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WILL EUROPE SHRINK FROM THE ARAB SPRING?

OMER TASPINAR AND JONATHAN LAURENCE



Will the Arab Spring finally end the European Union’s lethargic approach to the southern Mediterranean and lead to more serious support for democratization? Don’t hold your breath. There are three key reasons why “business as usual” with only cosmetic changes is likely to remain the norm.

First and foremost is the fact that Europe [is in deep economic and financial crisis](#). With growing discord between France, Britain and Germany, not only the future of the euro but the very foundations of the European Union are at stake. Consumed by its own existential crisis, a serious rethinking of foreign policy is obviously not a top priority for the EU at the moment.

The second reason why we should not expect Europe to seriously change its policy toward the southern Mediterranean is the success of Islamist parties in post-Arab Spring elections. For decades, Europe’s primary concern in the southern Mediterranean has been security and economic development. Anti-terrorism cooperation, border controls against immigration and economic assistance to corrupt but friendly authoritarian regimes were the hallmarks of a series of EU projects, ranging from the Barcelona Process (which became the Union for the Mediterranean in 2008) to the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP) and European Neighborhood Policy (ENP). This “security and development first” mindset came at the expense of genuine support for democratization in countries like Egypt, Algeria, Tunisia and Morocco.

The logic behind such European programs -- and similar American policies -- can be best summarized as the fear of the alternative. Autocrats like Egypt’s Hosni Mubarak became masters at exploiting such Western fears by presenting radical Islam as the only alternative to their repressive regimes. Now that Islamist parties are coming out ahead in parliamentary elections in Egypt and Tunisia, some serious second thoughts about democracy in the Arab world are likely to emerge.

Finally, the third reason to believe that Europe is unlikely to change its foreign policy toward the southern Mediterranean is Europe’s [continuing reluctance to embrace Turkey](#), whose own success as a prospering secular democracy owes so much to its European vocation. To be sure, the EU cannot offer membership prospects to its southern neighbors in North Africa. But it could rethink its approach to and support for democratization there. Yet, the fact that the EU sidelines even a country like Turkey shows the limits of Europe’s current geostrategic vision toward the Muslim world.

Despite all these shortcomings, the European Commission is trying to reorient its approach to the southern Mediterranean with proposals such as a “Partnership for Democracy and Shared Prosperity” and new task forces for the region. Conceived in March 2011 as the EU’s response to the uprisings in the Arab southern Mediterranean, the partnership puts an emphasis on democratic transformation and institution-building, civil society contacts and economic development underpinned by an improvement in educational and health systems. [Further areas of engagement](#)

are targeted toward fundamental freedoms, constitutional reform, reform of the judiciary and the fight against corruption.

What is missing, however, is an effective application of conditionality and a clear sense of priority attached to democratization. This repeats the mistakes of past European efforts, which also emphasized the importance of rule of law, democratization and human rights, while failing to prioritize these issues with clear metrics and conditionality for further economic assistance. Instead, the European Union's traditional approach has been inspired by modernization theory, based on the notion that economic development will lead to incremental democratization.

The expectation that higher economic growth would trigger political reforms stood in sharp contrast with the realities on the ground, where entrenched authoritarianism coexisted with economic stagnation -- with economic growth reserved for the few and well-connected. After Sept. 11, European policymakers had additional incentive to prioritize security cooperation with authoritarian regimes in areas such as counterterrorism and intelligence cooperation.

Similar dynamics were at play on the other side of the Atlantic. But the grueling years of state-building in Iraq and Afghanistan lessened the Bush administration's sure-footedness in the region. The push for democratization that characterized Washington's earlier approach between 2002 and 2005 underwent further re-evaluation after significant electoral gains by Islamists in Egypt, Lebanon and Palestine. Although the U.S. continued funding for its Middle East Partnership Initiative, that program represented a small fraction of the billions devoted to foreign military funding. Despite its aggressive rhetoric, the Bush administration did not follow through with policy action. The U.S. did not punish Egypt for the trials of Saad Eddine Ibrahim and Ayman Nour, for instance, nor did then-President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali pay a price for his violations of press freedoms in Tunisia.

Ironically, the Arab Spring came just as both Washington and Brussels were growing more comfortable with the old paradigm of sustaining what they knew to be an unsustainable order. Even [President Barack Obama's famed Cairo speech](#) soft-pedaled democracy promotion in the hope that the old regimes might hold the key to an enduring Israeli-Palestinian settlement.

After registering an initial sense of relief that the uprisings themselves were not led by Islamists, Europe has begun to feel alarm over the current turn of events. If the revolts were in themselves surprising, however, the sweep of moderate Islamist parties in elections in Tunisia (41 percent), Morocco (27 percent) and Egypt (36 percent plus another 24 percent [for the hard-line Salafist Al Nour party](#)) did not come out of nowhere. The Tunisian Ennahda party received 14.5 percent of the vote back in 1989, and the Moroccan Justice and Development Party won almost 13 percent of parliamentary seats in 2002. Most recently, in Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood and the Salafist Al Nour party together captured nearly two-thirds of the seats in the country's three-stage parliamentary elections. Although the Muslim Brotherhood was widely predicted to emerge as the top party, almost no one expected the more radical Salafists to score as high as they did. The Libyan National Transitional Council's pronouncement in October that Sharia would be that country's main source of law -- later partially disavowed -- had already raised eyebrows. Should the Egyptian Brotherhood choose to form an Islamist government in coalition with the Salafist group, it will certainly curb the EU's enthusiasm for elections and democracy in the Arab world.

Understandably, there are now voices in the Western media expressing serious concerns, even panic, that democracy's march is leading to a radical Islamic turn in Egypt and across North Africa. Western analysts should avoid pulling the emergency brakes just yet and try to understand the nature of this complex phenomenon generically called "political Islam" in the Arab world.

The place to start is to analyze the role of Islam in societies under the thumb of authoritarian regimes in the Arab world. Across the Arab world, from North Africa to Saudi Arabia and Yemen, the absence of good governance, democratic politics and free elections has been the most funda-

mental feature of entrenched political systems. Islam, in this repressive context, emerged as the only meaningful avenue for dissent. In the absence of political parties, grassroots-oriented NGOs, freedom of association and freedom of expression, the mosques became the only place where disenfranchised masses could gather and engage in collective action. While politics was the realm of the wealthy and corrupt elite, religion was the realm of the silent majority.

Since the mosques were the only available political and social outlet in these otherwise very repressive regimes, what emerged was a phenomenon that can be best summarized as the Islamization of dissent. Since Islam was often “the only game in town,” the Islamization of dissent also created a parallel process leading to the “politicization of Islam” as the conversations in mosques turned more and more political. The fact that Islam puts tremendous emphasis on the concept of justice also helped. The equality and unity of all believers and the absence of hierarchical structures controlling the relationship between God and believer are very important features of Islam. The call for justice against tyranny is also an inherent aspect of the faith.

Concepts such as freedom, human rights and democracy have alien, Western connotations in the Islamic world. But “justice” is part of the Islamic lexicon in an authentic way. And the concept of justice naturally resonates with humiliated, repressed and frustrated masses. It is not a coincidence that from Turkey to Morocco and Egypt, political parties that wish to emphasize their conservative, religious and populist credentials against entrenched power elites all refer to “justice.” It is also important to note that in most Arab countries, Islamic movements have become very effective at providing social and economic assistance to the impoverished masses. The weakness and corruption of the state stood in sharp contrast to the organizational capacity and willingness to help [demonstrated by Islamic movements such as the Muslim Brotherhood](#). In short, what we call “political Islam” filled an important vacuum in the social and economic sphere as well.

All together, these dynamics should help understand why Islamic movements have a tremendous head start in post-authoritarian Arab societies. There is nothing surprising in their electoral victories, and the West [should not panic about their rise](#). Instead, what we are witnessing is also a political opportunity. By sharing in the responsibility of government, Islamic movements will soon realize that their long-cherished slogan that “Islam is the solution” will not work. Given the complexity of the problems they will face, Islamists will have to adapt to the new environment by becoming more pragmatic and competent. If they insist on ideological rigidity and doctrine, their failure will provide an opportunity as well. Simply put, this failure will “demystify” political Islam as the magic solution. In either case, it will be a win-win for both the West and Arab societies. Instead of panicking, the European Union should see what is unfolding in Egypt as an opportunity for either the moderation of political Islam once in power or the demystification of a powerful force.

Given its geographic proximity to the Arab world, it is only normal that Europe has more at stake in the outcome of the revolutions in the southern Mediterranean. In addition to geographic proximity, another important reason Europe feels deeply involved is the presence on the continent of a sizable Muslim population, including 16 million to 18 million Muslims within the borders of Belgium, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Spain, Italy and the U.K.

When revolution came to North Africa in 2011, many observers wondered what role European Muslims would play in the events: Would they be cadres for the revolution, a cheering section or a supplemental electorate abroad? How would European minorities react to the chaotic forces unleashed by international politics? Would the revolutionary spirit of Arab awakening jump the sea into “Eurabia”? Would European Muslims stage their own days of rage to protest the policies of governments in London, Paris and Rome?

The dynamic events of the past year provided an opportunity to gauge European Muslims’ political cohesiveness as well as the vehemence of their objections to Western foreign policy in North Africa. Yet, for all the shock value of the year’s events, 2011 confirmed trends long underway

across the Muslim-majority world: Osama bin Laden's moon was waning while Islamist parties' stars rose. That was good news for counterterrorism efforts, but its effect on political contestation within the oft-conjured European Umma has been subtler.

For decades, European countries have served as a bullpen for the most ardent advocates of regime change in North Africa. If waves of Islamist activists arrived in Europe between the early 1960s and the late-1990s, it was because substantive opposition parties were banned in their countries of origin. Since both Tunisia and Egypt are historical sources of Islamic organizational leadership in Europe, the legalization in those countries of Ennahda and the Ikhwan could lead to participation by European Muslims in the ensuing political competition or, at least, active support from the diaspora.

The notion that these conflicts might spread via contagion to Western Europe -- home to sizeable Muslim minorities -- was also on the minds of many in Europe and the Middle East. "The waves of Islamic awakening in the Middle East will spread to Europe very soon," Iran's U.N. ambassador said in early June. For the Dutch-Moroccan politician Ahmed Marcouch, the Arab Spring [demonstrated that](#) "Muslims need to reach out to the others and say that freedom is our common value, and we must all fight for it and defend it." For the far-right French politician Jean-Marie Le Pen, the crowds in North African capitals called a different image to mind: "The day when you have a [Muslim] mob like that marching down the Champs-Élysées -- and it would be nothing for them to have 300,000 or so -- who will stop them? They won't be there to play around," he said, suggesting French Muslims might even target the presidential Elysée palace. Over the summer, an editor at *Le Monde* saw in the Indignados movement in Spain the signs of Europe's own "light version" of the Arab Spring: "The revolt has crossed the straits of Gibraltar." The Indignados' movement over the summer and [the London riots in August](#) contributed to a sense that the Jasmine Revolution would have repercussions well beyond the borders of North Africa.

However, while the Arab Spring has affected European politics and political culture, and although increased political participation by European Muslims could eventually influence policies toward the Arab world, the Arab awakening did not have immediate political resonance for European Muslims. The demonstrations and anti-regime slogans in Tunis and Cairo have added to the repertoire of collective action in Western democracies, but not to that of European Muslims in particular, who received little spark or new urgency for their own political participation.

The reason is that none of the countries most affected by the Arab awakening are major sending states of migrants to Europe. Tunisia comes closest with roughly 600,000 residents in France and another 250,000 in Italy and Germany. This is small compared to Turkey, Morocco, Algeria and Pakistan, the main ancestral homelands of Europe's Muslims. Instability in those countries might have had a more immediate impact. Beyond the excitement of living through a historic moment and welcoming democratization, the Muslim diaspora populations who settled in Europe for economic reasons have not gone out of their way to shape outcomes in their ancestral homelands, although they have welcomed the advent of political change there.

Tunisians in France are just "couch-potato revolutionaries," [according to a commenter](#) on French news website Rue89 in mid-March. But will they be armchair voters in Tunisia's post-revolutionary democracy or actively get involved? Two-thirds of the 600,000 Tunisians in France are thought to have dual nationality. Reports have suggested there is "no particular passion for the elections, as if the euphoria of the revolution had subsided." Another French-Tunisian observer [wrote that](#) "many seem disconnected from the political issues in their country of origin, as if they had abandoned the idea of investing in it because of the ramifications of Ben Ali's repressive regime, or . . . because of a simple lack of interest."

So far, it is not clear from electoral turnout just how interested the diasporas remain in elections in their countries of origin: Voting for residents abroad can present serious logistical challenges, and it appears that just 10-20 percent of Tunisians and Moroccans abroad availed themselves of

their right to vote during the first post-Arab spring elections of 2011: the Moroccan constitutional referendum in summer 2011, in which 266,000 votes were cast by Moroccans residing abroad, or less than 10 percent of eligible adults; and the vote for a Tunisian constituent assembly in the early fall, in which roughly 120,000 Tunisians residing in France, or around 20 percent of eligible adults, cast votes at polling stations. Many millions more have simply looked on as eyewitnesses and observers. The Moroccan government did not provide polling stations for citizens residing abroad in November's parliamentary election. Of Moroccans who voted in the referendum, however, more than 96 percent approved of King Mohamed VI's proposed reforms (compared to 98 percent in Morocco itself). Just 30 percent of Tunisians in Europe voted for the Islamist Ennahda party, [which received 41 percent in Tunisia proper](#).

The electoral rise of political Islam does not discredit earlier theses of its apparent demise. In important ways, this is not your grandfather's Islamism. Europe has played host to the democratic experience of former exiles, inevitably impacting the trajectory of figures such as the leader of Tunisia's Ennahda party, Rachid Ghanouchi, and the country's new president, Moncef Marzouki. In similar fashion, they, too, might now reassure Europeans so that European capitals can shape their southern Mediterranean policies to reflect a new confidence in the region's democratic potential. Salafism is yet another challenge, but the best arm against its pernicious rise may be to ensure room for maneuver by the democratic Islamist parties, and not a return to military rule. This risks moving further away from the status quo ante, including European countries' foreign policy commitments. But the epochal shift from patronage to partnership has revealed opportunities as well as dangers. New democratic pressures will force Egypt, Tunisia and other countries impacted by the Arab awakening to evaluate their alliances and treaties with Western democracies. Europe should seize the opportunity to influence the outcome through intensive engagement, rather than responding by giving in to fear. □

Omer Taspinar is a professor at the National War College and a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution.

Jonathan Laurence is an associate professor of political science at Boston College and a nonresident senior fellow at the Center on the U.S. and Europe of the Brookings Institution. He is author of "The Emancipation of Europe's Muslims" (2012).

Photo: Woman after voting in the constitutional referendum, Cairo, Egypt, March 19, 2011 (photo by Flickr user monasosh, licensed under the [Creative Commons Attribution 2.0 Generic license](#)).

A footnoted version of this article is available upon request.

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