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Research Report

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Gaps in the Toolbox

The Political Upheavals in North Africa Reveal Deficits in EU Crisis Management

Marco Overhaus

Just like the rest of the international community, the European Union was caught by surprise by the events in North Africa. It was only after the former rulers of Tunisia and Egypt had been overthrown that the member states succeeded in forming a unified position vis-à-vis the developments in both countries. Now Brussels wishes to energetically support the democratic transition. Still, the planned realignment of the Union for the Mediterranean and the European Neighbourhood Policy as well as the planned trade facilitation will, at best, have an impact over the longer term. Over the short and medium run, however, the EU lacks the structures and instruments, which would enable it to contribute to conflict resolution and the containment of potential violence during the particularly critical political transition phase.

In contrast to Libya, which has descended into civil war, the revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt have thus far proceeded in a relatively peaceful and orderly fashion. The situation in these countries, however, is also complex, and the new power structure is far from consolidated. At the time being and into the near future, a turnaround in the situation is possible at any moment – a reversal, which could even result in the use of force. The collapse of the old regimes in Tunis and Cairo constitutes a major challenge for European foreign policy. The instruments that had been available to the EU in following its policies towards its southern neighbours have primarily been focused on maintaining stability in the partner states. These instruments, however,

were not very useful for addressing acute instability and regime change. The lessons learned from these most recent events carry political relevance that extends far beyond the boundaries of North Africa. Whether it is in Lebanon, Bahrain, Yemen or Europe's eastern periphery with its "frozen conflicts": radical political revolutions will once again challenge the EU's capacity to act in the future.

Risks of Democratic Transition: Challenges for the EU

In the ideal case, the phase of political upheaval that follows the collapse of an old regime ends with the holding of elections. In Tunisia, elections for a council of repre-

sentatives charged with rewriting the constitution are planned for July 2011, while the Egyptians may elect a new parliament as early as September. The European Union quickly issued a guarantee to assist these countries in preparing and executing the planned elections by providing technical support and sending election observers. This type of support has long been a tried-and-tested instrument of the EU and its member states. The elections, however, are also associated with risks and uncertainties. A number of observers have already voiced concerns over whether enough time remains prior to the holding of elections for the possible founding of new political parties, reactivation of marginalised parties, and the implementation of necessary electoral reforms. In short, there are concerns about whether it will be possible over the interim to ensure that all relevant political forces can participate in the elections. The Secretary General of the Council of Europe, Thorbjørn Jagland, recently warned of a scenario in which the EU supports and thereby legitimises electoral processes, which may in the end be viewed by broad swathes of the population as unfair and illegitimate. The EU should therefore primarily work towards ensuring that the preparatory process be as inclusive and fair as possible.

The role of the police and military represents an additional element of insecurity into the transitional phase. In Tunisia, security forces disbanded in many locations while protests and strikes were still ongoing. In Egypt, the military retained power after President Mubarak's resignation. The people in both countries foster a deep-seated mistrust of the security forces. The rebuilding and reform of police and army forces has thus far not been an element of the European Union's partnership programmes. By sending a mission within the framework of the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), however, the EU could relatively quickly create new options for action. The Commission and the Council have already brought the CSDP into

play for the coordination of humanitarian aid, but not for assistance in reforming the security forces of Tunisia or Egypt.

Aside from supporting preparations for democratic elections, "national dialogues" and mediation among the various political groups are ultimately also important instruments for guiding the transitional process onto a non-violent and orderly track. At an early stage, the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Catherine Ashton, guaranteed EU assistance to such dialogue processes if Tunisia, Egypt and Yemen were to initiate them. In this case, the EU and other international organisations can only play an attendant role; otherwise their actions in these states would quickly be viewed as illegitimate interference from abroad.

Nevertheless, the potential for the EU to aid such national dialogues in achieving success is limited, not just in Libya, but also across other parts of North Africa and the Arab world. The EU only has a weak political presence in the region, a fact which cannot be fundamentally changed by the occasional local visits by High Representative Ashton. To date, for example, there is no EU special representative for North Africa, who would be supplied with a corresponding mandate and staff in order to take rapid action in a situation such as the current one.

The Realignment of EU Instruments

High Representative Ashton and the European Commission have responded to the political upheavals in North Africa with the announcement that they will fundamentally revise existing EU programmes for cooperation with the states along the southern Mediterranean. In their joint statement, which was welcomed by heads of state at the European Council on 11 March 2011, they announced a comprehensive set of measures under the heading of "Partnership for Democracy and Shared Prosperity", which would accompany and consolidate the political transition process.

The package is largely made up of support for aiding the unfolding of the democratisation process, the establishment of democratic institutions, the development of civil society, and economic stimulus by promoting small and medium-sized enterprises.

This ambitious sounding programme, however, raises a series of questions. For one thing, the programme's components are not new. They already exist in the multi-year country strategies, national indicative programmes, and action plans for Tunisia and Egypt. Apparently the goal would primarily be an accentuation and more effective implementation of the project points that have already been laid out in these programmes. Just how the Commission – which is responsible for the implementation of partnership programmes – will achieve these objectives, however, is largely unclear. Secondly, the activities that have been announced so far offer few answers for how to address short and medium term challenges.

Occasional contradictions are also evident. In the statement issued by Ashton and the Commission, the commitment to free and fair elections is presented as an entry qualification for the partnership. It remains unclear to which extent the sometimes protracted process with which the conditions for free and fair elections are created is also part of the partnership. Still, in the case of Tunisia, Ashton announced immediate assistance totalling EUR 17 million to quickly and unbureaucratically support the overall transitional process and, specifically, impoverished regions of the country. A representative of Tunisia's interim government reacted to this announcement with disappointment. Furthermore, the EU institutions did not see themselves as able to offer this type of immediate assistance to Egypt as well, because there has been no formal request from Cairo or a respective needs assessment.

Courses of Action

The European Union has just begun to adapt its community instruments to meet the specific needs of development in a crisis situation. In 2007, the Instrument for Stability (IfS) was created, which was meant to enable the EU to function more quickly and flexibly. It provides for accelerated political and planning processes in order to deliver aid within the span of weeks rather than months into the areas of security sector reform, reintegration of fighters, or reconstruction of infrastructure, to name a few examples. Projects financed from the crisis component of the Stability Instrument have a maximum runtime of two years and, in an ideal scenario, should transition into longer term bilateral cooperation projects.

The primary weaknesses of the IfS rest in a combination of an inadequate budgetary allocation and an unclear focus. From 2007 to 2013, around EUR 2 billion has been earmarked for the IfS. This corresponds to less than 3 percent of the budget available to all of the EU's foreign policy instruments – including those of the European Development Fund. In 2009 and 2010, the IfS carried out activities in more than 40 countries ranging from Madagascar (EUR 60,000) to Georgia (over EUR 30 million). In Lebanon, the police, border guards and parliament all received support from the IfS, while in Syria the focus is on aid for Iraqi refugees. The funds designated for the Palestinian territories are meant to promote the peace process with Israel and reconstruction in the Gaza Strip. In the latter case, the impact of the aid is more than dubious. Following the revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt, plans are now being developed in the European External Action Service and in the Commission, which would introduce the IfS into these two countries as well. Thus far, concrete project proposals have not been announced.

If the European Union is to be in a position to react more effectively to future crisis-ridden upheavals in partner states, it would be advisable to significantly increase the funding for the IfS. Despite the events

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in North Africa, however, it is unlikely that the EU member states will make such a decision. Against this backdrop, it is even more important that the EU establish clear priorities and political criteria for its involvement in crisis situations. First and foremost among these should be that the local political players have already agreed on concrete activities for which they will accept foreign support. Attention should be paid in this respect to finding a way to divide up the work with other actors, such as the United Nations, in a sensible manner. Small scale and microprojects should be avoided. Ultimately, certain activities, such as delivering assistance to refugees, should not be covered by the IfS, but rather from budgets tied to humanitarian objectives. The pending negotiations in Brussels about the shaping of external aid instruments within the context of the post-2013 financial framework offer the opportunity to raise the question as to which priorities and political criteria should underlie the IfS.

During times of crisis, it is even more important than in normal situations to enter into intensive exchanges with the local parties to the conflict and to get a clear picture of the situation. In order to accomplish this more successfully than in the past, the European Union must not only improve its toolbox in crisis management, but also increase its political presence in the areas surrounding the crisis-ridden locations. The newly created European External Action Service is predestined to take on a key role in this process. In the face of the current crises in North Africa, however, it has thus far hardly manifested itself.

Quickly deploying special representatives of the EU in the case of such tension-filled events as those currently taking place on the other side of the Mediterranean would be the right course of action. This option would be particularly applicable in the case of developments that impact more than one country, as is currently the case in North Africa. If this is not the case, an

alternative would be political upgrading and an increase in staff levels for the respective EU delegation. Although it has often not been the case in the past, the special representative should have both a strong mandate and be supported by adequate personnel. Moreover, he or she should primarily remain in the respective country or region during the incumbency. In times of acute crisis, special representatives or EU delegation leaders could function as the heads of political missions, which include high-ranking representatives of member states and EU institutions. The authority for proposing the launch of initiatives and projects – within the framework of the IfS, for example – should primarily rest with those who are locally based and actively attending to the developments on the ground.

Conclusion

The rapid succession of revolutions in North Africa and protest movements in other parts of the Arab world have clearly shown that the European Union must strengthen its short and medium-term instruments for addressing acute crises and political upheavals. Constituting approximately six percent of the total EU budget, the funds available for foreign policy activities and objectives are more than modest. The majority of these resources are in the so-called geographic instruments vis-à-vis the African, Caribbean and Pacific Group of States (ACP), the developing states in other regions of the world as well as the Eastern and Southern neighbours of the EU. These instruments are primarily used to serve long-term development cooperation. The need for being able to react quickly and flexibly to political revolutions in the partner states is likely to increase rather than decrease in the future.