of the Great Powers*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979.

for independence in the colonies. Pressured by the US, European states reluctantly shed their empires. When India became independent in 1947, Britain hoped to substitute that national loss by consolidating its Middle Eastern possessions, while France fought ‘tooth and nail’ for its remaining overseas territories. However, the Suez crisis (1956) and the Evian Agreement (1962) indicated that the time of empires had come to an end. Realising their inability to defend their territorial possessions by force, both countries devised opposite schemes to maintain their international influence. Britain chose to align itself closely with the policies of the United States, while France under General Charles de Gaulle opted for an independent and unaligned policy.<sup>9</sup> Both maintained close ties with their former colonies in order to substantiate their claims to international influence.

Decolonisation granted North African states territorial sovereignty and decoupled their political systems from those of Europe. Nonetheless, “independence” was initially more of a nominal concept, given their continuing dependence on financial aid, foreign investments and technological and administrative expertise. With the US unwilling to commit itself fully to the North African countries, there was an opening for the former colonial powers to continue to exert considerable leverage over regional affairs. Especially, France has remained deeply involved in the affairs of the Maghreb and parts of the Middle East, acting as regional power-broker and maintaining an intricate network of personal ties with North African elites. Britain, similarly, has maintained its close contacts on the Arabian Peninsula and has been consistently involved in all US military interventions in the Middle East since the end of the Cold War.

This position of influence provided both Britain and France with numerous advantages.<sup>10</sup> Most importantly, it corroborated their claim to being international powers of the first rank that have a legitimate right to a permanent UN Security Council seat. This in itself has become a constitutive part of France’s Gaullist heritage, according to which “France cannot be itself, without being in the first rank.”<sup>11</sup> It also provided both countries with a certain amount of leverage over the US, which was eager to draw on their regional influence and expertise in order to solidify its own

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9 Timo Behr (2011), “De Gaulle and the Middle East”, in Benjamin M Rowland, ed., *De Gaulle’s Legacy of Ideas*, Lanham MD: Lexington Books. Keith Kyle (2003), *Suez: Britain’s end of empire in the Middle East*, London: I.B. Tauris

10 See for example Lawrence Freedman, “Britain and the arms trade”, *International Affairs*, 54 (3), 1978, pp. 377-392. David Styan (2006), *France and Iraq: oil, arms and French policy making in the Middle East*, New York: I.B. Tauris.

11 Charles de Gaulle (1954), *Mémoires de Guerre: L’Appel* (Paris: Plon), p. 7. For a discussion of Gaullist foreign policy see also the articles by Timo Behr and Bastien Irondelle in Erik Jones and Saskia van Genugten, *The future of European foreign policy*, Routledge, 2009.

influence in the region. In Europe, involvement in and concern for, North African political developments provided a useful tool to check German dominance and the increasing eastward tilt of the European Union following the EU's eastern enlargement. France benefitted especially from this by claiming leadership of the EU's extensive Mediterranean policies. Finally, both have been able to draw financial advantages from their numerous ties to the region.

Given the considerable importance of the region for some of Europe's major powers, it is therefore no surprise that the current political turmoil has led to a repositioning of their foreign policies. Both France and the UK have seen their regional influence decline in recent years. Side-lined by an all-powerful US, bound by their European commitments, and 'outwitted' by new upstarts such as Turkey, China and Brazil, both countries have found themselves out of step with Middle Eastern affairs. With some of their old allies ousted as a result of current events, France and Britain faced a choice between stepping aside or 'taking charge' of the situation. With the US unwilling to engage and some of the new players tainted by their less than perfect track record on democracy, France and Britain rushed to into the fray to reassert their presence in Middle Eastern politics. Their underlying assumption is clearly that their daring engagement on the side of "the Arab youth" will enable them to maintain their geopolitical privileges and allow them to influence the transition process in their favour.

### EUROPE'S ROLE IN A MULTIPOLAR WORLD ORDER

During the Cold War, European foreign policy preferences remained relatively stable. Memories of war and hardship reminded political leaders that cooperation and multilateralism within Europe, however complex, was the better alternative to unilateralism. But with the Soviet threat gone, American leadership weakened, and national memories fading, competition for external influence and international standing appear to have resurfaced, albeit in a more diluted form.<sup>12</sup> Encouraged by their electorates, political leaders are increasingly eager to place national prestige ahead of European interests in both domestic and international affairs. Facing growing instability in their southern neighbourhood and a reluctant and increasingly isolationist US leadership, Britain and France therefore grasped the opportunity to claim centre stage in order to divert attention from their own domestic malaise.

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12 See for example Ivan Krastev and Mark Leonard, "The Spectre of a Multipolar Europe", European Council on Foreign Relations, 2010, [http://ecfr.eu/page/-/documents/FINAL%20VERSION%20ECFR25\\_SECURITY\\_UPDATE\\_AW\\_SINGLE.pdf](http://ecfr.eu/page/-/documents/FINAL%20VERSION%20ECFR25_SECURITY_UPDATE_AW_SINGLE.pdf)

However, European states are less eager to admit and deal with the fact that the global environment is changing and that their global role has been diminished. Moreover, Europe's current political environment has prevented a nuanced debate on political developments in North Africa. Indeed, the revival of European populism has meant that intra-European debates about North Africa are regularly held hostage by discussions about immigration and the role of Islam in Europe. Europe's electorate has also become increasingly distressed about the material and human costs of war. Decades of peace and prosperity under the American security umbrella have turned Western Europe into a land of thriving, but largely toothless, democracies with declining defence budgets.

While Britain and France may consider the European continent a global, military powerhouse, many other European nations are less certain, and may not wish to become involved in wars that they regard as unnecessary and wasteful. At the St. Malo summit of 1998, Britain and France committed themselves to a common European defence policy. However, after more than a decade of protracted progress, they realise that 'going it alone' might be the more effective method.<sup>13</sup> This was especially the case for the British government which felt stung by US Secretary of Defence Robert Gates' criticisms. Secretary Gates accused Europe of complacency over international security enjoying a 'free-ride' while allowing other nations, "to pay the price and bear the burdens of alliance commitments." Further, Gates suggested that "if current trends in the decline of European defence capabilities are not halted and reversed, future US political leaders – those for whom the Cold War was not the formative experience that it was for me – may not consider the return on America's investment in NATO worth the cost."<sup>14</sup>

Not only does Europe lack the cohesion and strategic foresight needed for military power projection, the Arab storm has also burst at a moment that Europe is experiencing an unprecedented fiscal crisis. The financial crisis, the bailouts of several banks, Europe's demographic decline, and an increase in unemployment have all taken their toll on European spending power. Fears about debt and currency crises are tip of the tongue. Britain, caught in an apparent state of stagflation, was forced to announce unprecedented multi-billion-pound austerity measures, including deep cuts in the defence budget. The UK deficit for 2010-2011 stood at around 10 per cent, while debt/GDP ratios went up in a way that made the main Chinese rating agency downgrade British credit worthiness. In the rest of Europe as well,

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13 Ben Jones (2011), Franco-British military cooperation: a new engine for European defence?, EU ISS Occasional Paper 88, February 2011

14 Robert Gates, The security and defence agenda (Future of NATO), speech delivered 10 June 2011, <http://www.defense.gov/speeches/speech.aspx?speechid=1581>

the recession has left its traces, with southern European countries having been worst hit. While without doubt Europe, in absolute terms, remains an enviable economic powerhouse, the long-term trends seem to be set on relative decline. Indeed, Europe's share of global GDP has fallen from 35 per cent in the 1970s, to 27 per cent in 2009 with a further decline to 20 per cent expected over the next 20 years.

This relative decline means that Europe can expect to encounter further competition in its near abroad. The rapid growth of foreign investments from China, India, Russia and Brazil in North Africa economies have aptly illustrated the emerging powers' interest in the North African region – which is in economic terms considered an immense growth market. Not only Europe is contemplating new economic and political strategies for North Africa. The same holds true for emerging actors in Asia, South America, and the Gulf as well as for nearby Turkey. The current regional crisis and a reordering of business relations in the post-revolutionary states also provide an opportunity for these countries to raise their geopolitical stakes in the region. Europe and the West are no longer “the only game in town”. In a more plural world, Europe and the US have lost their long held monopoly on “expertise” and foreign assistance.

The West needs to take note of its own political-economic situation as well as of the changing international order. European states do not possess the giant sovereign wealth funds wielded by some of its competitors. Moreover, European aid tends to be conditional while others can present their assistance as “gifts”. To illustrate, at the end of June 2011, Egypt startled the IMF and the World Bank by declining a 3 billion dollar loan facility. Instead, it decided to accept billions of new investments from Qatar and Saudi Arabia. North African states will have an increasing number of actors that they can do business with. The way and the depth of Western relations with North Africa will as a result be much more a function of the level of realism and the economic and political preferences of the new political actors in North Africa itself. While siding with the future winners might give Europe a nudge, it no longer will be able to dictate regional affairs.

### EUROPE IN DENIAL

The Arab revolutions have caught Europe in a moment of unparalleled weakness and internal division. Rarely has the EU appeared as disunited, or its external image as tainted as it is now. Indeed, little seems to remain of the EU's much-heralded “power of attraction.”<sup>15</sup> Rather than drawing

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15 See for example: Mark Leonard (2005), *Why Europe will run the 21st century*, London: Fourth Estate.

closer in face of an external challenge, the Arab upheavals seem to have further accentuated the already existing centrifugal forces within the European Union. Sensing a challenge to their international status, France and Britain have scrambled to reassert their own positions in the region, forcing the rest of the continent to either join them or be left behind. Others, like Germany, appear to have turned their back on the Middle East, confused by the unusual display of power politics by their partners, but unwilling to put forward an alternative vision of their own.<sup>16</sup>

Even more seriously, Europe's reaction to the Arab upheavals betrays a misunderstanding both about the meaning and importance of these events as well as Europe's changing role in the international system. Paradoxically, Europe seems to have understood the uprisings as a confirmation of the European model and of Europe's place within the region, rather than for what it is – namely, a call for greater autonomy and sovereignty for and by the Arab people. As a result, Europe's former imperial powers continue to pretend that their declining military and financial arsenal is sufficient to determine the outcome of current events and maintain their cherished positions as regional power-brokers. As the European Union continues to draw up unrealizable blueprints for reforms, based on dreams about its rebound, a new international order is breaking the mould of the Western liberal order. If Europeans want to have a stake in this, they will have to stop living in denial about their own power and attractiveness.

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16 Ulrich Speck (2011), *Pacifism unbound: Why Germany limits EU hard power*, FRIDE Policy Brief, no. 75, May 2011