

Opinion

The European Union's Mediterranean Policies after the Arab Spring: Can the Leopard Change its Spots?

Timo Behr*

Introduction

For more than two decades, the EU has played a pivotal role in the Mediterranean and North Africa. Although it never yielded the hard power of the United States, the EU's soft power and its deep social, political and economic ties with the countries of the southern and eastern Mediterranean have provided it with considerable sway in Mediterranean affairs. Through its Euro-Mediterranean Partnership, first launched in 1995, the EU promoted the vision of an open and integrated Mediterranean region that was organically tied to and politically oriented towards the EU. To pursue this vision, the EU has relied on a number of tools and measures that it appropriated from its enlargement policies. Over the years, the EU considerably refined these tools and repeatedly adjusted the shape and content of its Mediterranean policies. In the process, the EU jettisoned some of the more intrusive normative goals of its original Mediterranean policies for a close relationship with the region's autocratic, yet western-oriented, Arab regimes. Not only did these regimes promise to act as a bulwark against the rise of radical Islam and provide a measure of regional stability, but they also endorsed the EU's vision of a Euro-Mediterranean community. The result was a 'stability partnership' that served both the EU's interests in a stable and western-oriented Mediterranean and the need of Arab regimes to garner external rents and legitimacy.

By toppling some of the regions' long standing dictatorships and forcing others to pursue an agenda of domestic reforms, the Arab Spring uprisings of 2011 effectively drew an end to this relationship. While the popular revolts appear to have opened the door to a more modern, free and democratic Arab world, they also called the EU's role as a regional power and reference point in a changing region into question. Not only has the EU's image been considerably tainted by its long-standing relationship with autocratic Arab rulers, but it also no longer provides the only model for the proto-democratic states of the southern Mediterranean that are witnessing a revival of Pan-Arab and Pan-Islamic trends. The EU has reacted to these changes by advocating a radical shift in the contents of its Mediterranean policies with the aim of creating a 'democracy partnership' that legitimises itself through its support for the ongoing transition processes in the EU's southern neighbourhood. However, it is far from clear that the EU's recent *volte face* will be sufficient to provide the EU with a measure of relevance and influence in a quickly changing Mediterranean region eager to break free from its post-colonial bonds.

* Timo Behr is a Research Fellow at the Finnish Institute of International Affairs. This article draws on an earlier version published by the *Annuaire Français des Relations Internationales*.

This article traces the EU's search for a new regional role by focusing on its response to the Arab Spring uprising throughout 2011. It argues that, despite its best efforts, so far the EU has failed to sufficiently adjust to the changing domestic and geopolitical context that has resulted from the Arab Spring revolutions. The article sets out by describing the EU's policies at the eve of the Arab Spring and chronicling the EU's initial response to the emergence of popular protests in Tunisia and Egypt. A second section analyses the EU's attempt to refashion its role from that of a stability promoter to that of a democracy promoter and discusses some of the problems the EU has encountered in this role. A third section focuses on the EU's attempt to adjust to the changing geopolitical balance of power in the Middle East and North Africa and how this has affected the EU's own regional role. The article concludes with some thoughts on the future of Euro-Mediterranean relations and the EU's potential to act as an agent for change.

I. Managing Change: The Euro-Med as a Stability Union

The unprecedented wave of popular protests that ripped through the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) in the spring of 2011 caught the EU in a moment of crisis. Having been consumed by internal debates about the evolving institutional set-up and personnel composition of the European External Action Service (EEAS) throughout 2010, the EU's foreign policy elite was ill-prepared to respond to the fast-moving events. With much of the intra-institutional turf-wars over competencies continuing into early 2011 and with gaps in its core staff, the EEAS was unprepared to take the lead when Arab protesters took to the streets of Tunis, Cairo and Benghazi. Similarly, the continuing stalemate in Middle East peace talks and the indefinite postponement of the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM) summit in 2010 meant that Euro-Mediterranean relations had ground to a standstill.¹ With the deepening Eurozone crisis consuming the attention of European leaders, Europe's southern neighbourhood had received little attention in the months leading to the crisis.

All of this meant that when popular protests first broke out in Tunisia in late 2010, the EU was largely caught off-guard. Despite numerous signs that 2011 was gearing up to be a watershed year for the MENA region and especially for Egypt, there had been little forward thinking about the EU's role and position in the explosive regional context.² Although the EU launched a review of both its European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) and Human Rights Policy in 2010, these were largely bureaucratic exercises.³ In reality, the EU had long forgone its ambitions to foster change in its southern neighbourhood. Egypt's rigged parliamentary elections in November 2010 were a case in point. Although the elections were anything but free and fair and there had been reported numerous cases of voter buying and ballot stuffing, the EU decided to turn a blind eye. Given Egypt's role as the Co-President of its already ailing Union for the Mediterranean and Mubarak's importance as a partner for the EU in the Middle East peace process, political realism prevailed.

Similar tendencies were evident in other areas of Euro-Mediterranean relations. By early 2011 the EU was in the process of forging a closer relationship with Qaddafi's Libya, which had refused the EU's advances for many years, and had initiated so-called advanced status

¹ R. Balfour, 'The Transformation of the Union for the Mediterranean', *Mediterranean Politics* 2009-14, pp. 99-105; T. Behr, 'What Future for the Union for the Mediterranean?', FIIA Comment 1/2010, June 2010.

² K. Kausch, 'Managed Succession and Stability in the Arab World', FRIDE Working Paper 2010, No. 104.

³ S. Füle, 'European Neighborhood Policy Review', speech to the European Parliament's AFET Committee, 26 October 2010, Brussels.

talks with Ben Ali's Tunisia, after laying aside years of human rights disputes.⁴ More than ever, the EU's regional policy appeared focused on building political and economic partnerships with a growing number of its Mediterranean neighbours. Human rights and democracy issues, on the other hand, had become increasingly marginalised items on the EU's foreign policy agenda for the Mediterranean by the spring of 2011.⁵ Instead, discussions amongst experts and policy-makers were dominated by loose talk about the Chinese development model and European fears of losing export markets in its neighbourhood to the intensifying global competition from the BRICS countries⁶.

While this decline in the EU's 'normative agenda' has been facilitated by the shift from the multilateral framework of the Barcelona Process to the more intergovernmental UfM, as well as changes in the broader regional climate, its roots run deeper.⁷ For decades, the EU's policies in North Africa and the Middle East have been forced to strike a difficult balance between the Union's ambitions to promote political pluralism and human rights and its member states' interests in safeguarding regional stability.⁸ Whereas Europe's normative ambitions and self-understanding support a more value-led foreign policy agenda, its commercial and security interests have usually tended to tip the balance in favour of stability. Arab dictators skilfully exploited this European penchant for stability by habitually asserting that any political change would inevitably empower Islamic radicals and favour regional chaos. Fearful of the consequences that any sudden and uncontrolled change might bring, European policies sought to foster economic reforms and good governance initiatives.

European policy-makers argued that these initiatives would eventually create the conditions for sustainable political change while avoiding the destabilising effects of a sudden regime collapse.⁹ However, rather than serving as a catalyst for reforms, these policies cemented the political status quo and reinforced the EU's ever growing dependency on Arab dictators. Instead of promoting change, the EU unwittingly provided autocratic Arab regimes with valuable additional support. Indeed, by early 2011 the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership had largely turned into a stability union under which the EU provided Arab regimes with external rent and legitimacy in exchange for their cooperation on economic, security and migratory issues that were at the heart of EU interests in the region. Political change was meant to be a managed top-down process.

II. Against the Tide: The EU between Denial and Divisions

The EU's initial reaction to the Arab Spring uprisings needs to be understood as a combination of the EU's long term preference for regional stability and its more short term institutional shortcomings and divisions in this context. Inevitably, the resulting EU policy was both cautious and confusing. In particular during the initial phase of the Arab Spring

⁴ In November 2008 the Commission and Libya launched negotiations for an EU-Libya Framework Agreement for political dialogue and cooperation. In May 2010 the EU and Tunisia set up a joint working group to explore an "advanced status" agreement between Tunisia and the EU.

⁵ F. Bicchì, 'Dilemmas of implementation: EU democracy assistance in the Mediterranean,' *Democratization* 2010-17, pp. 976-996.

⁶ Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa.

⁷ The Barcelona Process included a specific focus on human rights and civil society issues and was driven by the European Commission. The UfM focuses on economic cooperation and provides Arab states with a veto power over all initiatives; F. Bicchì, 'The Union for the Mediterranean, or the changing context of Euro-Mediterranean relations', *Mediterranean Politics* 2011-16, pp. 3-19.

⁸ T. Behr, 'Enduring Differences? France, Germany and Europe's Middle East Dilemma', *Journal of European Integration* 2008-30, pp. 79-96.

⁹ E. Kienle, 'Political Reforms through Economic Reforms?', in: H. A. Fernandez & R. Youngs, *The Euro-Mediterranean Partnership: Assessing the First Decade*, Madrid: FRIDE 2005, pp. 23-34.

uprisings, the EU's common institutions were regularly sidelined by the member states and were unable to function as a catalyst for a common policy.¹⁰ Moreover, given the EU's dislike of instability in its neighbourhood, its initial reaction to the uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt can at best be classified as timid. Especially those member states that maintained close bilateral ties with North African regimes remained overly cautious.

In the case of Tunisia, the EU's shortcomings were most pronounced. Although popular protests had started on 17 December 2010 following the self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi and spread to Tunis at the beginning of January, the EU only took note of the situation in an official statement on 10 January 2011. In a soft-worded statement, High Representative Catherine Ashton and Enlargement Commissioner Stefan Füle merely called for restraint and the release of detained activists.¹¹ Only after the departure of President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali a few days later, did Ashton and Füle express their support for the democratic aspirations of the Tunisian people and promised EU support.¹²

While the EU's voice remained rather subdued throughout the crisis, some EU member states openly sided with the Ben Ali regime. In France, most notably, foreign minister Michèle Alliot-Marie offered to dispatch the French riot police to help quell the turmoil, while agriculture minister Bruno Le Maire defended Ben Ali as "someone who is often misjudged."¹³ Reluctant to desert a stalwart ally in the region and fearful about a new wave of immigration, at this stage many southern European countries remained outright opposed to a more strong-worded European statement or any talk of EU sanctions.¹⁴

Europe's utter failure in Tunisia drew considerable criticism from the press and civil society organisations and encouraged a gradual rethinking at the level of both the EU and its member states. This was already noticeable during the Tahrir Square protests in Egypt from 25 January to 11 February. Although the EU continued to trail US positions, it was swifter to condemn violence and side with the protesters.¹⁵ By 31 January, the European Council was calling for an orderly transition and free and fair elections in Egypt and High Representative Catherine Ashton played a more visible and active role in coordinating the EU's overall response.¹⁶ Although EU policy remained highly reactive, it no longer sought to stem the overall tide of events and jumped on the revolutionary bandwagon.

However, the EU's willingness to endorse the demands of the protesters still did not translate into a new EU strategy for the region. Nor did it amount to a blanket endorsement of the different Arab protest movements. In Bahrain, Algeria, Yemen and Iraq, the EU remained a distant player in the months to come and refrained from using its public diplomacy muscle. In Jordan and Morocco, on the other hand, the EU emphasised the need for government-led reforms and national dialogue. Only in the case of Libya, where popular protests that had begun in Benghazi in mid-February soon spiralled out of control, did the EU eventually play a more overt role in support of the rebel movement.

¹⁰ In one famous episode British Prime Minister David Cameron raced the EU's High Representative to be the first foreign dignitary to visit Cairo's Tahrir Square.

¹¹ European Union, 'Statement by EU High Representative Catherine Ashton and European Commissioner for Enlargement Stefan Füle on the situation in Tunisia', 10 January 2011, A010/11.

¹² European Union, 'Joint Statement by EU High Representative Catherine Ashton and Commissioner Stefan Füle on the event in Tunisia', 14 January 2011, A016/11.

¹³ B. Mikail, 'France and the Arab Spring: An opportunistic quest for influence', *FRIDE Working Paper* 2011-110.

¹⁴ L. Phillips, 'Mediterranean EU states block stronger action on Tunisia', *EUObserver*, 14 January 2011.

¹⁵ European Union, 'Statement by the EU High Representative Catherine Ashton on events in Egypt', 27 January 2011, A 032/11.

¹⁶ European Council, 'Council Conclusions on Egypt', 31 January 2011.

Nevertheless, with protests spreading throughout the region, the EU acknowledged that a new approach was called for. On 4 February the European Council reacted by issuing a declaration that underlined the EU's determination "to lend its full support to the transition processes towards democratic governance, pluralism, improved opportunities for economic prosperity and social inclusion, and strengthened regional stability."¹⁷ The European Council also invited the High Representative to develop a package of measures in order to support these processes and to adjust the ENP to the changing situation. The EU's High Representative Catherine Ashton reacted by highlighting the need to jettison Europe's "old stability" approach by opting for a new approach based on the promotion of "sustainable stability" and "deep democracy" in relation with its neighbourhood.¹⁸

These declarations opened the door for a revision of European policies and provided a more central role to EU institutions in the process. But they did not end intra-European divisions concerning the Arab Spring. Indeed, considerable differences remained between EU member states concerning the means and ends of EU policies.¹⁹ Many of these divisions revolved around the format and funding of the ENP. In mid-February, a non-paper issued by six southern European member states—France, Spain, Greece, Cyprus, Malta, Slovenia—suggested a shift of resources away from Europe's eastern neighbourhood towards the south and a more flexible and differentiated approach.²⁰ Most northern European countries, on the other hand, rallied behind a proposal by German foreign minister Guido Westerwelle that opposed a redistribution of resources and instead suggested to redirect funding within the ENP envelop in order to support democracy and human rights.²¹ Amongst other measures, the Westerwelle proposal also endorsed an opening of the EU agricultural market—an issue regularly opposed by the southern member states that stand to lose the most.

Further differences emerged in time concerning the role of the UfM and its relationship to EU institutions, with several different models being discussed.²² Intra-European differences over the future institutional set-up and role of the UfM have also complicated the functioning and funding of the ill-fated institution. This has meant that despite all the rhetoric of the UfM being a "project of projects", by late 2011 the UfM had still failed to launch a single development project in the Mediterranean.²³ Unsurprisingly, the funding of the UfM has represented another bone of contention. With most member states unwilling to back an institution whose future remains far from certain, an interim compromise was found in fall 2011 according to which France, Spain and Germany would jointly provide half of the funding, while the other half would come out of the EU's coffers. While this has bought the UfM some time, there is little to suggest that intra-European differences over the functioning of this contentious institution have been settled once and for all. This means that all European attempts to address the Arab Spring have tended to focus solely on the bilateral ENP, while its multilateral framework, in form of the UfM, has continued to linger.

¹⁷ European Council, 'Declaration on Egypt and the Region', 4 February 2011, PCE 027/11.

¹⁸ European Union, 'Remarks by the EU High Representative Catherine Ashton at the Senior officials' meeting on Egypt and Tunisia', Brussels, 23 February 2011, A 069/11.

¹⁹ T. Behr, 'Arab Spring, European Split', BEPA Newsletter, Issue 46, April 2011.

²⁰ French Foreign Ministry, 'Non-Papier: Action de l'Union européenne en direction du voisinage Sud', 16 February 2011, digitally accessible via <http://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr>.

²¹ FAZ, Westerwelle: Zusagen für Nordafrika an Reformen knüpfen', 18 February 2011.

²² In discussing UfM reforms, much of the debate has focused on the relationship between the UfM and the EU institutions, with some advocating its full integration, while others argue for it to be fully independent from the EEAS and reestablished outside of the Union's structures.

²³ In early 2012, the UfM finally succeeded in launching a project for building a Desalination Facility in the Gaza Strip.

Finally, deep intra-European fissure emerged over NATO's Libya intervention. Despite initial attempts to present a common European front on the issue and broad European support for UNSC Resolution 1970 on sanctions against the Gaddafi regime, differences soon emerged over Europe's role in fostering regime change in Libya. France's unilateral recognition of the National Transitional Council (NTC) as the legitimate representative of Libya on 10 March 2011 effectively undermined all attempts to coordinate a response through the EU institutions. In the aftermath of that decision, France and the UK took the lead in sponsoring UNSC Resolution 1973 on a no-fly zone in Libya and spearheaded the international response.²⁴ Germany's abstention from UNSC 1973 and its subsequent refusal to contribute to the NATO-led intervention in Libya further undermined any European attempt to present a common front on this issue. Just as in the case of the 2003 Iraq invasion, Germany's abstention was widely interpreted as deriving from its pacifist tradition as well as its complicated coalition politics and upcoming *Länder* elections.²⁵ However, far from being limited to differences between the EU-3, Germany's abstention also highlighted a wider intra-European split over the issue of regime change as such. In the end, only eleven EU member states contributed directly to the NATO-led intervention, with some traditional Atlanticists, such as Poland, notably opposing.

Subsequent attempts to rekindle common European actions on the Libya crisis similarly failed. In April, the European Council launched an EU military operation in support of humanitarian assistance operations in Libya (EUFOR Libya). The operation, under an Italian Rear-Admiral and with a joint operations headquarter located in Rome, would have seen European battle groups, with German participation, deploy to Misrata in order to safeguard UN humanitarian deliveries. However, in the end the mission failed due to the opposition of the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs.²⁶ New divisions also emerged over reports that France had provided weapons to Berber rebels in the Nafusa mountains and that both France and the UK had conducted covert operations in support of the Libyan rebels inside Libya. Even in the aftermath of the NATO intervention, intra-European divisions persisted with different EU member states reportedly backing different parts of Libya's emerging power structures.²⁷ Overall, the EU's response to Libya once again seems to confirm that on important strategic issues, national reflexes still tend to dominate over the common European spirit. Given this evident lack of strategic consensus amongst the member states, devising a new role for the EU in the southern neighbourhood has proven to be a difficult undertaking.

III. From Stability to Change: The EU in Search of a New Role

Despite continuing intra-European differences over the details of EU policies, a broad consensus soon emerged in favour of supporting the democratic transition processes in the Mediterranean. This had become possible as European member states realised that their interest in a stable neighbourhood could no longer be guaranteed by authoritarian Arab regimes. Rather, these regimes now had become part of the problem. In order to restore stability, an orderly transition to democracy of those countries that had experienced revolutionary upheavals was now in the EU's best interests. For the time being, this seemed to signal an end to the EU's long standing democratisation-stabilisation dilemma in the

²⁴ Mikail 2011, supra note 13.

²⁵ A. Rinke, 'Srebrenica or Afghanistan? Why Germany abstained on the Libya vote—tracing the history of a decision', *IP Journal*, 14 June 2011.

²⁶ S. Bloching, 'EU and Libya', *ISIS Europe Briefing Note* 2011-1.

²⁷ W. Lacher, 'Families, Tribes and Cities in the Libyan Revolution', *Middle East Policy* 2011-4, pp. 140-154.

region and allowed for a realignment of European values and interests.²⁸ This realignment was announced in a statement by Commission President José Manuel Barroso in March, when he stated that:

I think it is our duty to say to the Arab peoples that we are on their side! From Brussels, I want to specifically say this to the young Arabs that are now fighting for freedom and democracy: We are on your side.²⁹

This sentiment that the EU needed to take a clear stand in favour of pro-democracy protesters served as the basis for a revision of EU policies in the region that emerged out of two documents prepared jointly by the EU Commission and the EU High Representative in March and May respectively.³⁰ In its proposal for a “partnership for democracy and shared prosperity with the southern Mediterranean” the EU outlined a number of measures to support the transition processes in its southern neighbourhood, while in its communication on “a new response to a changing neighbourhood” it revisited the implications of this shift in strategy for the ENP at large.

In these documents, the EU sketches out a new approach for its southern neighbourhood that revolves around the promotion of “deep democracy.” According to the EU, the building of deep and sustainable democracies requires not only regular elections, but also demands a broader set of preconditions that includes freedom of association and expression, the rule of law, the fight against corruption and democratic control over security forces.³¹ In order to entice reforms on these various issues, the EU sets out an incentive-based approach that relies on greater differentiation amongst Mediterranean countries, which reemphasises the role of political conditionality. Support will be granted according to the principle of “more-for-more”. This implies that those countries that are willing to go further and faster than their counterparts can count on more generous European assistance. While the documents do not directly refer to punitive measures, most analysts have argued that the approach also implies a “less-for-less” policy, according to which the EU will have to punish democracy laggards in return.³²

According to these documents “a commitment to adequately monitored, free and fair elections should be the entry qualification” that allows countries to qualify for additional EU support.³³ Beyond that, more assistance and closer political cooperation will be offered in accordance with each country’s progress “towards high standards of human rights and governance.” To measure progress, the EU proposes the development of certain “minimum benchmarks” that it plans to relate to the ENP Action Plans for each country. However, neither of the documents contains any concrete suggestions concerning the nature and content of these benchmarks or how they might eventually be evaluated and enforced. Instead they stake out rather vague policy goals that leave considerable room for interpretation and cast some doubt about the feasibility of clear benchmarking.³⁴

²⁸ T. Behr, ‘The EU and Arab Democracy’, in: T. Behr (ed.), *Hard choices: The EU’s Options in a Changing Middle East*, FIIA Report 28/2011, April 2011, pp. 82-87.

²⁹ J. M. Barroso, ‘Statement by President Barroso on the situation in North Africa’, speech to the European Parliament, 2 March 2011, Point Press, Speech 11/137.

³⁰ European Commission, ‘A Partnership for Democracy and Shared Prosperity with the Southern Mediterranean’, COM(2011), 200 final; European Commission, ‘A new response to a changing Neighborhood’, COM(2011), 303.

³¹ European Commission, ‘A new response to a changing Neighborhood’, COM(2011), 303, p. 3.

³² S. Fischer, ‘The ENP Strategic Review: The EU and its Neighborhood at a Crossroad,’ *ISS Analysis* 2011.

³³ European Commission, ‘A Partnership for Democracy and Shared Prosperity’, p. 5.

³⁴ T. Schumacher, ‘The EU and the Arab Spring: Between Spectatorship and Actorness’, *Inside Turkey* 2011-3, pp. 107-119; R. del Sarto & T. Schumacher, ‘From Brussels with love: leverage, benchmarking,

In return for partner countries carrying out these somewhat ill-defined reforms and in order to support each country's democratic transition, the EU outlines a number of potential incentives. On the one hand, these revolve around the renewal of negotiations for "advanced status" agreements that offer Mediterranean countries a way to strengthen their political dialogue and cooperation with EU institutions.³⁵ On the other hand, the documents refer to more concrete rewards in three separate areas—money, mobility and market access (Ashton's "3 Ms")—that will be awarded in return for essential reforms.

In terms of monetary support, the EU has made more than €1 billion of extra funding available through its European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument for the period 2011-2013. While these resources are earmarked for the ENP as a whole, the majority of the funding has been allocated to the EU's nine Mediterranean partner countries through a number of designated programmes. Most importantly, the EU adopted a package of measures in September 2011 to support the transition processes. The centrepiece of this package was the SPRING (Support to Partnership, Reform and Inclusive Growth) programme that aims to disburse €350 million in assistance during 2011-2013 in accordance with the more-for-more principle. In addition, the Commission has launched a number of smaller pilot projects to support poorer areas, encourage the development of small to medium enterprises and invest in higher education. The central element of its people partnerships has been a new Civil Society Facility offering €22 million for 2011-2013 to foster the capacity of civil society organisations (CSOs) and their role in democratic reforms.

In addition to these direct support measures, the EU has also worked with member states to increase the lending operations of the European Investment Bank (EIB) and extend the mandate of the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) to the southern Mediterranean. On recommendation of the European Parliament, the European Council approved an increase in the EIB's lending envelop for the region by €1 billion per year. Similarly, the EBRD accepted the membership requests of Tunisia, Jordan, Egypt and Morocco and initiated funding activities in these countries in late 2011. Eventually, the EBRD intends to disburse as much as €2.5 billion per year to those southern and eastern Mediterranean countries that demonstrate commitment to and application of the principles of multiparty democracy, pluralism and market economics.³⁶

The second package of incentives concerns an increase in the mobility for nationals from Mediterranean partner countries. Here the EU documents hold out the prospects of "mobility partnerships" that would allow for an easing of visa restrictions for certain professional groups (students, researchers, businessmen) and a long-term perspective for visa liberalisation, better access to legal migration channels, and a boost to EU support and training for border control and migration management. At the same time partner countries would have to accept a host of EU legislation on these various issues, including on the return of irregular migrants. The models for these partnerships are the EU's existing mobility partnerships with Moldova and Georgia, with the Commission pledging to launch concrete negotiations in the cases of Egypt, Tunisia and Morocco.³⁷

Finally, the EU documents hold out the prospect for greater market access for the Mediterranean partner countries. Here the emphasis is in particular on the negotiation of so-

and the Action Plans with Jordan and Tunisia in the EU's democratization policy', *Democratization* 2011-4, pp. 932-955.

³⁵ K. Kausch, 'Morocco's Advances Status: Model or Muddle?', *FRIDE Policy Brief*, 2010-5.

³⁶ EBRD, 'The EBRD starts donor-funded activities in southern and eastern Mediterranean', Press Release 13 December 2011.

³⁷ European Commission, 'A dialogue for migration, mobility and security with the southern Mediterranean countries', COM(2011) 292 final.

called Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Areas (DCFTAs) that go beyond the elimination of import duties, but foster closer market integration and regulatory convergence.³⁸ Quicker progress is also being offered with regards to the liberalisation of trade in agriculture and services—sectors in which southern Mediterranean states hold a comparative advantage and where progress has often been slow. However, for the EU Commission to move forward on these and a raft of other trade-related issues, it will ultimately require the support of the EU member states. Given that they tend to be less than forthcoming when it comes to the liberalisation of the EU agriculture and service sectors to the south, progress on these issues is likely to remain slow for the time being.³⁹

While the EU documents connect the rewards offered in each of these distinct areas with progress on “deep democracy” reforms, in practice there are two concrete obstacles to such a direct link. First, in each of these cases the EU institutions share decision making authority with a number of other actors— International Financial Institutions (money) and member states (mobility and market access)—and will therefore have to coordinate their actions with these different players. Second, the EU itself sets out a number of parallel goals in its communications, namely to support people-to-people contacts and sustainable economic growth, which it also relates to these various measures. As a result, any attempt to strictly enforce the new “more-for-more” approach on human right and democratic governance seems likely to encounter considerable obstacles.

Together, these various measures are meant to define a new role for the EU in the Mediterranean that combines the EU’s new vision of deep democracy with its goal of building a Euro-Mediterranean community. However, there are several problems with the EU’s current approach. First of all, the overall level of ambition of the proposed partnership remains low. Most of the political incentives the EU is offering are vague and long-term in nature, while the EU’s financial offers fall far behind earlier considerations for a “Marshall Plan” for the Mediterranean.⁴⁰ Indeed, the level of financial assistance that is being provided by the EU is now being overshadowed by the far more generous offers from the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries. And with a budget of merely €350 million for 2011-2013, the EU’s SPRING programme simply lacks the firepower to implement an incentive-based approach to promote democratic reforms. Although greater mobility and market access would certainly enhance the EU’s appeal, there seems to be little haste in adopting these measures, given the current penchant for austerity.

Similarly, current EU initiatives largely represent a continuation of the EU’s existing policies in the region. Just as in the past, the EU’s policies in the Mediterranean follow an “enlargement light” formula that requires the Mediterranean partner countries to further integrate themselves with the EU by adopting European norms and regulations. This is hardly surprising given that the current proposals have been developed on the basis of an ENP review that was initiated last year. However, the EU’s political vision of an ever more tightly integrated Euro-Mediterranean area centred on Europe no longer represents the geopolitical reality of the region. Indeed, there is little that connects the current events with the revolutions of 1989. Back then, events were informed by a desire of Eastern European countries to “rejoin Europe”.⁴¹ Today, the “dignity revolutions” in the Arab world are partly driven by a longing for national autonomy and an end to the post-colonial era in the Middle

³⁸ A. Ghoneim et al., ‘Shallow versus Deep Integration between Mediterranean Countries and the EU and within the Mediterranean Region’, *CASE Network Report* 2011, No. 96.

³⁹ Michael Emerson, ‘Review of the Review — of the European Neighborhood Policy’, CEPS Commentary, 8 June 2011.

⁴⁰ F. Frattini, ‘A Marshall Plan for the Arab World’, *Project Syndicate* 2011.

⁴¹ M. Leonard, ‘Europe’s Multipolar Neighbourhood’, *Strategic Europe* 2011.

East. This means that most of the young Arab democracies are unlikely to pursue a policy that binds them ever more closely to a declining Europe. This trend is already evident in several North African countries. Egypt, most notably, has been reluctant to accept IMF funding, has refused to admit EU elections observers and has sought to curtail the activities of western NGOs. Instead, the focus has been on reclaiming the European assets of former dictators. In this situation the EU's existing offers are likely to fall on deaf ears in a number of countries.

All of this suggests that the EU has not yet managed to define a new role for itself when it comes to the democratic transition processes in the region. While it acknowledges that its previous model of supporting gradual top-down reforms has failed, its current proposals lack the necessary resources and political will to steer the democratic transition processes across the region. And with the attraction of the Euro-Mediterranean project clearly waning, the EU has little to offer to a region that is bent on reclaiming its international independence and own identity. As a result, the EU has remained an impotent bystander to the seismic events that are reshaping its southern neighbourhood.

IV. Geopolitical Games: Navigating the New Middle East

While the EU has struggled to adapt its policies to a more democratic and independent Middle East, it similarly had problems adjusting to the emerging geopolitical context of the region. Although much remains uncertain about the outcome of the current democratic transition processes, the Arab Spring has clearly changed the geopolitical balance in the wider Middle East. On the one hand, it has broken the prevailing Middle Eastern balance of power that had divided the region between a coalition of western-leaning status-quo powers and an axis of revisionist states and organisations. On the other hand, it has facilitated the emergence of a number of new emerging actors that are pursuing their own regional goals and interests.⁴² In this confusing situation, the EU has struggled to find a new place for itself on the changing Middle Eastern chessboard.

The toppling of Hosni Mubarak effectively ended the US-led "axis of moderation" in the Middle East and weakened Western influence across the region. The new Egypt has increasingly pursued an independent line in regional affairs as demonstrated by its role in negotiating a power-sharing deal between Fatah and Hamas, initiating contacts with Hezbollah and Iran and adopting a tough line on Israel.⁴³ Similarly, the Arab revolutions have seriously undermined the popular appeal of the Iran-led "axis of resistance", with Assad's Syria facing an all-out upheaval in late 2011 and Hezbollah and Iran being tainted by their ambiguous reaction to the Arab revolutions.⁴⁴ With both sides considerably weakened as a consequence of the Arab Spring revolutions, the Middle East has experienced a power vacuum that a number of new actors have attempted to fill.

Saudi Arabia, most notably, has been frustrated by America's abandonment of Hosni Mubarak and has attempted to stem the revolutionary tide.⁴⁵ To this end, the GCC countries, on Saudi Arabia's bidding, have dispatched troops to Bahrain and have propped up fellow Gulf monarchies with offers of financial and military assistance.⁴⁶ Similarly, Saudi Arabia has sought to further solidify its regional position by inviting Jordan and Morocco to

⁴² S. Florensa, 'Europe, the Mediterranean and the Arab Revolutions in the Current Geopolitical Puzzle', *Mediterranean Yearbook 2011*, Barcelona: IEMed, pp. 87-94.

⁴³ I. Black, 'The two swift changes in foreign policy that signal a new Egypt', *The Guardian*, 20 May 2011.

⁴⁴ D. D. Kaye & F. Wehrey, 'Arab Spring, Persian Winter', *Foreign Affairs* 2011-4, pp. 183-186.

⁴⁵ F. G. Gause III., 'Is Saudi Arabia really counterrevolutionary?', *Foreign Policy*, The Middle East Channel, 9 August 2011.

⁴⁶ H. Agha & R. Malley, 'The Arab Counterrevolution', *The New York Review of Books*, 31 August 2011.

join the GCC and by negotiating a managed transition to bring an end to the popular protests in Yemen. More recently, Saudi efforts have focused on rallying support in the region against Iran on the back of a foiled Iranian sponsored assassination attempt on Saudi's US ambassador.

Within the GCC, Saudi Arabia's revisionism has somewhat been tempered by the influence of Qatar, which has turned into one of the main winners of the Arab Spring.⁴⁷ Able to draw on a considerable battle chest of oil revenues, Qatar has thrown around its weight in the region by dispatching soldiers and weapons to aid the Libyan rebels and taking a similarly proactive role in the case of Syria. Finally, Turkey has skilfully used the Arab Spring to further bolster its regional status and promote its image as a model and leader in the Middle East, while stressing the EU's weakening role and influence.⁴⁸

In comparison with the growing regional profile of these emerging actors, traditional powers have appeared rather limp. As in Libya, the US has largely constrained itself to "leading from behind" and when it has taken a more aggressive approach – such as in the case of Syria and Iran – it has relied on others to play a leading role.⁴⁹ Similarly, China and Russia have shown little appetite for being drawn into the current conflicts in the region. Both have been incensed by NATO's Libya intervention and continue to play an important role as veto players in the UN Security Council when it comes to Iran and Syria. But time and again they have also been forced to make concessions for fear of being sidelined in the new Middle East and have been willing to alter their positions.⁵⁰

In this quickly changing power constellation, the EU's overall strategy appears to have been to appease Saudi Arabia, isolate Syria and Iran, protect Morocco and Jordan and ignore Israel-Palestine. As in the past, the EU's policies towards the GCC countries have been relatively subdued and most of Catherine Ashton's statements on Bahrain have focused on the need for a national dialogue.⁵¹ Instead, the EU has sought to cooperate with Saudi Arabia and the GCC countries not only on Libya and Syria, but also with regards to the transition processes in Egypt and Tunisia. As a result, European leaders invited the GCC to contribute to the G-8s Deauville initiative and remain keen on the potential of leveraging GCC funding for future UfM projects. Concerning Syria and Iran, the EU has taken a much tougher stance. In the case of Syria, the EU has gradually tightened the sanctions screw and has endorsed the Syrian National Council as a legitimate interlocutor over other Syrian opposition organisations. The EU also imposed far-reaching restrictive measures on Iran. Although it maintains its willingness to reopen negotiations, the EU expects Iran to take unilateral measures before lifting its sanctions.⁵²

When it comes to Morocco and Jordan, the EU has taken a notably different approach. Despite, albeit smaller, popular protests in both countries, the EU has provided a blanket endorsement to the partial reform efforts undertaken by the two monarchies. In the case of Morocco, Ashton and Füle welcomed the "King of Morocco's announcement [...] of extensive constitutional reforms" arguing that "it represents a commitment to further

⁴⁷ K. C. Ulrichsen, 'Qatar and the Arab Spring', *Open Democracy* 12 April 2011.

⁴⁸ N. Tocci, et al., 'Turkey and the Arab Spring', *GMF Mediterranean Paper Series* 2011.

⁴⁹ M. Boot, 'Did Libya vindicate 'leading from behind'?', *Wall Street Journal* 1 September 2011.

⁵⁰ J. Parello-Plesner & R. Pantucci, 'China's Janus-Faced Response to the Arab Spring', *ECFR Policy Memo* 2011-34.

⁵¹ See for example: European Union, 'Statement by EU High Representative Catherine Ashton on the events in Bahrain', 19 February 2011, A061/11.

⁵² European Council, 'EU reinforces restrictive measures due to serious human rights violations in Iran', 10 October 2011, 15307/11.

democratisation.”⁵³ They also greeted the results of the Morocco’s July reforms which recorded an unlikely 98.5% in favour of the King’s reforms. In Jordan, the EU has been similarly coy in voicing criticism about the proposed constitutional amendments. Instead, European leaders have granted Morocco and Jordan access to funding from the Deauville initiative and initiated an EU-Jordanian Task Force to support local reforms. All in all, the EU’s gamble has therefore been to prevent any Egypt-like protests in either of these countries, but to continue and advocate a process of more gradual top-down reforms. Finally in the case of the Palestinian conflict, the EU has been most notable for its absence. Despite periodic Quartet statements encouraging the re-launching of peace talk, the EU has largely decided to ignore the issue given the complex regional climate.

However, just as with its attempt to promote “deep democracy” in the southern Mediterranean, the EU’s efforts to adjust to the new geopolitical climate in the region have to contend with a number of problems. First, the EU has shown a considerable lack of consistency when it comes to democracy and human rights issues across the region. Its uncritical engagement with the GCC countries and its blanket endorsement of reforms in Morocco and Jordan run counter to its self-declared new role as a paragon of Arab democracy. Second, the EU’s relative disregard for the Palestinian issue and the role of European member states in preventing a UN vote on Palestinian statehood run counter to the wider developments in the region. Finally, the rise of a new set of actors has largely worked to the disadvantage of the EU. While European attempts to engage with these new actors have been at best sporadic, they seem to have resulted in a further erosion of the EU’s regional role and power of attraction.

Conclusion: Can the Leopard Change its Spots?

The Arab Spring did not lead to a paradigm shift in EU external relations. The EU’s initial reaction to the crisis was characterised by a period of denial and divisions, during which European countries first sought to stem the tide of change and then divided over how to manage its consequences. The EU’s subsequent attempt to redefine its regional role has been similarly flawed and has been primarily driven by the bureaucratic logic of EU policies. Continuing divisions amongst EU member states, as well as the sagging attraction of the European model, have further inhibited a real change of EU policies. This means that, when it comes to the democratic transition processes in the region, the EU’s new policy is unlikely to have a significant impact or to translate into a new role for the EU as a promoter of “sustainable stability” in the region. Similarly, the EU has so far failed to stake out a viable new position for itself in the emerging geopolitical context of the Middle East. What makes matters worse is that the EU’s commitment to Arab democracy once again appears to be sidelined by its broader geopolitical goals. This makes it more and more unlikely that the EU will act as a driver for change in the southern Mediterranean. Instead it seems bound to pursue a new variation of its long-standing Euro-Mediterranean vision that places partnership over democratic principles.

This means that following the Arab dignity revolutions, it will become increasingly difficult for the EU to regard the countries of the southern and eastern Mediterranean as a *domaine réservé*, where it has the status of a regional power. No longer consisting of a group of docile petitioners that look towards the EU as a model and the only path for their socio-economic development, Arab Mediterranean countries are going to act more independently in the future and are likely to view the EU’s offers of an “enlargement light” policy with increasing scepticism. Moreover, given the changing geopolitical and regional context, the EU’s

⁵³ European Union, ‘Joint statement by EU High Representative Catherine Ashton and Commissioner Füle on Morocco’s future constitutional reforms’, 10 March 2011 A 110/11.

southern neighbourhood is likely to become an even more complex and factitious region in the near term future, where the EU will have to increasingly compete with other powers to maintain some measure of regional influence. As a consequence, the EU's policies will lose some of their regional character and focus ever more narrowly on bilateral relations with those countries that are eager to pursue a deepening relationship with the EU. While this might preserve the myth of Europe's Mediterranean vocation, it will ultimately undermine its role as a regional power.