European Narratives on the "Arab Spring" – From Democracy to Security

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The article discusses the EU’s reaction to the developments in the MENA-region in the period 2011–14. Initially relatively optimistic metaphors like ‘the Arab Spring’ or ‘the Democratic Tsunami’ were part of the media–comments from Western leaders, but three years later the situation in the region seems to have changed significantly and consequently the narrative in the EU has switched from a predominantly pro–‘Arab Spring’ discourse to a focus on security aspects in a broad sense and, especially concerning the situation in Syria (to some degree also Lebanon and Libya), a focus on counter-terrorism.

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Changing narratives in the West three years after the ‘Arab Spring’
More than three years have gone, since – in early 2011 – demonstrations and protests in Tunisia and Egypt led to the fall of the authoritarian leaders Zein El Abidine Ben Ali and Hosni Mubarak. The reaction in the EU to the surprising developments was relatively optimistic and metaphors like 'Arab Spring' or 'Democratic Tsunami' were part of the media-comments from Western leaders, who from time to time even claimed, that what had taken place could be compared with the fall of the Berlin Wall. Three years later the situation in the region seems to have changed significantly and consequently in the narratives of the West. Gradually, the narrative in the West has switched from a predominantly pro-‘Arab Spring’ discourse to a focus on security aspects in a broad sense and, especially concerning the situation in Syria (to some degree also Lebanon and Libya), a focus on counter-terrorism.

Back in 2011, the EU announced its support for the democratic progress in Tunisia and Egypt, which was followed by further unrest in several other Arab states, potentially leading to radical changes of Middle East polity. An affirmative wording became part of official EU documents, as it for instance could be seen when in 2011 the EU launched its renewed European Neighborhood Policy (ENP), stating that the ‘EU needs to rise to the historical challenges in our neighborhood.’ This new version of the ENP was characterized by two significant elements. First of all, the new policy allowed for an increased differentiation regarding the links between each ENP-partner and the EU as to cater to the needs and aspirations of the specific Mediterranean state. The principle of ‘more for more’ was the second central pillar of the reformulated ENP, together with the opposite, a principle of ‘less for less’. The latter signaled that the EU intended to downgrade its relations with regimes, which violated human rights, including making use of targeted sanctions.

The 'more for more' approach was initially seen to project a positive stance and a change of the negative connotations that the ‘conditionality’ approach implied. Thus, the renewed ENP, as mentioned by Ingeborg Tömmel, appeared ‘to have a stronger focus on both the realist and the normative objectives’ – as compared to the ENP of 2004, which were more ‘induced by realist goals’. However, as demonstrated by Andrea Teti, the strategic stance in EU policies brought forward in the early months of the Arab uprisings emphasized continuity rather than the qualitative change, which at first seemed to characterize the rhetoric of the EU responses to the developments in the MENA region. As argued by Tömmel, the normative wording of the renewed ENP did not ‘imply a renewed turn of the EU to the role of a normative power but rather a turn to a more assertive position of the EU vis-à-vis its Mediterranean partners, as a response to the Arab Spring.’

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The ambition of the renewed ENP was, building on positive conditionality, to shape the destiny for its partners in the eastern and southern Mediterranean, taking its point of departure in a positive narrative, which emphasized a hope for a democratic development in the Middle East. However, the realities in the Middle East did not live up to the optimistic hopes of the first year of the 'Arab Spring'. A continued relatively democratic, but certainly not unproblematic, development in Tunisia was contrasted by a chaotic situation in Egypt, where in July 2013 the Egyptian army leader General Abdul Fatah al-Sisi after massive protests against the Muslim Brotherhood rule removed the democratically elected President Mohamed Morsi and consequently suspended the Egyptian constitution.

The EU and its member states had received the electoral success of the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamist parties and the subsequent hegemony of Islamist parties in all democratic fora with some skepticism. Still a pragmatic approach was applied from the EU towards the Egyptian democratic process. As mentioned by Marco Pinifari the ENP Progress Report for 2012 acknowledged improvements in the safeguards of individual and collective rights in some areas, such as the rights of demonstrators and freedom of expression, even if it raised a series of concerns related in particular to freedom of religion, the rights of women and minorities and the status of NGOs. The new Egyptian government led by the Muslim Brotherhood obviously had severe internal splits when dealing with the rules of democracy and at the same time holding on to their commitment to an Islamic solution to Egypt’s problems.

As things turned out, they were not given very long time letting the post-Islamist experiment unfold, as discussed by Asef Bayat and others. There were widespread frustration with the government and it seems likely that Morsi misjudged the level of popular frustration. Following the establishment of a strong alliance led by the military against him, Morsi was given an ultimatum offering his resignation, but refused and a coup by the army became a reality. The EU did not officially name the ousting of Morsi a coup; a fact which can be interpreted both as an expression of the traditional European cautious approach towards the Middle East but also as a sign, that Morsi did not act as the EU would have wanted. Violent confrontations between the army and many different groups of protesters including radical Islamic militants have taken place both in Cairo and other large Egyptian cities, demonstrating that the security environment in the large and important Arab state is highly unstable. For the EU an internal political situation in Egypt of this character is indeed an undesirable reality and without doubt it contributes to refocus the prevalent narrative in the EU from democracy to security.
The security conditions in Lebanon are also highly unstable, not the least – of course – due to the tragic development in Syria. The Lebanese President Michel Sleiman’s six-year-term expires in May 2014 and the level of consensus among the rival politicians in Lebanon concerning the upcoming election is at a very low point, as the political crisis in Lebanon continues. The National Dialogue Committee, Lebanon’s main political leaders including March 8 and March 14 parliamentarians haven’t held regular meetings since September 2012. The political unrest resulting of deep national divisions over the ongoing war in neighboring Syria recently became more tense following Syrian President Bashar al-Assad’s critique of Lebanon’s self-disassociation policy in an interview with a Lebanese TV-station: “Lebanon contributed directly in igniting the flames inside Syria by allowing terrorists to cross in through the Lebanese–Syrian borders so practically there was no self-disassociation”. Furthermore, the Lebanese political elite are yet unable to agree on the formation of the new government.

There is hardly any doubt that both sides in Lebanon, Hezbollah as well as the Future Movement alliance, are sending men and weapons to Syria. The Hezbollah is in armed confrontation with Sunni militias in Syria and it is feared in Lebanon that the conflicts will produce a spillover, so that there will be fighting on a larger scale in Lebanon. There have been clashes between supporters and opponents of al-Assad in the northern city of Tripoli causing dozens of victims and hundreds of wounded. So far the Lebanese Army has been able to contain the confrontations, but the fear is, that the unrest will spread to other areas in Lebanon including Beirut, where several car bombs have exploded and minor clashes have occurred. The caretaker government has drafted a security plan, but security forces will, if a further escalation of the conflict internally in Lebanon becomes a reality, hardly be able to control things.

A much discussed issue has been the case of former Minister Michel Samada, charged in coordination with Syrian officials of being responsible for smuggling explosives into Lebanon for the purpose of making car bombs. Samada was arrested by the Lebanese authorities in August 2012 and allegedly, during the interrogation, he admitted involvement in the conspiracy. Shortly after this the leader of the Lebanese Internal Security Forces (al-Maloumat), Wissam al-Hassan, was killed by a car bomb. The assassination was seen as a warning to people in Lebanon who might attempt to support the fight against the regime in Damascus, but the connection was never officially established. Hassan was leading the investigation concerning former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri’s death in February 2005, so apparently there was also a more direct address label attached to the bomb. Furthermore, Hassan had according to rumours supported the Syrian opposition in the Syrian war by facilitating a flow of money and arms to the Syrian opposition through Lebanon. He was given a state
funeral ceremony, posthumously awarded the National Order of the Cedar by the President and laid to rest alongside Hariri.

The National Dialogue attempted to touch upon the sensitive issue of disarming Hezbollah and in September 2012 Sleiman suggested a national defense strategy according to which it would be possible for the Hezbollah to maintain their armed forces, but in a changed setup so that they were under the command of the Lebanese army, which then (at least in principle) would be able to claim the monopoly of legitimate violence. The discussion related to the proposal has revolved around if it would be possible to make such an arrangement without handing over the weapons to the army or if a more informal coordination between the Hezbollah “resistance” and the Lebanese would do. Hezbollah–leader Hassan Nasrallah mentioned in an Iftar speech in July 2013 that “We are always ready to attend National Dialogue or any dialogue to discuss a national defense strategy before the formation of a Cabinet or after its formation.” He also warned 14 March supporters about pursuing an unrealistic scenario, where the Hezbollah would hand over their arms to the Lebanese army.

A Weberian approach can be useful, if one wants to understand the increasing social and political tension in Lebanon in light of the Syrian crisis. A simplified dichotomy, where on one side we have representatives for a legitimate, weak Lebanese government and on the other side proxies for Syria and Iran, might work in some lightweight Western media, but the Lebanese reality, is more complex. A dual–power situation in Lebanese politics is in the actual reality supplemented by a dual–legitimacy phenomenon, where the Hezbollah, with its efficient political work in parliament, municipalities etc., its notoriously well–functioning and wide–scaled social work and its ideological campaigns aimed at the Lebanese public sphere through the rhetoric of Nasrallah and the impressive satellite and internet based news–hub Al Manar, is able to some degree to dominate Lebanese politics and society.

The recent conflict is deepened by the fact that an estimated one million Syrian refugees have fled to Lebanon (UNHCR, January 2014). The conflict–potential related to this reality is significant, not the least because of the above mentioned national divisions. There is no consensus in Lebanese society regarding how the refugees should be dealt with. Some are worried about to which degree they will constitute a drain on the limited Lebanese resources. But more importantly: others fear that an influx of highly problematic groups will hide among the fleeing Syrians. Lebanon is, because of the more than 400,000 Palestinian refugees, who according to UNRWA are to be found in Lebanon and for decades have contributed to the recent dramatic Lebanese history, a sensitive country when it comes to refugees.
The dual legitimacy phenomenon in Lebanon has for years been an obstacle for the EU in the sense that the EU has had difficulties dealing with a strong non-state actor like Hezbollah: its sharing of power with other actors in Lebanon, its social work, its maintaining of a status as “the resistance” and at the same time its pursuing of political agendas on behalf of Syria and Iran. In July 2013 the EU added the Hezbollah Military Wing to its list of entities, groups and persons involved in terrorist acts. In the EU press announcement it was emphasized, that “this decision does not affect the continuation of dialogue with all political parties in Lebanon and does not affect the delivery of assistance to Lebanon.” By explicitly limiting the listing to the armed wing, the EU wanted to maintain working relations with Lebanon’s government and all political parties. Obviously, however, the decision may complicate the EU’s ability to approach Lebanese politicians with relations to Hezbollah. Again the security perspective is at the forefront and for the EU the Hezbollah, but also radical Sunni-Muslim organizations and Al Qaida affiliated groupings affect the security environment in the Levant. The situation in Lebanon contributes to refocusing the general perception in the EU of the Middle East three years after the ‘Arab Spring’. Security has become the main issue and the bombings and assassinations in Beirut in late 2013 and early 2014 add to this reality.

In Wolfram Lacher’s analysis of the situation in Libya in 2013, he describes the rift between on one side the many militias in the country, representing themselves as revolutionaries from the fighting against the Qadhafi regime, and on the other side the more established, conservative forces dominating the General National Congress, and emphasizes, that the “problems in the security sector and justice system represent the most urgent challenges of the current phase.” Lacher seems to assume, that the probability for the conflict escalating into a situation, where war breaks out again, is relatively low. But still the internal security environment is extremely fragile, as we have seen several expressions of in 2012 and 2013. Added to that – and contrary to Egypt, Jordan and Lebanon, two other security related issues are also highly relevant, namely the issues of energy and migration.

As it can be seen in the “MPC – Migration Profile” the official Libya, together with its international partners, is working on limiting irregular migration and increasing its capacity building to patrol land and maritime borders towards the North (Europe), the East (Egypt) and the West (Tunisia, Algeria). The Italian Prime Minister Enrico Letta emphasized in a speech on Malta (Nov. 2013) that the EU should put pressure on Libya to prevent tragic accidents like those killing hundreds of refugees trying to reach Sicily, Lampedusa or Malta during the last year. Letta stated that “There needs to be an EU initiative with Libya to try to manage different patrols and border controls (...) We need a new European policy toward Africa and the Middle East.”
Several different interests are at stake in connection with the question of human smuggling from North–Africa towards European coasts. The EU has an obvious interest in avoiding or at least reducing the number of attempts at reaching Italy or other Southern European countries. First of all the significant humanitarian aspects, but also the interest in being able to carry out European immigration policies based on efficient control of the external borders. Italy has from time to time claimed that they bear the brunt of the immigration pressure and that the EU needs to extend its deployment of naval vessels, helicopters and surveillance equipment in the Mediterranean. In the Frontex Annual Risk Analysis 2013, it is shown that throughout 2012, detections steadily increased and by the end of the year they totaled more than 10 000 detections. Most migrants were from sub–Saharan countries (particularly Eritrea and Somalia) and departed from Libya. This migratory movement takes place along the so–called Central Mediterranean route and in the context of that route there is no doubt that Italy is the main target for the majority of the boats departing from Libyan coasts.

As mentioned in the Frontex report, the Libyan authorities are under the recent conditions hardly in the possession of the necessary institutional capacities to tackle irregular migration and therefore there is an important potential field of cooperation between the EU and Libya. The question is, of course, if there is a commonality of interests. European security in a broad sense is not necessarily an important issue for Libya. And the question is if it is the right thing to do at the given moment to insist that Libya should help Europa with its “soft” southern borders. Lacher shows how it might be fruitful to tread a cautious path mentions as example, that “the European Union and UNSMIL are already competing for the favour of the Libyan government in their offers to reform the security sector or train and equip individual units. In some cases this has instead worsened confusion in the security sector.”

When working together with an entity as sensitive as the new Libya, the EU runs the risk that bilateral cooperation challenges the internal conflicts in Libya rather than contributes to resolving them. This said the EU is from a security point of view concerned with the recent development in Libya, as it can be seen in this statement by Catherine Ashton in connection with a meeting with Ali Zeidan, the Libyan Prime Minister: “The High Representative expressed concern about the security situation in the country (…). She stressed that it was vital for Libya’s economy and stability that oil flows return to previous levels (…). She expressed satisfaction at the progress to date of the EUBAM Libya border mission.”
The EUBAM (EU Border Assistance Mission) activities are from the EU side tied up with the Common Security and Defense Policy (CSDP). It is the ambition, that the activities will “contribute to state-consolidation, economic development, and the fight against organized crime and terrorism” but also that it will help avoiding that “Libya’s porous borders affect its neighboring countries”\textsuperscript{19} Summing up it is obvious that the security issue plays a highly significant role in the relation between the EU and the unstable post-Qadhafi–Libya.

The Jordanian case is different from Egypt, Lebanon and Libya and the development in Jordan is in some ways similar to what has taken place in Morocco. The parliamentary elections in November 2010 resulted in widespread protests, which preceded the eruption of protests in Tunisia and Egypt, but were inspired and intensified after the revolts succeeded in the deposing of the presidents in these two countries. Over the last three years, Jordan has experienced widespread and frequent demonstrations all over the country, also significantly in the tribal support base of the state. However, as stated by Valbjørn, “the Hashemite regime has during the last two years never been on the brink of collapse.”\textsuperscript{20} On the contrary, the state has responded largely peacefully to the protests and partially responded to the demands of the protesters. New constitutional amendments were issued by the parliament, most significant of which is the creation of the Independent Electoral Commission and the establishment of the constitutional court and the passing of a new election law. Parliamentary elections took place in January 2013 under the authority of the newly founded Independent Electoral Commission.

The EU has officially expressed its support for the path of reform that King Abdallah has taken. Jordan’s efforts in political reform have been affected by the severe economic conditions of the country and also by the huge influx of Syrian refugees into the country. Therefore, the EU efforts and financial support have been directed to help Jordan proceed in its political reform process, but also to ease the economic burden of the austerity economic measures that the government has implemented and the negative economic impact of the Syrian refugees. Despite these challenges the overall situation in Jordan seems stable, and the question is therefore if this means that Jordan at the same time represents the exception which proves the rule regarding a shift of focus in EU policies. If the idea is to point at a changing narrative in the European perception of the development in the Middle East, from a focus on democracy to a focus on security, Jordan is an exception – especially when compared to the tragic development in neighbouring Syria.
Perhaps Syria represents the biggest challenge to the EU policies in terms of developing a coherent policy towards the developments there. Although the EU and member countries in the beginning supported the aspirations of the Syrian people and the Syrian uprising, it was unable to take a unified stand in supporting an intervention in Syria or extending military support to groups fighting the regime in Syria. There were two main reasons for the inability of the EU to come up with a unified policy. The first reason was that some of the armed groups fighting the Syrian regime are Jihadist groups some of which are directly related to Al-Qaida. The EU was not able to decide to ease the arms embargo in order to help the rebels, because of fear that the weapons would end up in the hands of these militant Jihadist organizations. The second reason was that the Syrian conflict has become regionalized and internationalized with significant implications for the security situation in the region. The EU therefore opted to provide financial support for the refugees and to the countries hosting them. Besides this the EU tried to provide political and financial support to the national coalition and to support the US and Russia led political process. The EU seems to favor a process aiming at establishing a transitional government rather than a process insisting on regime change in Syria. The main reason for this is security. Syria represents explicitly the changing of the European narrative – from support of the ‘Arab Spring’ to an increased focus on security and, especially in the context of Syria, on counter-terrorism.

In a wider perspective there are two major lessons to be drawn from the transformations taking place in the MENA-region and the EU’s response to the surprising developments. The first lesson is that it has become increasingly difficult for the EU to maintain a policy that fits all countries in a region where the developments the last three years have led to an even more differentiated and unpredictable reality. The changes underline that the EU needs to work unilaterally with Mediterranean countries based on their internal development, and in connection with that it seems to be a sound policy to reduce the rhetoric of conditionality. The second lesson seems to be that following the last three years of development in the MENA-region the EU has reverted to the policies before the optimistic days of early 2011 – by returning to a narrative the main focus of which is European security.
Notes
2- Andrea Teti. ‘The EU’s First Response to the ‘Arab Spring’: A Critical Discourse Analysis of the Partnership for Democracy and Shared Prosperity’ Mediterranean Politics 17. no. 3 (2012).
3- See Tömmel. The New Neighbourhood Policy. p. 35
10- This is discussed in Peter Seeberg. ‘The EU as a Realist Actor in Normative Clothes: EU Democracy Promotion in Lebanon and the European Neighbourhood Policy.’ Democratization 16. no. 1 (2009).
15- The statements can be found in this article: “Italy and Malta say EU must press Libya to stop boat migration.” (Reuters. 11 Nov. 2013). see http://uk.reuters.com/article/2013/11/11/uk-italy-migrants-libya-idUKBRE9AA0LB20131111.
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