

European interview

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The European Union now has a major historic opportunity in the Mediterranean

1. How do you explain the events that have occurred over the last two months, notably in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya which are remarkable because no-one could have foreseen them and also because of their magnitude?

Until the winter of 2010-2011 most debate over these countries focused on political, economic and security mechanisms which explains why it was impossible for society in these countries to revolt. Comments concentrated on the restrictive capacity that the regimes were implementing to maintain voluntary servitude. Quite spontaneously demonstrators succeeded in bringing down regimes that had been considered to be strong. What is difficult to understand is that the conditions for revolt were quite obvious: social injustice, the arbitrary nature of power, authoritarianism, corruption, nepotism. Also urbanisation, literacy and demography provided fertile terrain for the wind of revolt: however with exception of Islamic opposition nothing else was in view! This explains what tipped the balance – people were no longer afraid of these regimes. The demonstrations in Greece, Italy, Spain and Portugal in the wake of the 2008 crisis influenced society in North Africa and the Middle East. But conversely to the countries of Southern Europe, the authoritarian Arab regimes repressed demonstrators violently causing the conflict to gather pace.

2. In your opinion what are the populations involved in these movements expecting from the European Union and its Member States

During the entire decade from 2000 on civil society did not understand why the European Union, which defines itself as a family of democratic countries, had made these authoritarian regimes its strategic partner. Likewise it did not understand why the European Union paid no attention to its claims. Surveys undertaken with regard to

how the EU was perceived in North Africa showed that until 2010 it was seen as a cold monster that only took interest in controlling its borders, making safe its energy supplies and protecting itself from terrorist attack. The values of democracy, freedom and justice are not associated with the EU, far from it! The European Union now has a major historic opportunity in the Mediterranean: if it provides itself with the means it can help the nascent political transition. From an economic point of view the European Union is in a financial and budgetary situation which makes any major regional ambition impossible – the countries in the region have understood this.

3. The striking thing in the present context is the contrast between the demand for democracy and the “wind of freedom” which is blowing over the Arab/Muslim countries and the European fear of seeing an influx of immigrants, whilst tension is rather evident on the Libyan-Tunisian border. How do you interpret the ambivalence in this vision of the present situation?

This ambivalence is worrying because it shows that there is a great deal of fear of change. The EU's initial nervousness with regard to the demands made by these populations shocked intellectuals in Arab societies who perceived the limits of the universality of the values promoted by Europe. Whilst they were expecting political support all they received was a wave of anxious questions that ranged from concern over tides of immigrants to the rerouting of these revolutions by the Islamists. Seen from North Africa this means that Europe no longer believes either in itself or in its values. We should prepare ourselves for a massacre of the rebels in Libya before we witness a salutary leap forwards.

4. The revolutions in some of these Arab countries are again raising the question over the Union's nei-

ghbourhood policy, notably with countries on the southern shores of the Mediterranean. Initially how do you analyse and assess this policy, its goals, the way it is organised and especially its achievements?

Since the very start the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) has faced major difficulty, especially in North Africa: it is not European enough. In fact it is the Member States in the south (France, Italy, Spain) who pretend, due to their proximity, to fulfil the role of the intermediary: however these three States have energy, economic and security interests which force them into promoting an ENP which lacks political ambition in order not to destabilise their political partners in power. Because of this it is easy to criticise the limits of the ENP, its lack of ambition and finally its perverse effects. This choice corresponds to the kind of partnership that Europe wants with the Mediterranean: no integration or enlargement in view. So what is the point of policy development? It is aimed at supporting an area of free-trade. The human aspect is not taken on board. At present the societies on the southern shores of the Mediterranean are saying that they do exist, that they do have political projects, rights and expectations. How should they be taken on board? This would entail a re-founding the ENP's goals and its means; by considering the EU's security as being linked to democracy in North Africa; that contributing to transition requires funding and above all conviction.

5. What do you think of the aid – particularly financial – that the European provides to the countries of North Africa and the Near East? What are the limits of this? How can we compare it to the aid provided by the USA?

The effect of financial aid is proportional to governments' resources: for oil producing countries like Algeria it is derisory; for governments such as those in Morocco, Tunisia and Egypt it is substantial but not fundamental. The European Union has quite rightly never set out a Marshall Plan for the region: none of the regimes are democratic and everything points to an alarming level of corruption. In contrast to the USA the European Union provides the most financial aid but there is a trade surplus for the Union.

6. How do you view the military operation in Libya? How is this initiative considered by the Libyan population and moreover by the Arab world in general?

The coalition operation in Libya is salutary: by challenging the regime the Libyans have run an enormous risk of being massacred. Unlike Ben Ali's Tunisia and Mubarak's Egypt, Qaddafi has decided, in an attempt to maintain power, to terrorise his population who no longer have any respect for him. The intervention by the international community provides the rebels with the means to protect themselves. It remains however that Libya is now in a state of war, the result of which is uncertain. The regime has the means to survive the airstrikes and the rebels still do not have the military capabilities to undertake a campaign against the regime's elite troops. This means that the war may last in Libya. For the populations of North Africa this intervention is necessary; for the regimes in Algeria and Syria it is worrying because it means that if their populations rebel they may also benefit, in the event of massive repression, from the protection of the international community.

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