EURODEFENSE

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THE ARAB AWAKENING THREE YEARS ON

IMPLICATIONS FOR EUROPEAN UNION SECURITY AND DEFENCE

INTRODUCTION

What has been happening in Arab countries since 2011 has raised in the EU and in the USA expectations of in-depth changes in the societies and policies of the Middle East and North African (MENA) nations. But for the moment one can mainly perceive unfinished revolutions and chaotic situations in MENA, and in particularly North Africa, on which this paper will mainly focus.

Notwithstanding a continuously evolving situation, the three years since the uprisings provides the distance which allows us to assess better the new situation and its aftermath.

The origin and development of the uprisings and civil wars in that region have been largely misunderstood. From the beginning the hopes were that the disappearance or replacement of dictatorial regimes would be followed by democratic reforms within new weak liberal societies. But the outcome is deceptive and the whole process is disappointing because almost nothing has changed.

Those who started and fuelled the revolts believed that by fostering popular discontent, based upon the lack of individual rights and of decent living conditions across large segments of the population, democratic reforms could occur. But in reality there still is disappointment that it has not brought widespread positive changes.

In countries where democratic elections were held, they have not been passports to stable democratic political systems but have been used as attempts to impose the dictatorship of the majority, as shown by the political actions of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and the Enhada party in Tunisia.

The uprisings were at first driven by the well-organized Muslim Brotherhood or the Salafists but the evolution of the political landscape shows that the Islamist parties won and held neither the hearts nor the power. The political struggle has shifted and the old and new regime forces are suppressing the radical Islamists political movements, as in Egypt or Tunisia.

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PRIMARY EFFECTS OF THE UPRISINGS

- Tunisia is now on a democratic track after the approval of the new Constitution.
- Morocco has learned lessons and has accelerated the tempo of its political and economic reforms by amending its Constitution.
- Algeria's political structure, led by a powerful party, based on numerous security forces and services, has managed to remain untouched by the Islamist movements next door or close to it.
- Egypt has exchanged one military leader for another, via a Muslim Brotherhood interregnum.
- Low level conflict between central Government and bands, cliques or tribes continue in Libya.
- Syria is enduring a destructive and extended civil war on which the world will not act
- Funding of religious militants by external governments continues.
- Major refugee crises in countries adjacent to chaos and conflict.

SECONDARY EFFECTS OF THE UPRISINGS

Among **positive secondary effects** are:

- Many people no longer see themselves as subjects but as citizens, aspiring to enjoy political, social and economic rights through nonviolence.
- Feelings of freedom from autocratic regimes and religious oppression where societies are now more open to everybody.
- The use of pacific, legitimate and democratic means to access power has been widely vindicated.
- The capacity to write constitutions to define the framework of the exercise and limits of power by the State.
- The ability to agree on the nature of the nation-State to protect the identities and the interests of the various ethnic, tribal, religious ideological and geographic groups belonging to it.
- The ways ahead, long and difficult as they may be, have already been opened up, despite whatever the present regimes think of it.

The **negative secondary effects** hindering democratic changes include:

- There is a renewed surge of internecine fighting between Shiites and Sunnis for power to impose their own version of Islamic ideology.
- Islamism is taking a lead as a form of Government, replacing earlier pan Arabism.
- Sectarianism and tribalism are widely used by groups to protect themselves in the absence of effective central authorities.
- Violent street demonstrations are used by political parties or groups to express their political identity.

Reflecting on the secondary effects we can ask whether Islamists (i.e. Muslim Brotherhood, Salafists and Al Qaeda affiliates) were truly committed to a new political culture out of national consensus or whether they only engaged in politics to promote their own priorities and rules, as did the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt or Enhada in Tunisia.

THE IMPACT OF THE UPRISINGS ON THE MENA REGION

1. POLITICAL

Despite the upheavals affecting Arab and Muslim populations for the last three years, many have not yet found a national identity. There is also no collective sense of belonging to the Umma (a single fatherland embracing all Arab nations) but rather to tribes or religious affiliation or other groups. As described by King Feisal of Iraq[1] in 1922 in his country did not live "Iraqi nationals" but were masses of people ready to fight any other tribe.

One explanation of this anomaly can be traced back to how many modern MENA countries were defined. Their frontiers were established disregarding the interest of the persons living within them, their natures and identities, and rather than uniting communities led to their fragmentation. The dismemberment of the Ottoman Empire after World War 1 was a prime example.

For a long time the unity of states was maintained by the centripetal force of totalitarian and absolutist rulers who allowed neither dissent nor freedom that might jeopardize their grip on the country.

The last three years have led to the change of autocratic regimes in some cases. But also they have awakened the earlier social, religious and tribal fragmentation. National political cultures that could have prevented present internal and transnational infighting in Libya, Egypt, and Yemen and in Syria itself, are still lacking.

The upheavals have had an influence on populations that are now aware of individual and collective rights. Moreover, the feeling of a collective mind is rising, opposed to the absolute power of Governments. This is a warning for the monarchies of the Arabian Peninsula, of Jordan and of Morocco ; in all these countries excessive political agitation has somehow been avoided, but the Arab and global media broadcasting information on the uprisings and turmoil has awakened longings for change.

The political surge resulting from the upheavals is shaping national ambitions but there are long and difficult roads ahead to achieve them. Danger now comes from Islamists who are not willing to accept subjects being transformed into citizens. The activism of citizenry is opposed to the ideology of radical Islamists.

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[1] As quoted by Bernard Lewis in his "Arabs in History", Oxford University Press, 1996.

2. ECONOMIC

The revolts and uprisings have had a negative impact on the economies of the concerned countries. Lukewarm economic reforms that had begun to fight under-development have come to a halt.

MENA countries are facing the absence of economic diversification that leads to sustainable development. This reality is masked in some countries by high revenues from oil and gas.

According to the World Bank the primary sector is dominant and amounts to 64% of their economies. The public sector provides an average of 25% of employment. Industrial and services sectors are very limited.

As a consequence, there is little prospect of finding jobs. This is a hindrance for political evolution because what citizens are seeking is not the right to vote but to look for and find employment. The situation, particularly amongst young people, is leading to emigration, legal or otherwise.

The upheavals have reduced inward investment and caused the drying up of sources of income like tourism.

Economic diversification would allow economies to increase productivity, leading to the creation of jobs and global trade that would also open up chances for employment. If these changes are delayed the possibility of further turmoil will increase.

3. SOCIETAL

Populations have increased dramatically in the last thirty years. They are becoming more urban, wishing to have a higher standard of living, like decent lodgings, good health system, an education policy, but above all a job to secure better living standards.

The uprisings raised hope that people could change their lives in a new environment that did not exist under the toppled autocratic regimes. Some Islamic interpretations hinder a swift reshaping of legal, social and economic conditions for progress (e.g. women in the workforce.)

Europeans should be asking themselves how to prevent a greater regional break up, rather than waiting for or encouraging the ignition of further turmoil in MENA. Our aim should be to try to bring stability rather than relaxing arms embargoes, or picking winners, or point–scoring against Russia or Iran or others, in the countries where there have been and still are raging civil wars.

THE SIGNIFICANCE FOR THE EU OF THE CHANGES

For Europe, events are on its southern frontiers but the consequences may be manifested continent-wide.

1. JIHADISM IN EUROPE[2]

Europeans should be concerned about the insurgency, terrorism and the participation in civil wars of radical Jihadists[3]. Quite a few of them have taken part in the uprisings and turmoil in MENA which might have been the training ground for actions carried out on our soil. They have been stopped, though it might have been their rationale behind their participation in the Syrian civil war.

There is evidence that many Jihadists fighting in Syria come from Europe and not only from Arab countries. 33% of them are from the UK, France, Spain, Italy, the Netherlands, Germany, Greece and Croatia and have found a suitable territorial space to train themselves for possible urban guerrilla or open warfare in Europe. Their return to countries of origin or to other European states could be considered a threat for our societies; not only because of their training but also because of the radical Islamist indoctrination they have undergone to fight "infidels" in the Western world.

This Jihadist threat might also be considered a factor in possible destabilization if it is able to inculcate radical Islamist doctrine into Arabs and Muslims already living within our society and use them as a fifth column to achieve their plan. The marginalisation of those populations, either sought or imposed, opens them to the radicalism preached in some European mosques.

Europeans Governments' goal should be to watch closely to see if Jihadists pursue their extremist aims in our countries. Member nations should confidentially pool information on Jihadists known to have left the EU for training or to fight in third countries.

2. THE IMPACT ON EUROPEAN DEFENCE

The Armed Forces of the Arab countries are not a threat to our defences since they do not have the military capabilities to reach our territories. Although some of the Armies in that region are undergoing a rearming process, mainly in the Persian Gulf area, it is not alarming since the arms they buy are more defensive than offensive.

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[2] The term Jihadism used here encompasses Salafists, the Al-Qaeda conglomerate, and Muslim Brotherhood members.

[3] Jihadists are theologically motivated and their ideology reaches not only religion but also politics and culture. They believe it is their religious duty to propagate their version of Islam (Qur'an and Sunnah) to government, legal system and cultural norms that go with it. The Jihadists allow very little space for extra religious ideas the interpretation of divine texts. The Jihadists' plan is to first establish a state called the emirate to be ruled under jihadist principles and then use that state as a base for further conquests to create a large entity they call the caliphate.

Our concern should be the arms North African countries have or are buying now. Therefore, the EU governments that are exporting arms to them must be very careful not to sell the ones that might constitute a threat for EU southern countries in the future.

Even if the military threat to us is not relevant, the challenges to our collective or individual security can be:

- The presence in EU member states of Muslim populations being subjected to Islamic radicalisation.

- Terrorist actions carried out by hardened Jihadists back from the battle fronts in Syria, Libya, the Maghreb or even the Sahel.

Both of these two threats can be neutralized by a close and thorough cooperation of our security forces, and also by training the military, border guards and police within MENA countries.

3. ILLEGAL IMMIGRATION TO EUROPE FROM MENA

The lack of economic opportunity and employment is pushing many people to abandon their countries for whatever improvement can be achieved.

According to the U.N. Commission for Africa and the Middle East and the World Bank, the jobless rate reached in the Levant and North Africa region are very high :

- In Egypt, 51% of the population is unemployed and among the young people that percentage is the 60%.

- In Morocco, more than 38% of its workforce is unemployed.

- In Tunisia, the rate goes up to 42%, its economy being in steep decline.

- In Libya, 52% of its people are job seekers.

- In Syria, the civil war has destroyed the economic fabric. Several thousand Syrians have been accepted into the EU. Thousands are being held in Bulgaria awaiting entry. Many hundreds of thousands are in refugee camps in neighbouring countries.

- In Saudi Arabia 45% of young people have no job and live on Government dole.

Arguably most MENA countries are potential sources of immigration into the EU because of high unemployment.

Since the Arab societies are now also very much media oriented, the masses of jobless people can watch the apparently opulent societies of the West, thus creating a longing to live like them. The revolts have not led to fulfilment. On the contrary, their disappointment seems greater because for the moment nothing allows them to believe that they will enjoy that kind of life in the near or distant future. Therefore their goal becomes escape, through emigration, from perceived hopeless economic, political and social situations that Arab governments cannot control or improve.

The outcome is that the EU is confronted with immigrants reaching its territories. This has already caused considerable political tensions in many Member states which have been reflected in the 2014 elections to the European Parliament

AN ACTION PLAN

A European action plan to combat illegal immigration might contain the following elements :

➢ EU countries should formulate a common policy to fight illegal immigration wherever it comes from.

➢ Re-establish and enhance previous EU programs to encourage, mentor and support private business and encourage economic diversity.

➢ Give preferential access to manufactured goods (not raw materials) from MENA countries.

➢ Establish legal mechanisms to allow more immigrants legal entry (c.f. US Green card).

➢ Accept and channel illegal immigration piecemeal.

➢ Return illegal immigrants. Sign agreements with countries from which illegal immigrants originate or their last departing place.

➢ Enhance EU mentoring and training for MENA border control and police personnel.

➢ Establish a joint Schengen border force, including maritime air patrols to detect, and fast ships bearing helicopters to intercept, uncontrolled vessels in the Mediterranean.

➢ As an interim and as a matter of urgency, set up an Operation Atalanta–style joint maritime task force in the Mediterranean.

➢ Undertake advertising campaigns in all places where immigration   starts focusing on the EU's strict return policy.

➢ In the event that immigrants destroy their identity papers to avoid deportation, EU Governments should send them back to the last embarkation place.

➢ If immigrants cannot be returned they should be held extra-territorially, i.e. not automatically acquiring rights accorded to EU citizens as otherwise occurs when landing in the EU.

Authorities in European Union Member states should make an immigration census to allow the Commission to acting as a clearing house for the redistribution of illegal immigrants to where labour forces are required. In this way, those governments that have received most of immigrants might be reassured they are not being left alone with their receiving and integration problems.

CONCLUSION

The EU should be more attentive to the political, social, economic and cultural developments in MENA countries. The EU should bring to them the technical, industrial and financial know-how they badly need. An updated *Union pour la Méditerranée* could be a tool to achieve this objective.

But if a European common foreign and security policy is to mean anything, Europe must address the problems posed by instability in the Middle East and North Africa. European nations acting individually cannot take effective action nor can we expect that the lead will be taken by the US.

An action plan on illegal immigration, as described above, should be seen as a practical start to a much wider suite of specific policies.

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