

The EU's Democracy-Stability Dilemma Persists in Egypt

Written by Sally Khalifa Isaac

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SALLY KHALIFA ISAAC, AUG 1 2013

The democracy promotion efforts of the European Union in the southern Mediterranean have been largely included as a component of a comprehensive EU security strategy in its immediate neighbourhood, rather than a policy borne of a moral stance. The neo-functionalist approach that the EU has chosen to embrace in relation to the Southern Mediterranean region reflects a combination of a realist and a neoliberal perspective in dealing with an area that the Union sees as essential for its security and prosperity. For many perceived soft and hard security threats emanating from inside the MENA region, Europe has been entrapped for decades in the dilemma of how to cope with two contradictory security requirements. One is the need to promote good governance, which is considered part of a long-term solution to many soft economic, social, and demographic security threats. The other is the need to simultaneously preserve the political stability of many authoritarian regimes because of their moderate foreign policy outlook, their strategic and geopolitical significance, their cooperation with many European countries in fighting terrorism and limiting illegal migration, and because of the EU's need to secure energy routes from North Africa and keep oil and gas prices stable. This implies that security and strategic considerations have long played a prominent role in the formulation and implementation of EU democracy promotion policies toward the Southern Mediterranean.[1]

Hesitance and Lack of Consensus

It is understandable therefore that when the January 2011 uprising started in Egypt, Europe was mostly hesitant in explicitly siding with the public protests. Initial EU statements did not demand the removal of Mubarak but rather called on the Mubarak regime to stop violence against peaceful protesters and undertake necessary reforms. Paradoxically, the then-Italian Prime Minister, Silvio Berlusconi, had even praised Mubarak on February 4, saying that he hopes "that in Egypt there can be a transition towards a more democratic system without a break from President Mubarak, who in the West, above all in the United States, is considered the wisest of men and a precise reference point." [2] It was clear that the EU did not utterly support the Egyptian public demands that Mubarak has to step down until the US President, Barak Obama, made his bold announcement on the 2nd of February 2011, in which he noted that Mubarak should leave and that Egypt's transition should begin immediately. [3]

The revolution in Egypt however, made it clear in Europe and elsewhere, that the protests would not only affect Tunisia, but that the Arab region was experiencing a broad spillover effect with highly ambivalent consequences. Immediately after Mubarak stepped down and before the commencement of public revolts in Libya, the EU announced that its ENP in the southern Mediterranean should be fundamentally revised. The EU's response to these uprisings was rapid, a fact which was manifested first in the issuance of a joint communication on a Partnership for Democracy and Shared Prosperity by the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and the European Commission, followed by a new release of the ENP in May 2011. Nonetheless, the new ENP has been heavily criticized because it presented the principals of differentiation, conditionality, and the more-for-more approach as elements of "fundamental change" but in fact they were not fundamentally new in comparison to the original 2004-ENP. [4] Besides, offering assistance funds to countries in transition were judged unreasonable. The EU has merely allocated a total of €7 billion to the entire MENA region from 2011 to 2013, a figure that sharply contrasts with the arduous economic situation of recipient countries. Also, the EU decision to postpone its actual

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implementation of the more-for-more approach to the end of 2013 (and to start with the future allocation of funds for 2014 and beyond) has at best indicated a wait-and-see approach and, at worse, a lack of seriousness in promoting what the EU labeled in late-February 2011 a “deep democracy”.

The EU Lacks Enough Leverage in Egypt

With regards to Egypt, the complexity of the political and strategic factors – added to the quasi immediate rise of political Islamist forces with their various degrees of conservatism which started to dominate the scene and to appease youth forces – seemed to discourage the initial European enthusiasm. After few weeks of the uprising, the EU seemed increasingly reliant on the United States, which, on its part, enjoyed more political leverage on Egyptian politics. The US had close relationship with the Egyptian military institution and already established contacts with what it became Egypt's major political force, the Muslim Brotherhood. The course that the Egyptian transition took from the January uprising until the fall of the Muslim Brotherhood president, Mohammed Morsi, in July 2013, demonstrated the central role of the United States in Egypt's highly debated transition and the lack of an independent European policy in Egypt. With the fall of Morsi in July 2013, a development which was strongly supported by the US, Obama's words in January 2013, stating that “when it comes to Egypt I think had it not been for the leadership we showed you might have seen a different outcome there”,^[5] does not really appear to be empty talk.

While the EU has faith in the need to promote democracy and economic development in Egypt, which have been identified in various EU documents as the apt tools in confronting soft security threats emanating from the southern Mediterranean in general, Europe's democracy-stability dilemma appear to be on-going. This became clear during the one-year presidency of Mohammed Morsi in Egypt. From the EU perspective, the Union was once more affronted with a regime that did not seem to progress positively towards a real democracy and that, at the same time, proved reliable in terms of foreign policy and regional role. Despite the generally negative assessment of the EU on the progress towards democracy during Morsi's presidency, the Union generally praised Egypt's cooperation in the area of foreign and security policy, regional conflict prevention and crisis management.

EU's Assessment of Egypt Under Morsi

In its two important annual progress reports, conducted by the European Commission on the implementation of the ENP in Egypt in years 2011 and 2012, the EU clearly indicates that there have been “serious set-backs”, especially with regard to the violations to human rights, the restrictions on work and funding of NGOs, the limitations on the freedom of expression, the interference in the media, the continuing torture practices by the police forces, the lack of enactment of the freedom of religion, the challenged rights of women and the reported violence against them. Even when the EU underscores that Egypt has reached several milestones in its transition, these achievements are described as controversial in other parts of the same reports. Hence, while giving credit to Egypt's efforts in the orderly organization of elections, the end of the state of emergency, and the smooth transition from military to civilian rule, the EU correctly contrasts these efforts with the infamous constitutional declaration that Morsi issued in November 2012, which gave him near absolute powers and rushed the adoption of a heavily criticized constitution. According to the EU's own description, these actions and the subsequent adoption of the constitution created a state of instability and further threw the nation into a deeply divisive political crisis.^[6] The resulting domestic polarization has been considered by the EU as a security challenge because it contributed to undermining internal social cohesion,^[7] and even, according to many Egyptians, threatened the integrity of the state itself. In the same way, the EU contrasts the lifting of the state of emergency in May 2012 with existing laws, which still allowed prosecutions initiated under the state of emergency and the trials of persons before the state of emergency courts. The culmination of EU's negative assessment of the Egyptian transition to democracy during Morsi's rule was manifested in the EU Parliament which passed a non-binding resolution in March 2013 in which it threatened to withhold budget support to Egypt if the country fails to take significant steps to abide by human rights, democracy, and the rule of law. The parliament reminded the EU, that the 5-billion-euro support package (which the EU together with the EIB and the EBRD have promised Egypt during the EU-Egypt task force in Cairo in November 2012) is conditional on respect of human rights, democracy and economic governance. The Parliament further demanded that the EU sets clear conditions for its aid to Egypt with a focus on promoting civil society, women's rights and minority rights in the country.

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In this context, the EU resumed in February 2013 its formal dialogue with Egypt under the ENP through an association committee after a long halt since it had been suspended in January 2011.[8] Further, the EU has actually praised Egypt's cooperative regional role in foreign and security policy both during the military-led transition and under Morsi. This became clear in the aforementioned progress reports, referring to Egypt's effective role in firstly, helping reach a conciliatory agreement between the Palestinian factions, which was signed in May 2011, in Cairo; secondly, the Shalit Swap deal of October 2011; and thirdly, the Gaza ceasefire in November 2012. Besides, reference was made to the broader regional role of Egypt in attempting to find a political solution to the Syrian crisis through an Egyptian-led quartet on Syria together with Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Iran. This is noted by the EU although the Quartet on Syria – with its four components – did not meet at all due to Saudi Arabia's mistrust of Iran, the latter being the main supporter of the Assad regime in Syria. It is important to mention that Egypt hosted the quartet on Syria only once in September 2012 with Saudi Arabia staying away from this meeting during which Iran paradoxically offered to send its own observers in Syria. In February 2013, there was another meeting in Cairo (without Saudi presence) which called for a halt to the bloodshed in Syria and discussed possible solutions to the crisis, but no practical steps were undertaken. The role of Egypt under Morsi in the Syrian crisis was largely believed – even among Egyptian officials and intellectuals – to be a diplomatic one without enough capacity to yield positive outcomes.

Looking at the negative EU assessment of the democratic transition in Egypt, which has been sharply diluted by the Brotherhood during Morsi's one-year presidency, and contrasting this with the EU positive assessment of that regime's foreign and regional policy suggests that the democracy-stability dilemma is still persisting in EU-Egyptian relations. The fall of Morsi and the following new road-map in Egypt's renewed transition offer a second chance for the EU in its engagement in the southern Mediterranean post 2011. However, the EU's role in influencing Egypt's domestic politics depends on the extent to which the EU is determined to play an independent role away from US influence as well as on the extent to which a consensus could be reached within the European institutions on how to react to internal developments in this pivotal Middle East country.

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[1] Cf. for instance: Richard Youngs (Summer 2003), "European Approaches to Security in the Mediterranean", *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 57, No. 3, pp. 414-431. See also: Radwan Ziadeh (2009), "The EU's Policy on Promoting Democracy in the Arab World", *International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance* (IDEA).

[2] Reuters (4 February 2011), "Berlusconi Calls Mubarak Wise Man, Urges Continuity", <http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/02/04/egypt-italy-berlusconi-idAFLDE7131GX20110204> (accessed: 10 July 2013).

[3] CNN (2 February 2011) "Obama Says Egypt's Transition Must Begin Now", <http://edition.cnn.com/2011/POLITICS/02/01/us.egypt.obama/index.html> (accessed: 10 July 2013).

[4] Cf.: Sally Khalifa Isaac (March 2013), "Rethinking the New ENP: A Vision for an Enhanced European Role in the

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Arab Revolutions”, *Democracy and Security*, Vol. 9, No. 1, 40-60.

[5] Barak Obama, “60 minutes”, 27 January 2013, Quoted in: Raymond Srock (February 2013), “On Mistaking Mohammed Mursi for his Mask”, *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, <http://www.meforum.org/3438/mohamed-morsi> (accessed: 10 July 2013).

[6] CF. European Commission (15 May 2012), “Joint Staff Working Document: Implementation of the European Neighborhood Policy in Egypt: Progress in 2011 and Recommendations for Action”, Brussels: SWD (2012) 113 final. See also: European Commission (20 March 2013), “Joint Staff Working Document: Implementation of the European Neighborhood in Egypt: Progress in 2012 and Recommendations for Action”. Brussels: SWD (2013) 89 final. See also: Sally Khalifa Isaac (October 2012), “Egypt’s Transition: How is it under Brotherhood Rule?”, Milan:*Istituto per gli Studi di Politica Internazionale*, analysis no. 138.

[7] European Union (8 February 2013), “EU’s response to the “Arab Spring”: The State-of-Play after Two Years”, Brussels: A70/13, p. 1.

[8] European Commission (20 March 2013), op.cit.

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