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**The Arab Spring:  
Where Was the EU, and What is Its Future Role in the Region?**

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# The Arab Spring: Where Was the EU, and What is Its Future Role in the Region?

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In 2010 the martyring of Mohamed Bouazizi began a ripple of civil uprisings across the Middle East, and would lead to a wave of revolutions that the media would dub the Arab Spring. From North Africa to the Gulf Region, these civil uprisings made major headlines but found little intervention on behalf of world superpowers such as the United States or the European Union. Acting as more of an observer than as an active participant in these revolutions, it would seem that the European Union played a small role in preventing civil unrest, or in aiding in the policing of these oppressive governments. By example of the passive position held by Europe during these revolutions, the EU appears to be ill equipped to handle security issues such as the massive revolutionary chain witnessed across the Mediterranean. Now, however, they have a new opportunity to be involved in a post- Arab Spring Mediterranean.

This paper seeks to address some reasons behind the Arab Spring, describe the institutional framework previously and currently in place, as well as to analyze the progress of Europe's relationship with the Mediterranean by analyzing the EU's past and current role in the Mediterranean. It will also look at critiques of the EU's role in the Arab Spring, as well as the opportunities to be taken in the Mediterranean region.

## **First Comes Winter, Then Comes Spring**

In reaction to the confiscation of his fruit stand, Tunisian Mohamed Bouazizi lit himself on fire in front of a Tunisian municipal office after he was denied an audience for his plea to the government for the return of his livelihood: his produce. This bold act inspired Tunisians to stand together, engaging in a revolt against authoritarian leader Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, which would ultimately lead to an entire overthrow of the government. Across the Mediterranean, the Arab world began to take a stand against the governments that had oppressed them for so long. From Bouazizi's home country of Tunisia, the Arab Revolution spread to Yemen, Egypt, Libya, Bahrain, and now Syria.

Following these events, the European Union has taken several actions in response to the Arab Spring. For instance, on March 8, 2011, the EU released a statement following the revolutions entitled the 'Partnership for Democracy and Shared Prosperity with the Southern Mediterranean.' In this statement, it offered to aid these Arab countries in reform through economic and political means. Through the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR), an initiative was posed to create:

A partnership for democracy and shared prosperity with the Southern Mediterranean.' ...stresses the need for the EU to support wholeheartedly the demand for political participation, dignity, freedom and employment opportunities, and sets out an approach based on the respect of universal values and shared interests. (Delivering on the Arab Spring 2011: 4)

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These actions have been further asserted by changes to the European Neighborhood Policy, instituted to face upcoming challenges faced by the EU from its Mediterranean partners. These changes suggest that the ENP supports committing stronger efforts in building democracy, economic partnerships, increasing dialogue regarding human rights, and supporting civil society organizations in the region (Delivering on the Arab Spring 2011: 4).

The report *Delivering on the Arab Spring* says that non-governmental EU institutions like the EIDHR have the ability to intervene in countries in the midst of revolts without permission from the country in question. Additionally, these institutions have the ability to work with civil society (2011: 10), helping create change according to the will of the people. Preceding the Arab Spring, a culmination of conferences and policies led to the EU's relationship with nations in the region. The combination of these policies and the aforementioned NGOs has established the EU as an actor in the region, albeit a cautious one. These attempts to bridge the gap between the people and the EU show a renewed position held by the EU, and its aim seems to be more oriented in defending democracy and human rights greater than before.

### **The Barcelona Process**

In November 1995, the Barcelona Process came underway in efforts to create an economic, political and social cooperative network between European Union and non-EU Mediterranean states. Meeting at the Barcelona Euro-Mediterranean Conference, Ministers of Foreign Affairs from 15 EU states convened in Spain in efforts to initiate conversation and policies regarding the idea of a partnership between the European Union and several countries within the Mediterranean region. Non-EU states that met at the conference include the nations of Algeria, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Syria, Tunisia, and the Palestinian Authority (Barcelona.com). Along with the European nations, these governments met to create policies on issues such as “arms control, democratic reforms and human rights in a format resembling that of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe” (Gomez 69). However, these were not the only objectives sought to reach through the Barcelona Process.

At the conference, these states were also able to create the framework of a partnership that would be carried into future years to come. As Vasconcelos (2000) describes, the “objective [was] to create a zone of economic development, democracy and peace through a process of integration.” The Barcelona Process would conclude in establishing the beginning of a Euro-Mediterranean regional community and creating a greater understanding (for the EU) why there is such a gap between the West and the Middle East and Mediterranean region. The efforts to create relationships between the EU and the Mediterranean resulted in partnerships in two levels, bilaterally and regional. Through this manner, the EU was able to develop its relationship both within the region and on a deeper level per country. Setting the framework for a much broader policy that would seek to strengthen the same aforementioned ideals on a broader scale, the next stage of the Euro-Med Partnership would commence in 2008.

### **The Union for the Mediterranean**

Thirteen years after the Barcelona Process was created, Nicolas Sarkozy led a conference in Paris with the aim to further develop an initiative to broaden the Euro-Mediterranean relationship through the reanalysis and expansion of the Barcelona Process, resulting in the Union for the Mediterranean. In November 2008, the Joint Declaration of the Paris Summit (2008) established that through the Union for the Mediterranean, the EU would seek to further its partnership in the Mediterranean by:

Upgrading the political level of the EU's relationship with its Mediterranean partners; by providing for further co-ownership to our multilateral relations; and by making these relations more concrete and visible through additional regional and subregional projects, relevant for the citizens of the region.

The idea behind the Union for the Mediterranean was the precipice for the current model, the European Neighborhood Policy, instituting a series of memberships for states in the Mediterranean. These memberships gave the states the ability to commence in greater trade liberties, economic benefits, political cooperation, and the expansion of cultural ties between the EU and its partners. These partnerships would also seek to provide extremely similar benefits as those received by EU-member states without the hassle of incorporating the Mediterranean states into the European Union (Whitman and Wolf 2010).

With the Union for the Mediterranean, the European Union began to entangle itself with the Mediterranean region and received tremendous economic and political benefits. With a more clear declaration that the EU would aid in propagating the ideals of human rights and democracy, it would seem that the Euro-Med partnership had the momentum to make a dramatic difference in the region, but as inter-regional conflict and greater instability in the region surmounted, the EU began to shift its priorities. Instead of seeking a mutually beneficial relationship between these nations, the EU became more concerned with security issues and forewent the promotion of democracy and human rights by acting cautiously in its dealings with the Mediterranean countries. The next step would result in a security-based agenda, the European Neighborhood Policy.

### **The EU's Response**

Built into its foundational platforms, the European Union and, subsequently, the European Neighborhood Policy seeks to promote its core platforms of democracy and fair human rights. According to Astrid Boening, the European Neighborhood Policy was designed to reward neighbors, in this case Mediterranean neighbor states, for their continued progress towards adopting a democratic state and by improving their practice of human rights (Boening 2009). However, it is suggested through the example of the Arab Spring that these revolutions were not sparked without cause. The common theme throughout these Mediterranean states is that oppressive regimes have led to unrest and reaction on behalf of its people. Drawing on this conclusion, and the EU's blind eye to human rights violations, scholars have critiqued the EU as putting economic and security gains before the fundamentals it so adamantly promotes.

To elaborate, the European Neighborhood Policy has stood on the platform of strengthening security and stability within the Mediterranean region in efforts to keep Europe safe from issues of instability, such as illegal immigration and spillover from conflicts across the sea. The human rights violations within these countries involved in the Arab Spring are clear. However, despite the EU's institution of ENP agreements with partner states, in which such a partnership is based on the partner's agreement to hold "commitment to values such as the rule of law, good governance, respect for human rights, and the promotion of good neighborly relations," the EU continued and continues to conduct relations with countries that obviously did not abide by these stipulations (Peters 2012: xiii).

### **The Current and the Future**

The aftermath of the Arab Spring has left the Mediterranean region more unstable than in years past. Most recently, major conflicts within the nations of Syria, Egypt, and the Palestinian Territories, along with isolated incidents in Lebanon and other nations in the region, it is clear that much is at stake in the Mediterranean region. The example of the Arab Spring, and other conflicts, illuminates the level of inconsistency within the EU regarding security issues, and with these nations so near to Europe's borders, the possibility of inter-regional spillover is more than possible, it is occurring. With the example of the

Syrian border being adjacent to Turkey, the conflict has consequentially created large scale instances of forced migration of Syrian refugees into Turkish border towns (UNHCR). By ignoring the human rights atrocities within nations like Syria, it would appear that the resulting repercussions have come to metaphorically bite Europe in the behind. Though there was no way to know that these conflicts would arise, Europe has the potential to make sure that once the storm calms, it can lead these devastated nations towards a more stable and democratic position. However, until then, Europe will soon be forced to take a more hard power role in these instances if it is to maintain stability within its own borders.

Additionally, these uprisings and their potential to flood into Europe elude to that the EU's attempts at preserving security and stability, in which the EU has so desperately sought through the implementation of the European Neighborhood Policy, is failing. Positing that if these instabilities do not fizzle out soon, they will continue to affect Europe and the EU, the European Union should look towards find a common ground in its foreign policy. For instance, where Turkey fights to stand strong in the waves of Syria's aftermath, Russia's economic and military aid to Bashar al-Assad's regime offers a stark difference in perspectives regarding Europe's involvement in the Mediterranean and though these states are not currently EU states, by the examples above, the approach to promote democracy and stability within the region is not being met. With insurmountable cases of human rights violations and anti-democratic practices held just across the sea in countries, the European Union must find some compromise to stand united and prevalent in the region, or take a position against these violations by limiting or cutting off its partnerships. In future conferences regarding the EU's position on the Mediterranean, and regarding the partnerships in which it currently keeps and wishes to create, policies regarding the EU's position on potential violations could be important and incentivizing for partner countries who wish to continue benefiting from their relationship with the EU.

Regarding future relations, Landaburu, EU ambassador to Morocco, (2011) writes that despite the EU's move towards greater financial assistance, the Arab world is need of much more. He provides that there must be serious assistance in the arenas of institutionalizing democracy in the area, and that by helping structure economics through trade liberalization and open trade with Europe is necessary in ensuring the stability in which the EU has so desperately sought through its European Neighborhood Policy. These suggestions create greater accountability on behalf of the European Union, and strengthen the EU's role in the Mediterranean. As the closest superpower, geographically, to the Mediterranean, the EU has the opportunity to first handedly ensure that stability and security in the region can be achieved by aiding in the structuring of new governments. Additionally, the relationships to be gained by playing this role would be advantageous to both the EU, a pillar of democracy, and the developing democratic states.

## **Final Thoughts**

The evolution of Europe's policies towards the Mediterranean region range from matters of economic incentives to issues of security, such as controlled immigration, environmental protection and energy security. Throughout the past twenty years or so, the EU has led a passive role in the region regarding taking a stance against authoritarian regimes counter to its main tenets, being the overarching themes of democracy and human rights that lay in the EU's framework. It is clear that the oppressive nature of governments found in the countries involved in the Arab Spring led to their ultimate demise, with the actions of the people speaking for themselves. The EU's choice to look past human rights violations has led to the continuation of the conditions that led these uprisings. Though in the past the EU might have had less of a role in actually instituting these themes beyond paper, its prospects in promoting these ideals in practice in a post- Arab Spring Mediterranean are much greater (Delivering on the Arab Spring 2011).

Furthermore, though the Arab Spring took the European Union, and much the rest of the world, by surprise, there is much potential to interact with the Arab world and the Mediterranean partners post-revolution. Though much of the development of these reformed societies rests in the hands of civil society, the European Union has the opportunity to aid in this development in a political and economic realm. With the amount of progress to be had in countries recuperating from the revolution, and for countries like Syria and Palestine that are currently enduring the tragedies of war, the EU can help support building a region with democratic values and sound human rights practices, which will help support the pillars in which the EU has built most of its policy: regional stability (Perthes 2012).

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