

A make or break challenge for the EU's global role

Europe propped up discredited Arab regimes and failed to create worthwhile economic and political ties with its own southern neighbourhood. **Massimo D'Alema** warns that a concerted and ambitious EU development strategy is already slipping away thanks to Europe's internal divisions and lack of resolve

We Europeans have since late 2010 been privileged to witness historic developments in the Arab world that may well change the region's destiny. What is happening in North Africa and the Middle East is true revolution that may eventually constitute an extraordinary turning point for millions of people, and that is being brought about by a new and digital generation of youth.

More than this, the Arab upheavals are a by-product of the 21st century and the inexorable process of globalisation. They are being triggered by the ever-faster circulation of information through the internet, by social networks and by economic and social changes that Western governments and public opinion at large has either underestimated or ignored. The Arab world is being transformed by soaring expectations created both by education and by contact with the Western world.

It is essential to accurately diagnose the causes of the Arab uprisings, because it is only by fully understanding their demands and grievances that we will be able to give our southern neighbours appropriate support. Nor must we surrender to the temptation of turning our backs on them, because even though the Arab revolts have not been against Europe or the Western world in general – on the contrary, they have been fed by the same principles and values that we share – these revolts may yet turn against us.



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Undervaluing this risk would be a terrible mistake, and there are three preconditions that Europe and also the United States must meet to be sure of avoiding such an appalling scenario. First, our support must be unambiguous. We must show no sign of uncertainty so that the Arab peoples can clearly see that the EU and the U.S. genuinely intend to sustain their rights to democratic political systems while also enjoying freedom of opinion and speech and gaining access to decent jobs. In short, establishing their right to human dignity and improving standards of living.

Support of this sort doesn't simply involve military intervention, as is currently the case in Libya. Support means developing consistent policies and putting in place concrete measures aimed at favouring a peaceful transition to democracy. It means the unreserved isolation of dictatorships across the region, even of those governments that have been traditionally considered Western allies and reliable economic and political partners.

The European Union must keep its distance from such regimes, thus abandoning its long-standing political approach to governments in North Africa and the Middle East, because that has if anything had the consequence of bolstering authoritarianism while compromising the reputation of the EU among Arab people. Finally, we Europeans have to reassess our preconceptions about Islam and its supposed incompatibility with democracy and the rule of law. The EU must make a clear choice between the values and principles on which the European project was founded, and its economic, political and security interests. The tendency has so far been to favour the latter in the interests of pragmatism, even though this has weakened the credibility of the EU's commitment to promoting democracy.

The second precondition the EU must fulfil if it is to encourage peaceful political development in the Arab world, is to fill the void of its own political actions towards its southern neighbours.

Europe risks failing the Mediterranean region again by not displaying the same resolve it brought 20 years ago when the Cold War had ended. Then it identified common goals for eastern European countries facing the difficult transition from Communism to democracy and a market economy. The former Soviet satellites had the alluring prospect of joining the two clubs of the European Union and NATO, and this smoothed the way for radical political and economic reforms. And while we cannot offer Arab states the same accession prospects, we have a moral duty that is also in our own political interest to present them with something comparable;

some kind of association process with the European Union that might give them enough motivation to embark on some profound changes.

We're going to need creativity to overcome our own institutional shortcomings, and in practical terms we'll need to offer our Mediterranean partners major concessions on market access, financial aid and migration policy. We must greatly reduce the technocratic aspects of the EU's approach to external actions and at the same time privilege the EU's relations with southern Mediterranean countries.

In institutional terms, this means replacing the ineffectual Union for the Mediterranean, and making full respect of democratic values among the membership eligibility requirements of its successor. The Italian Council of the European Movement, for example, is calling for the establishment of a Euro-Med Community



Background Briefing

Europe's response to the Arab spring: It has still to put its money where its mouth is

The term "Marshall Plan" is being bandied about a lot these days. A quick internet search reveals multiple appeals for Marshall Plans to rescue the U.S. economy; ease the plight of eurozone debtors; re-build the economies of such countries as Congo and the Ivory Coast; fund urban renewal in London or Marseilles; and even to help French vegetable farmers survive the E.coli scare.

But demands have been particularly strident in support of a Marshall Plan for the fragile democracies emerging from the Arab spring.

The premise is tempting: a major package of European aid could shore-up fledgling post-dictatorship institutions, inject new life into torpid economies, curtail the risk of social unrest and perhaps political extremism, cement ties across the Mediterranean and lay the foundations for an arc of stability across Europe's southern neighbourhood.

Yet all these comparisons with the Marshall Plan that did so much for post-World War II Europe are misleading. The original U.S. plan to rebuild Europe's post-war economies injected a total of around \$13bn, which then represented around 5% of America's gross domestic product. The EU would therefore need to find around \$800bn to provide aid to the Arab world on a similar scale, an unrealistic prospect even without the eurozone debt crisis.

between the European Union and the non-EU Mediterranean countries, whose focus, besides economic integration, should be the promotion of peace and human rights.

The third precondition for giving credibility to Western countries' approach to the Mediterranean region is a genuine step towards the solution of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. So far it has been the chief obstacle in the way of stronger partnerships between Europe and the Arab world. No real progress is possible in either EU or U.S. involvement in the region without a substantial improvement vis-à-vis the Palestinian issue. The EU and its member states need to seriously commit themselves to finding a viable strategy to resolve this more than 60-year long conflict.

The Arab spring in fact offers an extraordinary opportunity for this. Arab dictators have long had no interest in a real peace between the Tel Aviv government and the Palestinian Authority, because

Europe does, however, have ways to take the lead in reaching out to its southern neighbours. Even if its financial assistance falls short of Marshall Plan levels, its still substantial aid contributions could be targeted on institution-building, support for civil society and economic regeneration. Europeans can open the EU's markets to trade from North African countries, and institute more imaginative immigration policies that could help alleviate unemployment.

The European Commission and the EU's new External Action Service have included such plans in their review of European Neighbourhood Policy. Their suggestions include the development of "mobility partnerships" to manage migration with Morocco, Tunisia and Egypt; the creation of Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Areas (DCFTAs) and a European Endowment for Democracy.

The impact of these initiatives will shrink in relation to the time before they become reality. Europe's initial reaction to the Arab spring seemed characterised by a reluctance to abandon support for friendly dictators. That was followed by divisions over military action in Libya, so the stakes could hardly be higher as Europe faces the need for urgent and decisive action on what are arguably its greatest foreign policy challenges since the collapse of the Soviet bloc. Just as important as its economic support will be Europe's contribution to the region's security. With NATO set to bring its Libya operations to a rapid close, some observers are urging the EU to match its economic strategy with an ambitious multi-lateral security framework spanning European and Maghreb nations. ■

the Middle East conflict and the region's very precarious stability provided a justification for their own undemocratic regimes.

For its part, the Israeli government must now be well aware that a situation considered acceptable, or even convenient, to authoritarian Arab regimes will no longer be tolerated by new democratic governments. Unlike their predecessors, they will resolutely demand the respect of human rights for Palestinians under Israeli occupation.

The weak and short-sighted attitude of the Israeli government toward the Arab spring is puzzling, not least because it has itself long been the region's only true democracy. But in Washington, the Obama Administration seems to have understood the extent of the changes taking place in the Middle East. In May of this year,

Commentary

Let's be clear; the Arab spring is a genuine revolution

When Massimo D'Alema declares in no uncertain terms that what is happening in the Arab countries is a "true revolution", he also debunks a myth that has been in danger of taking hostage much of today's sociological thinking. For the Arab spring has sparked renewed argument over the correct definition of "revolution", and it's already become a sterile debate pitting North against South, with the term's use much contested by European observers but defended by Arab ones.

For the former, 12m Egyptians on the streets in a single day; toppling the regime and demystifying those in power after decades of personality cults; followed by a profound reconfiguration of civil society still doesn't add up to a

revolution. Yet those same people say that protests by a few thousand opposition activists in the streets of the Georgian capital Tbilisi qualified as a revolution. And to deprive Arabs of the revolutionary "privilege" reserved for "others" unfortunately matches a wider scepticism about the political and social dynamics in Arab countries.

Massimo D'Alema's observations on the need for a less self-absorbed Europe to re-evaluate its previous stance towards a region so close and yet so misunderstood therefore seem very pertinent. Europe must abandon the policies that were no more than hollow pretexts for helping to keep dictators in power. And Europeans' imagined fears of a destructive political Islam must be replaced by a more balanced assessment based on real knowledge of the Arab world's political landscape.



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President Obama publicly stated that a return to negotiations on the basis of the pre-1967 borders is essential.

The United States, or Barack Obama at any rate, seems to be moving in the right direction, despite the round of applause that greeted Netanyahu's speech before U.S. Congress last spring. For its part, the European Union is once again showing itself to be irresolute and riven by internal divisions on both the Peace Process and the Arab upheavals. The same incoherent approach has in the past undermined the EU's external projection efforts, ensuring that all too often they are perceived as feeble and inadequate. If we do not want Europe to be politically marginalised in international affairs, we must quickly develop a strategic response to the Arab spring and the future of the Arab world. ■

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It doesn't help, for example, to portray immigration as an evil threat, and to consider Arab countries as some sort of geographical barrier protecting Europe's southern flank that needs to be reinforced. Propping up dictators to maintain so-called stability has plainly failed, and now ending the injustices that the Palestinian people suffer must be a key element in any rapprochement between the two shores of the Mediterranean. As Massimo D'Alema says, for equitable development and real integration to become realities, Nicolas Sarkozy's Union for the Mediterranean needs a profound re-think.

The Arab revolutions enjoy one great advantage that has seldom been the case in the other democratic revolutions; they have been initiated and managed locally

without any direct interference from outside powers. But external support will nevertheless be a decisive factor in the transition process in those countries that have already overthrown their dictators. This external help has to match each country's needs, however, and so avoid corrupting the emerging civil societies. What is needed is constructive advice, and not the kinds of lesson whose bankruptcy was demonstrated during the West's hesitant, technocratic management of human rights cases under the dictators.

The credibility amongst Arabs of outside actors has been damaged, but can be repaired through transparent co-operation between Arab and Western civil societies. ■

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