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# **The end of Arab exceptionalism and the European “Winter”**

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*With the Arab Spring still unfolding in its backyard, the EU has proven incapable at playing a substantive role in the international politics. The uncoordinated policies of the EU have been widely criticized as the succession of revolts in the Middle East fertilize fears of collapse of the Schengen Agreement and “paralysis” in the implementation of European Common Foreign and Security Policy.*

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The Arab Spring has not been an occasion to be politically proud of the EU, as it highlights a significant omission in EU policies: the absence of any real policy agenda in the Middle East. The European Council was extremely slow in formulating a political reaction to the popular revolts, in times when the Euro zone is in crisis and the ghost of euroscepticism is sweeping the old continent. Furthermore, in an effort to stabilize its south eastern periphery in the Mediterranean region, EU member states signed the Barcelona Declaration in 1995, which became part of the European Neighborhood Policy in 2004. The assessment of this ongoing policy process, however, has not been fruitful as was expected and in 2008, French President Nicolas Sarkozy launched the idea for a Union for the Mediterranean, which aspired to coordinate relations between the EU, North Africa and the Levant. Paradoxically though, the same leaders who promoted political and social reform through the Action Plans and MEDA financial packages of Neighborhood Policy, appeared to be slow and confused in breaking its opportunistic bonds with the autocratic leaders like the former Presidents of Tunisia and Egypt.

This article will explore the EU's political reaction towards the blossom of the Arab Spring with two major issues prevailing. First, the popular revolts unfolding in the Arab world have put pressure on the EU, as its handling of immigration issues has raised questions concerning the need for a review of the Schengen Agreement. Second, the uncoordinated and incoherent response of the European states questions the ability of the Union to support a Common Foreign and Security Policy by promoting collective interests in the Middle East.

## Schengen Review?

So far, the Arab Spring appears to be an immigration issue rather than an issue of Arab democracy's seizing moment. On a backdrop of rising nationalist sentiments in Europe, the refugees of the Arab Spring have put pressure on one of the most significant achievements of the European Union: the Schengen Agreement, which allows unrestricted travel between Schengen's 25 member state participants. The open borders agreement along with the euro single currency is Europe's signature unification project, but could this actually be reconsidered?

Undoubtedly, the issue of irregular immigration is unevenly spread geographically across the EU member states. The transit countries of the southern Mediterranean are coping with the appearance of thousands of Arab immigrants crossing by boat, wishing to reach destination countries like France, Germany and the UK, which has created a political psychosis in Italy and France. The Dublin II Agreement proved to be inefficient in the management of the migration problem even before the outbreak of the Arab Spring. The latest European Commission offer of \$140 million in aid to Tunisia in return for a commitment to control emigration<sup>1</sup> is emblematic of a disappointingly unimaginative response to the issue of external and internal immigration within the EU.

According to a report of Europol, the Union's joint police, the Arab revolutions and the economic crisis could increase the risk of terrorist attacks in the EU by Islamist, far left and far right groups.<sup>2</sup> Consequently, Silvio Berlusconi and Nicolas Sarkozy issued a letter to European Council President Van Rompuy and Commission President Barroso calling for border checks at internal borders.<sup>3</sup> The French President said for the treaty to stay alive, it must be reformed, while Berlusconi added that "we both believe that in exceptional circumstances there should be variation to the Schengen treaty"<sup>4</sup>. Article 2, paragraph 2 of the Schengen Agreement states that any country facing extreme threats to national security

can reinforce the border checks for a specific period of time.<sup>5</sup> The question is to what extent the Arab Spring poses a threat to the national security of the EU member states, and whether a possible alteration in the EU's signature agreement for integration will prove to be an inefficient method when handling and responding to regional political events.

## **Paralysis of Common Foreign and Security Policy**

The Chairman of the European Parliament's largest political alliance, the European People's Party, Joseph Daul has argued that Europe remains a dwarf in international politics.<sup>6</sup> It is in fact a bold statement but there is some truth in it. EU foreign policy failed as the events began to unfold in North Africa questioning the ability of the EU to promote its common interests. It took the EU almost a whole month to deplore the violence of Ben Ali's regime against his people and it did so only when France had decided to drop its support for the dictator. The ensuing revolt in Egypt brought a slightly faster response with the large member states Germany, France, the UK and Italy taking the lead in signing a joint statement followed Washington's terminology of "a quick and orderly transition". In the case of Libya, while France had already deployed fighter jets to take aim at ground targets, the UK soon followed while Germany refused to participate in any military engagement.

The EU's slowness in reaching an agreement on sanctions against Gaddafi's murderous regime weeks into the horrific violence against the demonstrators in Libya was inevitably compared to the response of the UN. The Security Council was quicker than the EU to impose sanctions. The decision to implement a no-fly zone on Libya was finally taken by the UN Security Council on March 17th, when it adopted resolution No.1973.<sup>7</sup> Regarding the suppression of revolts in Syria, security forces have killed an estimated 800 demonstrators and detained thousands, but the EU has only responded with a set of mild sanctions. It announced that it froze assets and restricted travel for 13 people close to the Syrian President, but not for Assad himself.

The institutional context of the Lisbon Treaty has not been fully implemented, while a common foreign policy stance towards the Arab revolts was inexistent. The "high policies" of the EU remain a matter of the strongest member states' interests and the hard security pillar is served under the North Atlantic Alliance as the case of Libya has indicated. Better late than never however, last Wednesday on May 26th,<sup>8</sup> EU Foreign Policy Chief Catherine Ashton unveiled a new strategy which was tabled at the G8 Summit in France. In sum, under the "New Response to a Changing Neighborhood" policy, states' financial help will be provided depending on the progress of building and consolidating democracy and respecting the rule of law. Thus, the faster the countries progress in their internal reform, the more financial support they will get from the EU. Obviously, this is not a U-turn of the Neighborhood Policy, as the Action Plans and the MEDA financial schemes existed before and they proved to be inefficient. What will indeed change is the manner with which the recipient states will handle the financial packages. The disbursement of the funds will be in accordance to their commitment to actual reform.

In conclusion, witnessing the mild end of Arab exceptionalism, the EU of 27 member states is characterized by a political frustration and proved it is not fully ready to respond in a timely and coherent manner to an international crisis. The suggestion to review the Schengen Agreement due to the number of immigrants arriving in the EU sounds rather weak in addressing the multifaceted issue of migration. Moreover, the European Union was ill-equipped to develop a coherent stance towards the Arab Spring, which indicates that the implementation of the Lisbon Treaty will take a while.

# NOTES

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