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Where has Arab Spring Gone?

A Point of View from Brussels

There was a real hope in those heady days of 2011 and 2012. It was unthinkable, as one despot after another was toppled from power, that the situation would be worse within five years or so. But whether we like it or not, the situation is indeed markedly worse in several parts of the region. The Global Strategy, adopted by the European Union in June 2016, however, opts for a positive approach and promotes the view that while the transition is painful and tragic in many aspects, the region is not doomed and may well recover, if we show commitment and confidence.

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WHERE HAS ARAB SPRING GONE? – A POINT OF VIEW FROM BRUSSELS *

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The self-immolation of Tarek el-Tayeb Mohamed Bouazizi on 17 December 2010 in Tunisia, raised immediate parallels with the dramatic act of Jan Palach almost exactly 42 years previously, and it was only a short leap in the public's imagination from the Prague to the Arab Spring.

I must say, that I never liked the term when applied to the Arab world. To me it sounded too flippant, too self-assured when applied to a region that had transitioned so seamlessly from colonial rule to autocratic nationalism only three generations or so earlier. Moreover, the spring in the East took well over two decades to lead to a significant break with the past, so how could it be expected that things would change overnight in North Africa and the Middle East?

Nevertheless, there was a real hope in those heady days of 2011 and 2012. It was unthinkable, as one despot after another was toppled from power, that the situation would be worse within five years or so. But whether we like it or not, the situation is indeed markedly worse in several parts of the region.

Some would cite the security situation that deteriorated as a result of the power vacuum that followed, offering opportunities to those who had lurked in the shadows with their extremist agendas. Others have argued that the Arab world was not prepared or had no desire for reform and western-style democracy, preferring a firm hand delivering stability. Another theory has it that there was too much meddling from the outside, as the major powers rushed in to install their brand of governance and to ensure that their precious contracts remained intact.

There is probably an element of truth in all of the reasons cited above, but there are clearly more fundamental factors involved, including the driving forces that lay at the root of the revolutions themselves.

It has not been possible for commentators to agree on what actually triggered the events of 2011. Some say that there had been a desire for freedom and reform evolving over time; others argue that the technological age, with its access to information, laid bare the failures of the dictatorships while social media allowed youth activists to transform flash rallies into massive demonstrations; many contend that it was the dire socio-economic factors, which deteriorated rapidly in the wake of the international financial crisis, which were the main causes. Once again, the truth probably lies in between.

Source: Colin Scicluna

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On 1 January 2017, High Representative Federica Mogherini appointed him Director and Deputy Managing Director for the Middle East, North Africa and Gulf region in the European External Action Service.

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One of the key reasons for the failure of real change was the absence of independent institutions that could step in to offer alternatives. The total monopoly of power of a regime like that of Ghaddafi in Libya meant that the only alternative was a vacuum. Interests that were either involved in the former regime or that had been suppressed by it (or both, in some cases), emerged to occupy that space, but were obliged to decide whether to start from scratch or to use the failed methods that had been shunned by the protesting masses. The people, who had finally found their voice, had nowhere to place their hopes and trust.

In certain instances, the new order (which sometimes looked remarkably similar to the old one) learned the lessons of the Arab street and took steps to progressively restrict the space within which dissent and criticism could be aired. Elections were held, but in some cases quickly became easy to manipulate, either because the exhausted citizenry was keen to regain a semblance of normality or because there was a tight enough grip on the reins of power.

There are exceptions, although even Tunisia, which is held up as a shining symbol of change, is still in a very fragile state with both its economy and its security at risk. Morocco and Jordan have continued their (slow) pace of reform, while Lebanon has emerged as an unlikely example of consensus politics: a grand bargain late in 2016 has unlocked a political crisis that had gone on for years and which promises to offer some stability if elections can be held within the next few months to cement this agreement, as is planned.

The obvious failures have been Libya, Yemen and Syria, which in varying degrees are all embroiled in civil conflict. While in the first two, the revolutions did manage to topple the strongmen, one was removed entirely from the picture while the other was able to make a comeback of sorts. Syria remains mired in deadly gridlock, a sectarian war

of many facets that has evolved into a proxy conflict of epic proportions. Iraq is still struggling to build a democratic, representative political system with institutions that are robust enough to contain various divisive factors. Moreover, Da'esh has emerged as an additional, deadly actor in practically all these conflict zones.

Extremism has been a factor in the region for decades, some would argue for generations, since colonial times. The more modern, nationalist streak of terrorism transitioned into a more ideological trend, with the likes of Islamic Jihad. This religious strand transitioned through Algeria and Afghanistan in the 80s and 90s, coming to the fore as a global brand with Al-Qaeda and the attacks of 11 September 2001. The front page of the following edition of *The Economist* said it all: next to a picture of the burning twin towers, the caption read "The day the world changed". Nevertheless, as time passed, Al-Qaeda came to be considered by some as not being pure enough, not true to its objectives and this led to what eventually became the so-called Islamic State, which aspires to create a new world order and which found fertile ground in the Fertile Crescent, as traditional forms of governance have failed to gain a foothold. It is no coincidence that the areas blighted by civil war have offered this space; perhaps more surprising is the twist that so many young Tunisians have despaired of their own prospects and have thrown their lot in with the extremists.

The *Gulf Cooperation Council* states have largely maintained their stability, but they have not been impervious to the changes going on around them and they too have had to cope with a series of challenges, including falling oil prices, a resurgent Iran and active political Islamists of various hues, all of which have rattled the rentier model to its foundation.

Egypt, already the Arab state with the largest population by far and growing at an alarming rate, remains a conundrum. Its first revolution was one of the most dramatic, leading to the unexpected election of an Islamist President, yet followed very soon after by a second uprising. There is a risk that some of the measures taken since, including the curtailment of freedoms, which were taken in the name of counter-terrorism, combating extremism and re-establishing stability, will simply exacerbate the problem and could add to expressions of popular discontent.

The European Union has not been a detached observer. There is a realisation that the events in our immediate neighbourhood have a direct impact on our lives, as recognised in the Global Strategy adopted in June 2016: *"Solving conflicts and promoting development and human rights in the south is essential to addressing the threat of terrorism, the challenges of demography, migration and climate change, and to seizing the opportunity of shared prosperity"*. This acknowledges how we have had to adapt our approach over time: while the EU started out by presenting itself as a partner, striving to accompany and support the reform process, we have been constrained to follow a stabilisation agenda, as the situation became more complicated. The Global Strategy, however, opts for a positive approach and promotes the view that while the transi-

tion is painful and tragic in many aspects, the region is not doomed and may well recover, if we show commitment and confidence.

In a welcome reminder of what our core values are, High Representative Federica Mogherini recently called for a "People First" approach, arguing that we must look at the human face of these challenges, knowing that this may not be popular in all quarters but courageously affirming the principles that must find their place once again at the heart of European policies.

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* The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the EU or its institutions.