

spotlight europe

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How the European Union can Support Change in North Africa

Christian-Peter Hanelt

Bertelsmann Stiftung, christian.hanelt@bertelsmann-stiftung.de

Almut Möller

German Council on Foreign Relations (DGAP), moeller@dgap.org

Change in Tunisia and Egypt was sudden and came as a surprise. The European Union should now provide pro-active support with the help of a transformation partnership. For this purpose it should as soon as possible subject the instruments and strategies that it has used hitherto to a thorough revision. Moreover, the EU should open its market for agricultural products from North Africa and the Middle East.

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At the beginning of 2011 protest movements in Tunisia and Egypt unexpectedly toppled the long-standing regimes of President Ben Ali and President Mubarak. The demonstrators on the streets of Tunis, Cairo and Alexandria have fought for and obtained the opportunity to initiate a new political process in their countries and sent a signal to the whole of the Middle East. Both countries are now at the start of a difficult transitional phase. For decades the regimes were dominated by the two presidents and their parties. They were a synonym for political stagnation. And they have now reached the end of the line. Who and what will finally take their place is an open question. But there is a distinct possibility that in the weeks ahead two countries of the Arab world will set out on the path leading to democratization.

The European Union has offered to help and assist Egypt and Tunisia. In addition to the political challenges, both countries are confronted with economic and social problems which will complicate the transitional processes.

With these transformation partnerships in North Africa the European Union is entering on new political territory. Assuming that the new political leaderships that are beginning to emerge accept the offer, the transformation partnerships will provide the EU with an opportunity to put its largely unsuccessful Mediterranean policy, which has been in existence since 1995, on a new footing. However, this means that the EU actors in Brussels will have to develop a clear-cut strategy and coordinate the measures they decide to adopt. Fur-

thermore, the requisite financial resources will have to be made available forthwith.

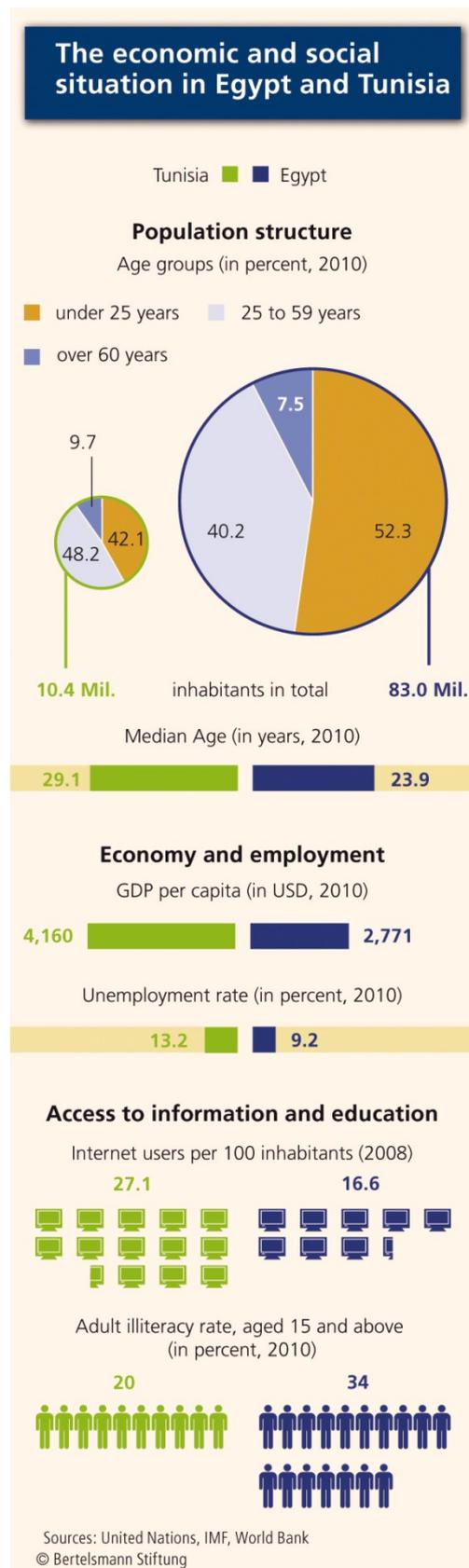
Why have the regimes in Egypt and Tunisia collapsed at this juncture?

The collapse of the regimes and the speed with which it happened came as a surprise to all observers. It is true, for example, that in its Transformation Index the Bertelsmann Stiftung has been pointing out for years that the democracy rankings for North Africa and the Middle East and the regional average lag far behind those of every other region in the world. And in the countries concerned the benefits of economic liberalization have not as yet reached the majority of the population. Since 2002 the Arab Human Development Reports of the United Nations have systematically described the deficiencies. The regimes were nevertheless deemed to be “stable.” However, trouble was brewing under the surface.

“The deficiencies were known but the regimes were nevertheless deemed to be ‘stable’.”

The countries of North Africa were hit by the global economic crisis, which simply exacerbated the existing problems. On the one hand there was economic distress caused by rapidly rising food prices, unemployment and the lack of a future, especially among the rapidly increasing younger segment of the population; there were the decades in which people were denied political rights; and there were corrupt governments and persistent and (now well documented) human rights abuses. On the other hand, there were new forms of communication and organization through social networks, and better access to the media and information. All these

factors contributed to the civic Arab revolutions which broke out in 2011.



II

How do the political upheavals affect the European Union and its Mediterranean Policy?

The events in the southern Mediterranean affect the EU and its member states far more directly than the US. This has once again been demonstrated by the refugees from North Africa who are currently attempting to reach Europe via the Mediterranean. Cairo and Tunis are only a few hours by air from the capitals of the European Union. EU Mediterranean Policy means Neighbourhood Policy, and, since 2004, is at least on paper, one of Europe's foreign policy priorities. However, in the last decade the European Union's attitude to the southern Mediterranean area was to a large extent determined by security issues. It is true that in 1995 the EU, in its Barcelona Process, started out with a wide-ranging agenda which included political dialogue, the economy, democracy, civil society and human rights.

“The EU countries are now faced with the task of explaining why they were unable to distinguish between stability and stagnation.”

But the aftermath of 9/11 and the terrorist attacks in Europe, the growing migratory pressure from the southern Mediterranean area, and the conflicts and wars in the Middle East led to “securitization,” and prompted the EU states to adopt a constricted view of their southern neighbours. This went hand in hand with the fact that presidential regimes which governed their countries with an iron fist (and, seen from without, in what for decades seemed to be a stable manner) were deemed to be reliable

partners in a region that was increasingly threatened by instability. The EU countries are now faced with the task of explaining why they were unable to distinguish between stability and stagnation. The events in North Africa will force the EU to fundamentally reform its existing instruments. It is true that all important cooperation areas are listed in the Neighbourhood Policy documents and in those of the Union for the Mediterranean. However, there is a lack of focus and there are implementation problems. Most importantly, the European Union must attach conditions to its assistance. This is an area where the EU clearly needs to do more as the transformation partnerships progress. Perhaps this may also be an opportunity for the Mediterranean Policy, which at the moment is not making a great deal of headway.

III

How will the economic and social situation of people in Egypt and Tunisia affect the transformation processes?

Egypt and Tunisia are not only facing a politically difficult transition period, the exact course and duration of which are currently impossible to predict. Both countries have in the past witnessed considerable deficits in areas such as democratic elections, the separation of powers, the independence of courts, efficient governance, freedom of assembly, and freedom of the press. Furthermore, the political transformation process is taking place against a background of economic problems and social tensions, and in recent years, largely unnoticed in the West, these have led to protests and demonstrations in both countries. In recent years both governments introduced economic reforms. However, the ruling elites have been the main beneficiaries of the high growth

rates. A relatively high proportion of the population continues to live in extreme poverty. Illiteracy is declining, but is still high among adults. Whilst it is true that

own destiny. However, it is in the interests of the EU to promote a process which will lead to the democratization and stabilization of its neighbours. For this reason the

Instruments of the EU to support the political and economic transformation in the South Mediterranean Area

- **European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP)**
- **Barcelona Process: Union for the Mediterranean**
- **EU delegations in Kairo und Tunis**
(within the framework of the new European External Action Service)
- **EU missions**
(e.g. election observers, support for rule of law, experts in the field of civilian administration)
- **Measures of development policy by the EU Commission**
- **Access to the single European market**

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EU should certainly make some attractive offers, though these should be tied to strict conditions. Reforms pay off, and reneging on one's promises can have serious consequences. The more the EU operates as a single bloc, the greater its chances of success. This is especially true of its internal market, a sensitive

there is access to education, job opportunities for a growing number of young people are few and far between. Youth unemployment in both countries is significantly higher than unemployment among adults. Egypt in particular, a country with more than 80 million people, is faced with enormous challenges on account of its (growing) population. In both countries transformation will make sense only if it is accompanied by economic and social development.

issue in the EU when it comes to agricultural products, though for the exporting countries in North Africa it is of very great interest. In this area the EU has at its disposal a powerful instrument which it can make available in order to provide support and as a reward. In the area of circular migration the EU could offer to facilitate temporary access to education and training. The restrictive approach to visas for people from the region has sent out the wrong message. Young Europeans can jet to North Africa with low-cost carriers, but the reverse route is by and large denied to people from the area. As far as they are concerned, the Mediterranean, which once facilitated trade and connected people, is now a symbol of division. This does not have to stay that way, since the EU and its member states can decide to change the basic framework. When all is said and done, the EU should use tailor-made agendas which support the economic development of the population as a whole, which make a contribution to improving educational opportunities, and contain programmes that focus on young people and women. In the area of political reforms the EU can offer support in the run-up to free

IV

Can the EU play a part in the transformation processes?

The European Union can merely offer to support the transformation processes. In the region people still remember that they were once subjected to foreign rule; and they have not forgotten the aggressive democratization agenda of the George W. Bush administration. It is thus right to emphasize that the new leaderships and people in the region are masters of their

elections, and send out election observers. It can also make available the services of constitutional experts. And Europe's foundations and NGOs can provide training courses for political parties and candidates. Corrupt and inefficient government departments must be reformed. The EU has quite a lot of experience in this area, and can send out advisory missions. However, the EU should also coordinate its measures with those of its member states and with other countries and organizations. Money should not be poured into the region indiscriminately as a result of a wave of euphoria. For this reason there should first of all be a conference on transformation partnerships with Egypt and Tunisia which other countries and organizations can attend as observers.

V

How should the EU deal with political Islam?

In the past European governments have tended to adopt a reserved attitude to political Islam. In the aftermath of 9/11 the political discourse tended to focus on its radical varieties, even though these are merely espoused by a minority. This has led to a situation where there are very few people in Europe's capitals who actually know any of the Islamist actors who have fought for freedom in recent weeks. However, in future Islamist movements and parties are going to play a greater political role in both Egypt and Tunisia.

“Islamists in the region have been calling for democracy, an end to corruption, social responsibility and good governance.”

The country reports which are part of the Bertelsmann Transformation Index show

that Islamists are frequently the most important or even the only forces which have managed to survive under repressive regimes. Liberal and secular parties were rather successfully kept in check. Islamists in the region have for many years been calling for democracy, an end to corruption, social responsibility and good governance. For example, in Egypt the Muslim Brotherhood has taken on central social tasks which the regime either could not or did not want to deal with. It is deeply rooted in the local community and possesses not only a certain degree of credibility but also the requisite infrastructure in order to care for the social needs of the population. It remains to be seen whether the moderate or the conservative wing will gain the upper hand in Egypt and Tunisia. This is yet another reason why the EU should become involved. Critics have been advocating a dialogue with Islamist movements and parties – refusing violence – for years. This issue now needs to be put on the agenda of the European Union.

VI

What should the new European External Action Service do?

The European External Action Service (EEAS) has officially been operational since 1 December 2010. However, it is still in the establishment phase. Staff from the European Commission, the General Secretariat of the Council and the national diplomatic services are still being assembled. There are still basic questions about the character, the assignment of tasks and the financing which can more or less be explained by the fact that the EEAS is pooling erstwhile responsibilities of the Commission and the Council in the area of foreign policy, and that this has led to some noisy clashes. The EU delegations in non-EU countries are also still in the process of being restructured. In the past they were made up of representatives of the EU

Commission, who as yet are still quite clearly in the majority.

The political upheavals in North Africa are the first test for the EEAS and its head, the High Representative Catherine Ashton. The EU delegations in Cairo and Tunis, and in the other capitals of the Middle East and North Africa, need to be re-organized quickly and indeed with some urgency. They will have to be streamlined according to the goals of the transformation partnerships, and the EU Neighbourhood Policy. These delegations will now be able to showcase the full range of EU policymaking. The EU should make good use of this new instrument.

VII

How can the European Neighbourhood Policy be reformed? Should the Union for the Mediterranean be abolished?

In 2004 the European Union enhanced the Barcelona Process by adding to it the southern dimension of the European Neighbourhood Policy. Whereas the ENP tends to favour a bilateral approach, the policy initiated in Barcelona—which was transformed into the Union for the Mediterranean in 2008—preferred a multilateral framework. However, Barcelona and later the Union for the Mediterranean have turned out to be a failure, largely on account of the gridlock caused by the Middle East conflict and the lack of political will displayed by the EU member states and the partner countries. The Union for the Mediterranean is in a political deadlock and in its present form ought to be reformed. Its interesting features, for example, in the area of sustainable energy supplies (Mediterranean Solar Plan) or environmental protection could be implemented within the framework of the ENP.

“The Union for the Mediterranean is in a political deadlock and in its present form ought to be reformed.”

The ENP approach facilitates tailor-made policies, and these would have to be fleshed out on the basis of the priorities defined by the new transformation partnerships. Here it will become apparent that less is more. As was suggested above, the EU should concentrate on significantly fewer areas of cooperation, though these should be linked to rigorous conditions. The Union for the Mediterranean in its current form is untenable, and should be transformed into a more or less informal security forum which can discuss every security issue that is of general interest. This would yet be an ambitious project and only a first step towards a structured security dialogue in the region, which would subsequently have to incorporate the Gulf states.

VIII

What do these regional developments signify for the Middle East Peace Process?

In 1979 Egypt under President Anwar al-Sadat made peace with Israel at Camp David. Under President Hosni Mubarak the country was an important ally of Israel and the West, and benefited from military and development aid amounting to billions of dollars. In the course of the efforts of the US and the Middle East Quartet to promote the peace process between Israel and the Palestinians Egypt under Mubarak showed itself willing to cooperate, and also attempted to launch initiatives of its own, for example by mediating between the Palestinian factions, Fatah and Hamas. In

Israel most commentators see the departure of Mubarak as a threat to the stability of Egypt and thus of Israel. Not many people are willing to see the new opportunities presented by the democratization of North Africa. In particular many people in Israel are worried by the scenarios of a lengthy phase of instability, and the possibility that the Islamist Muslim Brotherhood—which is where Hamas, which rules the Gaza Strip, originated—will be politically upgraded. Whilst it should not be assumed that a new political leadership in Cairo will terminate the peace treaty with Israel, it is currently difficult to predict how the political situation in Egypt and in other countries in the region will develop. It cannot be ruled out that some of these countries will be destabilized. As far as Israel is concerned, a new phase of insecurity has begun. Even though for the Palestinians – they hope for a broad international recognition in September when Pal-

estinian President Mahmood Abbas intends to declare an independent Palestinian state at the UN General Assembly. Now the Palestinian Authority fears loss of international attention to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. For this reason it was a good idea that Catherine Ashton, the High Representative, also decided to visit Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories on her trip to the Middle East in the middle of February 2011. Shortly before, at the Munich Security Conference, she had coordinated her approach with her Middle East Quartet colleagues from the US, Russia, the EU and the UN, and emphasized the link between what is happening in North Africa and the Middle East conflict. In the Quartet the EU should now make another determined attempt to encourage Israel and the Palestinians to sign a peace treaty. For this purpose the Quartet should meet monthly in Jerusalem.

About the authors:

Christian-Peter Hanelt is Senior Expert Middle East of the Programme Europe's Future of the Bertelsmann Stiftung

Almut Möller is head of the Alfred von Oppenheim Center for European Policy Studies at the Research Institute of the German Council on Foreign Relations (DGAP) in Berlin.

For Further Reading:

Bertelsmann Stiftung (Hrsg.): Transformation Index 2010. Political Management in International Comparison, Gütersloh 2010. Also available on the internet under <http://www.bertelsmann-transformation-index.de>

<http://www.bitterlemons.net/> Bitterlemons is a joint Palestinian-Israeli effort to promote a civilized exchange of views about the Israel-Arab conflict and additional Middle East issues among a broad spectrum of participants.

European Union: European Neighbourhood Policy - Reference documents, http://ec.europa.eu/world/enp/documents_en.htm#

United Nations Development Programme/ Institute of National Planning: Egypt Human Development Report 2010. Youth in Egypt: Building our Future, Cairo 2010.

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Responsible

Bertelsmann Stiftung
Carl Bertelsmann Straße 256
D-33311 Gütersloh
<http://www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de>

Dr. Dominik Hierlemann
dominik.hierlemann@bertelsmann-stiftung.de
Telefon +49 5241 81 81537

Joachim Fritz-Vannahme
joachim.vannahme@bertelsmann-stiftung.de
Telefon +49 5241 81 81421

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