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The European Union, NATO and the "Arab Spring"

Abstract

In this paper the author analyzes political upheavals in Northern Africa and the Near East, trying to investigate their causes and outcomes. The author also compared these protests to earlier Eastern European wave of liberal democratization. Social unrest in Arab countries was generated by political, social and economic problems, along with the regimes' loss of legitimacy and oppression. The outcomes of the upheavals vary from one affected country to another. The author wanted to underline that EU and NATO had different roles in this democratizing political transformation. Whereas European Union was too passive, NATO took much more active role in this process.

Key words: NATO, European Union, social and political upheaval, crisis.

Starting in early 2011 an unprecedented wave of social unrest and political upheavals has swept across the Near East and Northern Africa. To the initially spontaneous, massive and peaceful demonstrations the ruling regimes have in most cases responded by brutal police repression and in some countries by using regular army units and heavy conventional weapons even against unarmed civilians. Following the first demonstrations in Tunisia and the flight of its President Ben Ali to Saudi Arabia the wave engulfed most of the Arab world, from Morocco to Syria and Bahrain.

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The Peculiarities of the "Arab Spring" in Comparison With the Earlier Eastern European Democratizing Wave

Although in many respects idiosyncratic the upheavals in Arab states have reflected and made part of a much wider phenomenon of social fever which in 2011 led millions protesters to streets and squares in many capitals and major cities on four continents. Some underlying reasons for the unrest and protests were very similar – the deep dissatisfaction with the general economic situation, the respective government's austerity measures, high unemployment etc. In Arab countries the protests were provoked by price hikes for staple food which resulted largely from the draught, floods and fires in several important world's exporters of grain. The protesters were strongly motivated by the ruling regimes' loss of legitimacy, by heavy – handed oppression and by widespread corruption among the elites (Orlov 2011). The exceptionally high rate of unemployment also among the well educated and the lack of opportunities for social promotion brought to public manifestations hundreds thousands young people, initially mostly urban unmarried males. The social unrest, political upheavals and revolutions in several Arab lands have subsequently activated a growing cross section of urban population, including also females, teachers, medical personnel and other groups of civil servants (De Vasconcelos 2011). Although many members and supporters of Islamist parties and associations participated in demonstrations no Jihadist and anti-Western slogans were notably displayed. In this respect the "Arab Spring" of 2011 greatly differ from many previous mass protests and other similar events in predominately Muslim countries, including Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan. The main targets of Arab protesters were exclusively domestic regimes and hated, home-grown dictators. Contrary to some speculations and accusations by endangered Arab regimes there has been no credible proves of non-Arab interference or of outside fomenting of troubles. However an intra-Arab demonstration effect though commercial mass media has been obvious, particularly salient prior and during the mass demonstrations in Kairo. Having been blocked by the regime-controlled public communication system the young organizers successfully used for inciting mass demonstrations electronic social networking through personal computers, cell phones and the Internet. This has been a relatively new social and political phenomenon of major significance (Manoilo 2011).

Although some similarities were observed with the earlier Eastern European wave of liberal democratization in the late 1980 - early 1990s the "Arab Spring" has greatly differed from it. Among the Eastern

European members of the Warsaw Treaty Organization (WTO) demonstrations and protests were directed against authoritarian communist regimes imposed and maintained by the dominant superpower (USSR). The democratization wave had greatly affected then all East European communist states, including the two non-WTO members (SFR Yugoslavia and Albania). On the other hand the upheavals in 2011 did not take place in all Arab countries and the protests were not directed against foreign domination. The Arab protest movements have been ideologically highly heterogeneous and fuzzy, without a clear vision of an alternative social and political order and notably lacking prominent and charismatic leaders. Unlike in Eastern Europe resisting Arab regimes could not be defeated without a massive foreign military intervention. In contrast to most of Eastern Europe (with the partial exceptions of Poland, SFR Yugoslavia and Romania) the Arab armies and professional military played a crucial role in determining the outcomes of democratic upheavals in their own and even in neighboring countries (Bahrain). These roles varied from the attempts of brutal and determined suppression (Libya, Yemen, Bahrain, Syria), changing and vacillating attitude (Egypt) to protecting unarmed demonstrators against police brutality (Tunisia).

The dynamics and outcomes of the "Arab Spring" have varied greatly from one affected country to another. By December 2011 only two dictatorial Arab regimes disappeared (in Tunisia and Libya). The new regime in Libya still does not control the entire vast country, sharing with and competing for power with local warlords, tribal chiefs and unruly armed gangs. In Egypt an ex-general dictator was replaced by a military junta, which has been accused by the leaders of continuing mass protests of "stealing the revolution". In Yemen and Syria the two dictatorial regimes are still in control in spite of many months of mass demonstrations, thousands of victims and Yemeni President Ali Saleh's formal resignation. The biggest political beneficiaries of the upheaval in several Arab states (notably in Egypt) were not the initiators of protests but much better organized Islamists of various shades, from moderates to Jihadists. The general rise of Islamism in many Muslim (including Arab) countries could be explained as a reaction to oppressive secular, "pro-Western" regimes. In this respect there is some parallel with the rise of clericalism and with the increased wealth, power and influence of Catholic and Orthodox churches in a number of ex-communist states in Eastern Europe.

The developments since the "Arab Spring" have brought neither radical geopolitical realignment of the region nor the disbandment of the regional interstate organization (the Arab League). The social and

political upheavals did not create a new, hitherto unknown variety of direct and spontaneous partless street democracy, as some European neo-Marxists and leftist anarchists dreamed about. There has been no radical change in the Arab economies or in the patterns of trade relations with their major international partners.

To sum up, the earlier East European experience of region-wide transition to competitive politics and market economies remains of only very limited relevance and cannot be replicated in the culturally quite different Arab world.

The Roles of the European Union and NATO

Given its liberal democratic credo the European Union has been widely expected to actively support the democratizing political transformation in Arab states. The political, social and economic problems which sparked the "Arab Spring" offered useful starting points for new EU policy initiatives. It has been important to help the new governments so they would not be dragged down by the problems inherited from their dictatorial predecessors (Asseburg and Salem 2009).

Yet the "Arab Spring" found the European Union, with its network of well-paid delegations in Arab countries unprepared, poorly informed and confused. The main reason for the ensuing passivity seemed to be the members' unwillingness to let EU play an active role in the region and their waiting for a response by NATO. To massive upheavals across the Mediterranean the EU Commission responded with a proposal for a new "Partnership for Democracy and Shared Prosperity". This paper plank however brought nothing new and only somewhat altered the label on the "European Mediterranean Policy" (EMP). The sanctions imposed by EU on several dictatorial regimes have also produced no notable effect on the political dynamics in the Arab world (Aliboni 2008).

The reaction to the crises in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Syria exposed serious disagreements among EU members, a very considerable gap between EU's proclamations and the actual policies of its member states and insufficient coordination between the EU Commission and the EU External Action Service. The EU's "European Mediterranean Policy" as part of the "European Neighborhood Policy" (ENP) has been proven ineffective inspite very considerable funds spent over years on officially promoting liberal reforms and human rights in Southern Mediterranean countries. The EU Commission has in fact been concerned primarily with maintaining political stability, assuring

uninterrupted oil and gas imports from North Africa and the Near East and with preventing excessive illegal migration into the EU territory. Leaders of important EU member states have visibly entertained cordial relations with and more than tolerated dictatorial regimes which presumably guaranteed stability and served as a bulwark against Islamic Jihadism and Al Kaida. European leaders have usually turned a blind eye on wide-spread violations of human rights and fundamental freedoms in practically all Arab states. As a result of its inaction at a crucial moment the European Union failed to seize the opportunity to project itself as key geopolitical factor and, in accordance with European real long-term interests, to influence tangibly the seminal developments in its Southern neighborhood.

The dramatic developments in Libya in spring and summer 2011 had involved also NATO. For the first time in its history an Alliance's "out of area" operation has been initiated jointly by two European members France and Great Britain. USA joined in, provided crucial military support but this time declined to take the lead role. The operation "Unified Protector" had been commanded by a Canadian general and coordinated from the NATO and SHAPE Headquarters. It was based on the UN Security Council Resolution 1973 adopted surprisingly smoothly on March 17, 2011 and supported by the Arab League and the Organization of Islamic States. The resolution gave the NATO military intervention much needed legitimacy as a humanitarian operation with the clearly stated objective of protecting Libyan civilians from brutal repression by the Ghaddafi regime. The operation started on March 19, 2011 with missile and bombing strikes against Libyan military targets, the imposition of a no-fly zone for Libyan aircraft and of a naval blockade in the Mediterranean to prevent the flow of war materials to Libyan ports. The initial missile attacks were carried out by the US Navy, while subsequent bombing and fighter raids by the air forces of other NATO members and later also of Qatar and United Arab Emirates. On the average 150 missions were flown daily. By September 29, 2011 the sum total included 23.246 sorties, of which 9.040 "strike missions". With these attacks NATO very soon neutralized the Libyan Air Force, destroyed the government's command and control centers, anti-aircraft defenses, a good deal of combat units armed with heavy conventional weapons as well as of the stocks of ammunition and fuel. The UNSCR 1973 excluded a "foreign occupation force" in Libya. NATO honored this prohibition but several hundred Qatari military personnel acting independently of NATO entered Libya and served as advisors to the rebels. Contingency plans for a limited invasion were also developed in the NATO Southern Command.

There were several internal problems in the Alliance in connection with the operation "Unified Protectors". Only eight members actively participated in it while fourteen provided various kinds of military support. Small members understandably could not offer for the operation appropriate advanced air and naval assets. However this was not the reason for the abstention of the two largest European members – Germany and Turkey. Due to disagreements among its member states NATO had from the outset no clear and agreed upon political strategy of the mission. This fact prevented a desired close fit between the mission's operational goals and the means required. Remarkably the non-US share in the number of sorties flown as compared with that of the US Air Force was about five to one, opposite to the ratio during the operation against Serbia in 1999. However, the "Unified Protector" confirmed the continuing insufficiencies in the capabilities of European allies to carry out, without US support, protracted large scale air combat operations even in Europe's immediate neighborhood. The lacking capabilities in cruise missiles, other precision ammunition, intelligence, reconnaissance, target acquisition and air refueling were provided by the US forces. The American contribution was this time less visible than that of the Europeans but still indispensable for the operation's success (Sloan 2011).

The constraints contained in the UN mandate (and occasionally sand storms) increased the number of targeting errors. On a number of occasions the NATO force overstepped the restrictions on the use of force imposed by the UN Security Council resolution. The air raids caused moderate collateral damage and deaths among the Libyan civilian population and also among the rebels subsequently hurting public support to the mission, particularly in Arab states. Moreover in the Libyan civil war NATO clearly sided politically with the anti-Ghaddafi forces. The foreign ministers of the leading Alliance members superimposed on the fully legal and legitimate humanitarian mission a politically problematic and controversial military intervention to help overthrow Libya's dictatorial regime (Sloggett 2011). The operational command nevertheless endeavored to stick as closely as possible to the constraints of the UNSC mandate. In spite of NATO's full dominance in the airspace and in the coastal waters, the heavy losses suffered by the Libyan government's armed and security forces and the wide international, moral and political support to the rebels the thoroughly but not fully isolated Ghaddafi regime fought back fiercely for more than six months. The struggle lasted twice longer and produced much more military and civilian casualties in Libya than the resistance of the militarily much stronger Milosevic regime in the Federal Republic of

Yugoslavia in 1999. The overstepping of the UNSC mandate by NATO contributed to ruling out a similar international action in Syria although from the humanitarian standpoint it would be even more justified given a large number of civilian casualties. The Russian Federation's stiff opposition in the UN Security Council (supported, for a somewhat different mix of reasons, by PR of China), the Russian and Iranian military and political support to the Asad regime and expected much greater military risks produced so far a very different outcome in the Syrian civil war.

During the Libyan crisis NATO, in contrast to the European Union, reacted much faster, performed much better and more than fulfilled its immediate objectives. Unlike the EU highly complex and cumbersome institutional structure and decision-making which poorly function under the stress of crises the Alliance has been designed and organized from the outset to operate well under the worst conditions. NATO had been this time also very lucky in several respects. The difference in the resulting performance of EU and NATO has been impressive. The Alliance proved once again to be the only interstate organization capable of dealing effectively with severe humanitarian crises in Europe and its neighborhood. In spite of internal tensions NATO had been able to successfully organize and well execute a large scale "out-of-area" military operation. On the political side the Alliance forces had decisively contributed to the overthrow of Ghaddafi's regime and accidentally even to the dictator's capture which was followed by the torture and ugly execution by the rebels. Following this graphic violation of international humanitarian law NATO officially terminated the operation on October 31, 2011 although the National Transitional Council of Libya asked for its extension for several additional months. The success of the "Unified Protector" allowed the new authorities to declare an end of the civil war and to begin preparations for orderly rebuilding the Libyan state which would be, according to their public statements, based on the principles of representative democracy and Arab religious and cultural heritage. NATO has much more effectively than the European Union contributed to creating favorable internal and external conditions for democratic development in Libya, leaving to the Libyans themselves to decide on their state's future. The Alliance has been ready to provide advice in rebuilding the Libyan armed forces, carrying out a security sector reform and developing democratic civil-military relations, if the new legitimate Libyan authorities were to request such assistance (Gaub 2011).

Some Lessons to be Drawn

Following the failure in 2011 of the EU policies in the Southern Mediterranean the EU Council and Commission have been expected to review critically and set clearly EU's future priorities in the region. In its relations its countries EU would be well advised to present itself as a friend of the Arab peoples and not as pretentious fortress Europe (Barry 2011).

The need for a revision of the EU policies comes however at a difficult period of financial troubles in several Mediterranean EU members (most severe in Greece) and of a crisis in the eurozone as a whole. The stagnation and economic downturn in many EU members increase the pressures on the EU and national budgets. It would be thus unrealistic to expect that the "European Neighborhood Policy" and the EU External Action will receive important funds additional to those foreseen in the 2007 – 2013 Financial Perspective. The same limitation applies to the European Investment Bank as well.

The philosophy behind the "European Neighborhood Policy" has been so far based on the presumption that it is for the partner countries to reform themselves but not for EU itself. In fact the developments in a number of Arab states showed the need to change some EU policies. In order to promote long-term democratic stability in the Southern Mediterranean and in the Near East it would be appropriate for the European Union to:

- conduct a consistent Mediterranean policy and stop using double standards when dealing with Arab regimes;
- remove protectionist barriers, liberalize trade in agricultural products and in labor intensive industrial products. These measures would promote more balanced economic development in the Southern Mediterranean;
- develop a comprehensive and proactive immigration policy which would help alleviate the problems of the aging population in most EU member states, to reduce the very high unemployment levels in some Arab countries and bring down the pressure of illegal migration into EU;
- adapt the Schengen system to possible future extraordinary events in the neighborhood;
- assume an active role in managing the Israeli – Palestine conflict instead of waiting for and following the USA policy, which has been for internal political reasons biased in favor of Israel and harmful also to the American and EU political and economic interests in the Islamic world.

Another lesson from the experience of the "Arab Spring" is related to the "strategic partnership" between EU and NATO which obviously did not function (Smith 2011). The EU "Common Foreign and Security Policy" and its specialized part the "Common Security and Defense Policy" in this case proved to be highly disappointing failures. Without determined efforts by its main protagonist it will probably be difficult to improve the situation concerning ESDP during the two Presidencies in the EU Council in 2012, given Denmark's and Cyprus' respective positions.

The very modest achievements of the "Arab Spring", particularly in Egypt, the very disquieting lack of progress in managing the Arab-Israeli conflict and Iran's nuclear ambitions have exposed the serious limitations of the European Union's political influence on developments in the Arab world and the Near East. The EU's "European Mediterranean Policy", NATO's "Mediterranean Dialogue" and the two Euro-Atlantic organizations' relationship with North African and Near Eastern states need to be reviewed and adapted to the new situation (Aliboni 2008; Tigner 2011). It would be also appropriate to rethink the "Berlin-plus" arrangement between EU and NATO, introducing possibly a Berlin-plus-in-reverse mechanism. The EU-NATO cooperation could be improved by combining the top-bottom and the bottom-up approaches (Smith 2011). It would be desirable that Turkey and other non-EU contributors to ESDP were given full access to the EU ESDP missions and that Greece and Cyprus in EU and Turkey in NATO do not block them for their own conflictual reasons. There is a pressing need to clarify the rules for applying the doctrine of international "responsibility to protect" endangered civilian population and to use them consequentially.

The recent dramatic events in the Southern Mediterranean have provided thus both EU and NATO with ample grounds for serious introspection and the international community for a reflection on the best way to help improve social, economic and political situation and security in the Mediterranean. This improvement in our Southern neighborhood would be highly beneficial also to us, the Europeans.

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