

## 2012 Nobel Prize Winner European Union as a Civilian Power in the Middle East?

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Since the 1970s, the self-image of European foreign policy towards the Middle East has been shaped by the approach of a “civilian power.” This image has received prominent external support when the Norwegian nobel committee awarded the EU the nobel prize for peace in October 2012. An ideal “civilian power” is supposed to base its foreign policy on values of democracy and peace. Yet, in terms of European policy towards the Middle East, both inconsistencies in the approach and realities on the ground in the Middle East as well as a hostile international environment resulted in policies that mostly did not correspond to the ideals of a civilian power. The recent cataclysms in the Arab Middle East, as triggered by toppling decade-long authoritarian leaders, particularly Ben Ali of Tunisia and Mubarak of Egypt, are both a challenge and an opportunity for reconciliation between Europe and the Arab Middle East.

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The aspirations and convictions of an ideal-type civilian power are based on the so-called “civilizational hexagon”, which was developed by Dieter Senghaas, according to which a foreign policy aims at (the improvement of) “effective control of private violence through the monopoliation of force; a culture of non-violent resolution of political disputes; rule of law; development of social division of labour and institutions; participation in decision-making by those affected by them; and social justice.” (Maull 2000: 14-15). In contrast to political realism, it is assumed that values and norms shape interest generation. Research conducted by experts on international relations has extensively covered European foreign policy based on the civilian power approach. Moreover, the connection between political science and politics was in place as the EU discovered the model of a civilian power as its genuine overall political concept (Jünnemann/Schörnig 2002).

The heydays of Europe’s attempt to act as a civilian power started with the Oslo peace process in 1993 and peaked in November 1995 when the European Mediterranean Policy (EMP) was launched. With the exception of Libya, the EU was able to engage all non-European arbiters of the Mediterranean Sea plus Jordan in a policy that was modelled after the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE), thereby focusing on three baskets: political stability and security, economic cooperation, and cooperation in cultural, humanitarian and social issues. The participation at EMP was linked to a commitment *inter alia* to human rights, the rule of law and the freedom of information and opinion. Thus, cross-Mediterranean relations were designed by the EU on the normative basis of the civilian power approach.

Yet, when the actual development of cross-Mediterranean policies are measured by the criteria of the civilian power approach, the achievements of the EU were very limited in the ten-year period before the Europeans re-structured their policies towards bordering countries in the frame of the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP) in 2004. In particular, no progress was achieved in terms of spreading democratic features to the Middle East. At the same time, not much, if any progress, in establishing a Palestinian state could be accomplished. The following initiatives, particularly the ENP and the Union for the Mediterranean launched in July 2008, were much less ambitious. Without explicitly giving up its self-image as a civilian power, the EU appeared as an actor that had come to terms with authoritarian reality in the Middle East. Thus, when social and political protests occurred in the Arab world demanding freedom and participation rights, the EU was initially not prepared to welcome it. In particular, France was

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<sup>1</sup> The present essay is an updated, shortened version of the following article: Martin Beck (2012), European Foreign Policy towards the Arab Middle East Revisited, in: Nayla Tabbara (ed.), What About the Other? A Question for Cross-Cultural Education in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, Louaize: Notre Dame University, pp. 33-46.

willing to uphold the rule of Ben Ali nearly until its very end. Moreover, the other major European powers and the EU itself found it difficult to abandon their cooperation with Mubarak. When, however, the two authoritarian leaders were finally toppled by their people, the Europeans were quick in welcoming these steps as an expression of the legitimate political rights of the Arab people.

Inspired by the Arab Spring, the EU was quick in reviewing its policy towards the Arab Middle East in the frame of the ENP. In March 2011, the European Commission revealed its first review of the ENP by releasing the “Partnership for Democracy and Shared Prosperity.” This was followed in May 2011 by the Commission’s “New Response to a Changing Neighbourhood”. On July 14th, 2011, EU Commission President Barroso (2011) delivered a basic speech on “Partners in Freedom: The EU response to the Arab Spring.”

EU Commission President Barroso (2011) clearly distanced himself from the past approach by stating that “In the past too many have traded democracy for stability.” At the same time he showed awareness for the fact that the Arab change will not bring immediate stability and peace by stating that “The road to democracy is not a peaceful stream of water but rather an unpredictable river very much like the Nile used to be before the Aswan Dam”. Thus, contrary to its past policy towards the Arab world, the EU seems to be aware that stability is merely a long-term goal and that democratization processes imply periods of de-stabilization which have to be accepted in the short and medium term.

Moreover, the EU not only committed itself to significant additional financial support but also explicitly abandoned its old approach of “one size fits all” on which the association agreements were based. Rather, the EU announced that it will follow a “more for more” approach (Tocci 2011). Thus, positive conditionality ought to be applied. If a country achieves progress in democratization, the EU is willing to support its democratization process with additional means. Moreover, the EU announced its intention to strengthen its ties with the Arab civil societies.

Yet, Nathalie Tocci (2011) has rightly pointed to significant shortcomings. When it comes to migration policy, the EU still follows its traditional security-oriented approach, for instance in terms of its restrictive visa policy. Moreover, many of the concrete EU policies towards the Arab Middle East are still tailored as if the Arab world would have a perspective to join the EU. This applies for example to the European emphasis on harmonizing trade standards and practices. Yet, contrary to Eastern Europe in the 1990s there is no such perspective. Rather, it would be important that the European Union opens its agriculture markets to the Arab world. However, there are no indicators that it is willing to do so. Furthermore, the new concept of “more for more” is still very vague, which is why it is to be feared that in the end “more for more” will just give way for the EU and its member states to reward those Arab states that are willing to foster good relations with the EU—thereby neglecting the criterion of genuine progress in the democratization process. Last but not least, although strengthening European relations with the Arab civil society is basically a very desirable aim, it is questionable why the EU, rather than promoting Cross-Mediterranean civil society ties,

opted for establishing the European Endowment for Democracy as a quasi-governmental institution from above.

The European reaction to the Palestinian application for upgrading its status in the United Nations from “non-member observer entity” to “non-member observer state” — the so-called Vatican status—in November 2012 may very well be interpreted as a portent for the EU to act as an effective civilian power in the Middle East. In terms of effectiveness, the European states proved unable to coordinate which became very apparent when France gave a yes vote, Germany and the United Kingdom abstained, and the Czech Republic opposed. Secondly, in terms of acting as a civilian power, the EU would have had strong incentives to support the Palestinian initiative of becoming even a full member state of the United Nations (a more ambitious plan that Abbas had postponed since the US could and would have vetoed it in the Security Council): the Europeans had strongly supported Salam Fayyad’s 2009 plan for Palestinian state-building whose achievements were assessed positively by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (see Bronner 2011). At the same time, non less than Obama virtually declared the bi-lateral Oslo process as a dead end when in December 2010 he frankly acknowledged that he was not capable of convincing Israel to a settlement freeze in the occupied territories, which also had been a major demand of the Quartet on the Middle East. Thus, empowering the Palestinian side in future negotiations with Israel by granting them statehood would have been consistent with the civilian power approach, whereas the attempt to force them to bilateral negotiations with the Israeli side without any prior commitment on their side to terminate major pillars of the occupation is not.

After a long tradition of imperialism, followed by a period of powerlessness vis-à-vis the US in the 1960s and 1970s, the Europeans came up with a very ambitious attempt to bring themselves back into Middle Eastern affairs on the basis of the civilian power concept. Its heydays, which were marked by the Oslo process in 1993 and the Barcelona conference in 1995, were short-lived. In the early 21st century the EU had virtually come to terms with authoritarian reality in the Arab Middle East. Yet, in the light of the Arab Spring, conditions to act as a civilian power in this world region appear to be improved. Although major European actors were steadfast in their support to failing Arab authoritarian leaders until the tide shifted in their disfavour, the European Union welcomed the Arab Spring quickly after the downfall of Ben Ali and Mubarak. Although it is certainly too early to come up with a definite assessment of the European policy towards the ongoing complex processes triggered by the Arab Spring, on the declaratory level, the European Union in the person of Barroso showed some remarkable awareness of past mistakes and major insights in future challenges. However, significant shortcomings of the European approach have not been removed. In terms of one of the first major challenges for the European Union and its member states to act as civilian powers, the prospects therefore look rather bleak: the Europeans missed the opportunity to embrace the Palestinian demand of upgrading their status in the United Nations, even when the Palestinians moderated their demand to receive the Vatican status only rather than full recognition as a member state — a demand that af-

ter more than forty years of occupation and nearly twenty years of fruitless bilateral negotiations with Israel as well as major achievements in the Palestinian state-building process would have deserved support by a civilian power.

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