

Between ideals and reality, the EU and democracy promotion in the Middle East

Paper analyzing the role of the EU in the Arab uprisings by Max Roed Simonsen, student at the contemporary Middle East Studies at the University of Southern Denmark

Abstract:

The EU has been actively engaged in democracy promotion in the Middle East, and in particular the southern Mediterranean for more than two decades. But how has this affected the neighborhood, and what role can these policies be ascribed when we examine them within the context of the Arab Spring. This paper makes the conclusion that the role of the EU has been minimal and that this mainly is due to pitfalls that the EU by design placed within the ENP program. The EU has used democracy promotion in the southern Mediterranean as a part of their overall security policy. This has led to the EU being forced to choose from either following the principles within the policy, and thereby risking potential unrest, or turning the blind eye on the situation and thereby avoiding an unstable situation at its southern borders. This can be seen in the policy itself as it is formulated, in the economic projects within the ENP and also to a large extent in the actions of the EU when confronted with a choice of either following the principles or continuing their support of the incumbent rulers in the southern Mediterranean.

Introduction

When Mohamed Bouazizi set himself on fire in frustration over the injustice of the Tunisian police and his situation in general, he not only set alight a general notion of relative deprivation¹ amongst the young population in Tunisia but also ignited uprisings in several other countries in the region. That the uprisings started in Tunisia was a surprise to the EU since Tunisia was said to be a model-state for the democratic transition that was on the way on the basis of the ENP², but the death of Bouazizi and the uprisings that followed revealed that the EU had misinterpreted the situation and also de-masked the EU as a realist actor in sheep's clothes. The EU turned out very hesitant when the uprisings broke out and for long supported the incumbent rulers to avoid an unstable situation along the southern borders.

This paper will make the case that, to some extent the EU itself through the ENP, and the actions taken on behalf of the project the EU had created pitfalls that in the end was unavoidable. The European Mediterranean partnership (EMP), also known as the Barcelona process and the UFM will not be included in the paper due to a wish to be able to go into further detail with the ENP. Before going into details about the EU and the ENP, a short venture into the genetics of democratization and revolutions will be made.

When looking at previous revolutions, the element of economic growth and the rise of the middle class stand out as a common prerequisite of a revolution or change in regime³. This has been the case both in south-America in the 80's and during the velvet revolutions in Eastern Europe at the end of the cold war in the 3rd wave of democratization⁴. The strategy has been known as a markets first, democracy later strategy⁵, and has become a commonly used methodology in democratization. As opposed to that, Wendell Phillips argued that "revolutions are not made, they come"⁶ referring to that you can promote the change in every way possible, but if the spark is not there to ignite the fire, the revolution will lay dormant within the society, as Gurr also argues. In the Middle East, many attempts have been made to promote economic growth in order to promote democratic transition, without the result ever emerging, causing scholars to announce that we had entered the

¹ Described by Ted Robert Gurr as "the tension that develops from a discrepancy between the "ought" and the "is" in

² Haugbølle (2005) p. 427

³ Sørensen (1998), pp. 26-27

⁴ Huntington (1991), p. 13

⁵ Heydemann (2007), p. 18

⁶ Phillips (1891), p. 36

post-democratization era⁷. The regimes ended up conducting a “transition to nowhere”⁸, to accommodate the pressure from the western societies and at the same time remain in power. The ENP, when it was launched in 2003, signaled a new dawn in European democracy promotion and the wish for a friendly (and democratic) neighborhood based on the democratic peace-thesis⁹. The policy was born in the wake of the EU expansion and was conceived around bilateral action plans, which were made between the partner country and the EU concerning democracy, rule of law and good governance¹⁰. The overall idea of the individual action plan was to offer a positive conditionality that would permit the partner country to enter a free-trade union given that they would comply with the standards prescribed in the action plan.

The ENP and the Arab uprisings

With these overall concepts in mind, it is remarkable that the EU in the introduction to ENP writes, “Over the coming decade and beyond, the union’s capacity to provide security, stability and sustainable development to its citizens will no longer be distinguishable from its interests in close cooperation with the neighbors”¹¹. The term a “friendly neighborhood” is with the quote given a new connotation, and the fact that EU created the ENP as ultimately a security strategy to promote its own security is slowly coming into focus. The argument is supported even further when the action plans for the countries of the southern Mediterranean are investigated. In the action plan for Morocco from 2006 it is stipulated that “exchange of information and dialogue on illegal migration; practical support for activities to prevent illegal migration” is important¹², and a look into the 2007 country strategy paper for Tunisia reveals that €30 million out of €127 million was set aside for “specific projects on services, justice, freedom, security and migration”¹³ indicating that the issue of migration and security was a great concern for the EU in it’s efforts.

From the outset, economic development in the partner countries has been a cornerstone in ENP, which the EU has emphasized in the main document of ENP¹⁴. 18 months into the project, EU issues an amendment to the project where economic development, migration and regional conflicts

⁷ Albrecht et al (2004), p. 385

⁸ Brumberg (2003), p. 13

⁹ Build on the republican liberalism thought that democratic states do not engage in war with each other due to their common culture in solving conflicts through dialogue, shared moral values and economic interdependency (Sørensen (2009), p. 976)

¹⁰ Hollis (2008), p. 343

¹¹ EU (2003), p. 3

¹² http://trade.ec.europa.eu/doclib/docs/2006/march/tradoc_127912.pdf, accessed 28th of March 2013.

¹³ CSP (2007) p. 28

¹⁴ EU(2003), p. 4

(on the eastern borders) are proclaimed as the new areas of interest for the ENP¹⁵. Along with further focus on economic development in the partner countries the EU wishes to give better opportunities for granting visas in order to develop close cultural and economic bonds to the EU¹⁶. With an increased focus on economic growth, the EU wanted to create a better situation for the population to remain in their own countries. As a side effect, the EU thereby should receive less immigrants from the southern Mediterranean. Hollis argues that, “Under the ENP, the implementation of specific measures for migration control is among the conditions to be met by the MPCs in order to receive more EU financial assistance”¹⁷. This positive conditionality enabled the EU to set a certain standard for cooperation on the migration issue. This further stresses the notion that the EU developed the ENP for the sake of promoting own security rather than for the true democratization of the partner countries. It would of course be a welcomed side effect to see a democratization take place along the southern borders, and with the examples from the 3rd wave of democratization it was very likely this would be the outcome, but the real aim was securing own borders. The problem of illegal boat refugees on the Mediterranean was indeed an increasing problem at the time, and when looking at the issue across the EU (also counting Norway) there was an overall increase of 15% from 2004 -2007, with Spain having the largest increase of 45% in the period¹⁸. Given the situation in the southern EU with the international economic crisis it seems only natural that the ENP would contain policies that would reduce the number of immigrants from the southern Mediterranean, but the issue here remains that such policies does not motivate the partner country to conduct reforms that essentially was to the good of the EU.

When the uprisings eventually did break out the EU again demonstrated the pitfalls in the ENP by initially supporting the crumbling regimes and only hesitantly supporting the transition. This has two main reasons. For one, the EU seemed afraid of the emerging Islamic opposition that was emerging in both Egypt and Tunisia. This fear has roots in the security discourse that since the terrorist attacks in London, 2005 and Madrid, 2004 had caused Europeans governments to associate Islamists with radicalism and linking it to terror¹⁹. The other reason for supporting the incumbents was that EU seemed to prefer status quo²⁰, since this was associated with a stabile situation that would mean fewer immigrants along the southern borders. When looking at this in the context of

¹⁵ EU (2006), p. 2

¹⁶ EU (2006), p. 4

¹⁷ Hollis (2012), p. 92

¹⁸ OECD (2011)

¹⁹ Nielsen (2011), p. 2, Hollis (2009), p. 342

²⁰ Seeberg (2011), p. 3, Cavatorta (2008), p. 48

the Arab uprisings, it seems that the regimes on the basis of the EU support had simply developed a strategy that lead to small changes in regime to avoid changes of regime²¹, and thereby not supporting the overall goal of achieving a democratic transition of the partner countries. Albrecht et al argue that this reaction is very understandable, since the regimes most likely would act to remain in power²².

Conclusion and perspectives

This paper has shown that the ENP is an integral part of the overall security strategy for the EU concerning its southern neighbors. The EU also stipulates this very clearly in the introduction to the ENP, and the subject of security also remains a large part of the various actions plans within the ENP itself. Both in the policy itself, the execution and the hesitancy to support the uprisings the EU has primarily been concerned with safeguarding their own borders, and only secondarily been concerned with the democratic transition in the partner country. Therefore the ENP can only be ascribed a limited effect on the outbreak of the Arab uprising.

The conclusion raises the question whether the entire project is worthwhile in the first place. Given the slim effect on the Arab uprisings that the ENP has been given in this paper it seems a waste of energy and taxpayer money to embark on the quest. The answer to this is, no it does have a high value, and despite all the negative predictions, the project was indeed worthwhile for two reasons. It promoted a new approach in comparison to the ever so often-used US approach of hard kinetic choices that has been the policy of choice in the region for decades. The ENP promoted dialogue instead of hard power, and managed to set a different agenda coming from a new-ish actor at the international scene. Crediting the EU for putting democratic dialogue on the agenda may be to far fetched, but it did actually promote dialogue concerning good governance and rule of law. The project hat it's share of pitfalls, primarily created by the EU itself but was indeed worthwhile when looking at what has happened in the region in terms of (semi-) democratic transitions. All the more important the project cannot be credited a direct fingerprint in the uprisings, that the countries affected by the uprising would feel that the revolution was initiated by the EU. This has given the uprising legitimacy, and made it Arab uprising and not EU-lead, Arab-performed democratic transition.

²¹ Albrecht et al (2004), p. 380

²² Albrecht et al (2004), p. 372

Litterature:

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