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For at least fifteen years prior to the Arab uprisings of 2010/2011, the European Union had a policy for the promotion of democracy, human rights, the rule of law, freedom of expression and civil society activism in the southern Mediterranean. Yet the EU and its member states were taken by surprise when mass demonstrations across the Arab world challenged the dictatorial regimes of Tunisia, then Egypt and beyond, from December 2010. While they had celebrated the progress made by Arab regimes on several economic indicators, the EU had become complacent about the persistence of autocratic rule.

At the time of the Arab revolts, Europe was still preoccupied with its own financial crises. However, once presented with the spectacle of mass demonstrations in Tunisia and the knock-on effect in neighbouring Egypt, EU leaders realized that something momentous was underway and opted to welcome the demonstrators' demands for change. Within weeks the EU announced a recalibration of its policies and institutional arrangements to support political reform, and allocated additional funds for the purpose. When Libyans challenged the dictatorship of Muammar al Qaddafi and he marshalled his forces to crush them, France and Britain acted quickly to galvanize an international response that included NATO air and maritime support for the rebels. The EU suspended all cooperation with the Qaddafi regime; imposed sanctions on individuals and entities and, following deliberations, launched a plan of action to support Libya through its post-Qaddafi transition.

Some three years on, however, the forces of counter-revolution had succeeded in either containing or reversing the movement for change, as in Egypt; or, in the case of Syria, had reduced the country to all-out civil war. In Libya, the elected government was forced to flee the capital in the face of opposition and turf battles among rival militias. Only in Tunisia did a broad-based commitment to democracy and the rule of law prevail.

To attribute the reversals of the quest for democracy in Egypt and Libya to the failings of the EU would be to accord too much weight to its capacity to influence the course of events in either country. Equally, as noted in Chapter 2, the EU could not

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claim credit for the comparative success of the reform movement in Tunisia, though it was generally supportive. In all cases, the EU was a player, but not a leading one; and, as will be documented here, it could have been more effective than it was. Yet, as also discussed here, the main failings of the EU in the context of the Arab revolts have to do with the very nature of the EU itself: its conflicting objectives, institutional inertia and diffuse power structure.

As discussed in all three chapters in Part I of this volume, on the transitions in Egypt, Tunisia and Libya, the impetus for regime change in these countries was principally the product of indigenous factors and dynamics. In all cases also local actors were willing to accept international assistance only on their terms. Had the EU sought to intervene directly and try to manage the course of change, that would have run counter to the whole ethos of democratic legitimacy, quite probably producing a backlash of criticism against the EU. In a sense, the EU was destined to be 'damned if it did, and damned if it didn't' act more vigorously. Conscious of this dilemma, the EU erred on the side of caution, and in a way consistent with EU norms and institutional inertia. The results were disappointing for the champions of democracy on both sides of the Mediterranean.

EU policy-making process

A Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) has been an EU objective since the European Community was transformed into the European Union in 1992. That transition coincided with the collapse of the Soviet Union and Western Europe's embrace of the newly independent East and Central European states as candidate members of the EU. Their incorporation meant the expansion of EU membership from 15 states in 1995 to 25 states in 2004 (now 28 states). Inevitably, the task of agreeing a CFSP among all the members became more cumbersome and demanding.

In an effort to streamline the process, under the terms of the Lisbon Treaty (2007), a new post of High Representative (of the EU for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy), to be held in conjunction with Vice Presidency of the European Commission (the EU's executive body), was created (hereinafter referred to as HR/VP). A dedicated

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new EU diplomatic corps, the European External Action Service (EEAS) was also established. The Tunisian uprising coincided with Catherine Ashton's first year in the post of HR/VP, and the EEAS began operation only in January 2011 – so it was a major challenge for the EU to produce a coherent response immediately. That said, Ashton was able to use the opportunity to establish her visibility¹, and waded into controversy in the process.²

Scholars who specialize on the institutions and procedures of the EU have written extensively on the implications of these new arrangements.³ The net effect was to create a new echelon of offices and institutions which sat uneasily alongside and overlapped with the existing ones. Consequently, with respect to the Arab uprisings, pronouncements and policy statements came not only from the HR/VP Ashton, but also from the President of the European Council (Herman Van Rompuy), the President of the European Commission (José Manuel Barroso), the Commissioner for Enlargement and Neighbourhood Policy (Stefan Füle) and, after his appointment in July 2011, the Special Representative for the Southern Mediterranean (Bernadino León). Furthermore, while the HR/VP was broadly understood to be the lead voice on EU policy positions, she did not have control of decisions about the disbursement of aid – which was the responsibility of the European Commission.⁴

In response to the challenge of the Arab uprisings, the HR/VP created yet more institutions, including the aforementioned Representative for the Southern

¹ http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_SPEECH-11-101_en.htm?locale=en;
<http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2011/feb/04/egypt-tunisia-eu-deep-democracy>

² <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/africaandindianocean/egypt/8303929/Egypt-crisis-David-Cameron-reprimands-Baroness-Ashton-at-EU-summit.html>

³ See for example: Smith, M E (2004) *Europe's foreign and security policy: the institutionalization of cooperation*, Cambridge University Press: http://www.swp-berlin.org/en/publications/swp-comments-en/swp-aktuelle-details/article/europaeischer_auswaertiger_dienst.html;
<http://www.ceps.be/book/reviewing-member-states%E2%80%99-commitment-european-external-action-service>; and
<http://carnegieeurope.eu/strategieurope/?fa=50020>.

⁴ Federica Bicchì (2014) 'The Politics of Foreign Aid and the European Neighbourhood Policy Post-Arab Spring: 'More for More' of Less for the Same?' *Mediterranean Politics* 19:3, 318–332, at p. 320.

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Mediterranean and three dedicated Task Forces – for Tunisia, Jordan and Egypt. While this signalled a readiness to focus on the specific needs and challenges arising during the transitions in Egypt, Tunisia and Libya, these arrangements also further complicated policy formulation and implementation. On the ground, the EEAS diplomats had a further problem of coordinating with the missions of EU member states in these countries. Meanwhile, the governments of the EU member states were free to develop their own individual initiatives and funding streams. In the case of Libya, President Nicolas Sarkozy of France and Prime Minister David Cameron of Britain effectively upstaged the EU with their calls to action.

Policy Substance

As mentioned, some fifteen years before the start of the Arab uprisings the EU already had a policy to promote political as well as economic reform in its southern neighbourhood. Launched in Barcelona in 1995, the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership Programme (EMP) embodied a three-tier agenda for economic, political and cultural, and security cooperation intended to turn the Mediterranean into a more integrated region. The programme made some advances in persuading Arab governments in North Africa, including Tunisia and Egypt but excluding Libya, which was then under a sanctions regime in connection with the Lockerbie airliner bombing, to institute some economic reforms. It failed, however, to prompt much in the way of political reforms.

The Arab states of North Africa also resisted EU inducements to promote South–South trade and transport links. The main reason was the persistence of cross-border rivalries, security concerns and disputes. Libya was not included in the EMP in any case. Because each of the EU's Arab partner states in the EMP operated unilaterally, the EU formed the hub and engine of the process, effectively dealing with each of the Mediterranean Partner states individually, thereby undermining the concept of partnership between North and South.

Crucially, the EMP actually reinforced the economic advantages of the EU. Arab partner states were obliged to open their markets to European investors and to remove trade and tariff barriers on manufactured goods. Yet the EU only undertook a

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progressive reduction of its tariff barriers on the import of agricultural products from North Africa – some of which were kept in place to protect southern European farmers from competition from across the Mediterranean. Furthermore, while promoting the free flow of capital and goods (with some exceptions), the EMP did not allow for the free flow of labour: the common market principles upheld inside the EU were not fully replicated in the Mediterranean Partnership.

To the disappointment of the EU, Arab business leaders proved adept at creating private monopolies and crony capitalism in the southern neighbourhood, and the anticipated market liberalization failed to benefit smaller businesses and the middle classes. Overall, the EMP formula compounded the very economic problems – high youth unemployment, low wages, rising living costs and corruption – that contributed to the Arab uprisings.⁵

Regarding political reform, meanwhile, Arab regimes were able to argue to their EU interlocutors that security concerns prevented them from instituting democratization for fear that the results would be destabilizing and would benefit Islamists. For its part, the EU was so keen to curtail inward migration and gain the cooperation of Arab governments on this and combatting terrorism that it avoided pushing for political reform and settled for cosmetic measures instead.⁶ As reported to the author by former British and US officials, former President Mubarak of Egypt countered every European proposal to improve human rights in Egypt, especially in respect to political prisoners, with accusations that Western governments were themselves so inept at dealing with extremism that they had no business telling the Egyptians what to do.⁷ The Mubarak regime made non-interference in Egyptian internal politics a condition for cooperation on international security.

⁵ Europe's inadvertent role in the genesis of the Arab revolts, through policies which widened the wealth gap between North and South and within Arab economies, is discussed in Rosemary Hollis (2012) 'No friend of democratisation: Europe's role in the genesis of the Arab Spring', *International Affairs* 88:1, 81–94.

⁶ <http://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/5080133.pdf>

⁷ See Rosemary Hollis (2013) 'Mubarak: The embodiment of "moderate Arab leadership"?' in Lawrence Freedman and Jeffrey Michaels, eds, *Scripting Middle East Leaders: the Impact of Leadership Perceptions on US and UK Foreign Policy* London: Bloomsbury.

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In the wake of the invasion of Iraq in 2003, when the US side launched a new initiative to promote democracy in the Arab world, the EU countered with a new initiative of its own. This was the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) which introduced the concept of 'differentiation' to EU dealings with its Arab neighbours. The idea was to calibrate the EU's proposals for reform to the relative capacity of its partner countries to adopt such measures. Implementation of the formula involved providing each Arab government with a list of potential reforms – extracted from the body of law (the *acquis communautaire*) that all EU membership candidates are obliged to incorporate into their legal systems – from which to choose a short list for adoption. That list would then form the basis of an 'Action Plan' agreed with the EU and against which progress would be measured over time.

Following negotiations, both Tunisia and Egypt did agree on Action Plans. As the Tunisians themselves indicated at the time, they had little choice, given that the EU constitutes its biggest trading partner.⁸ The Egyptians took a tougher line on what to include in their Action Plan and managed to avoid signing up to anything they specifically did not want with respect to political reform. Technically, conditionality was incorporated in the Action Plans, but the EU was not rigorous in implementing this, in part because its bureaucrats could not make political decisions. More crucially, however, significant financial rewards were not attached to compliance.

The reward held out by the EU was simply greater returns on exports through expanded access to the EU internal market. To attain increased access, the partner countries were expected to introduce EU standards into their own economies and thence drive a process of 'harmonization' with EU internal market standards. Some development aid was made available to partner countries to smooth the process, but the whole philosophy behind the EU strategy was a belief in economic liberalization, with scant regard for the near-term consequences in the partner economies. Already at a disadvantage in relation to EU economies, the partners were expected to take

⁸ In 2011, 74.2% of Tunisia's total exports went to the EU and 63.1% of its imports came from the EU. See Hrant Kostanyan and Elitsa Garnizova (2013) 'Tunisia in turmoil: How should the EU react?' CEPS Commentary 4 March 2013.

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all the pains of harmonization without any of the benefits, such as labour mobility and infrastructure development aid, accorded to new member states of the EU.

This aspect of EU policy to promote an area of 'shared prosperity' in the Mediterranean reveals a fundamental blind spot in EU thinking. Essentially it amounts to an assumption that neighbouring countries, while denied the full benefits of EU membership, are nonetheless bound to benefit from becoming at least a little bit more like the EU economies.⁹ A similar set of assumptions about EU values such as democracy, freedom of expression, an independent judiciary and respect for human rights seems to have informed EU thinking about the benefits of political reform in the neighbourhood. This could be summarized as: 'the more you espouse our values the more you will resemble us, and that will be good for you and for us'!

Prior to the Arab uprisings, Arab regimes were not convinced. They understood well that opening up their systems to democracy, freedom of expression and accountability would spell the end of their regimes. They also understood that wealth distribution inside the EU was such that they could operate a democratic system without fear of revolution; and that free market capitalism works once an economy has passed an initial stage of development, but that before such a stage has been reached, an economy could be wiped out by competition. Finally, Arab regimes were party to the special pleadings of European leaders to do bilateral deals to stem migration flows, to protect the EU from an influx of migrants that would upset the prevailing social harmony and perhaps also open the doors to potential terrorists.

By the time of the Arab uprisings, the Arabs had witnessed the effects on Europe of the global financial crises and thus had new reasons to question EU advice on how best to manage economic development. In light of this, it is remarkable that the Europeans themselves seem not to have questioned their own assumptions when the 'Arab Spring' erupted. They did, however, express regret that they had not done more to promote their own democracy agenda in the recent past and vowed to make amends.

⁹ http://www.cvce.eu/content/publication/2013/11/15/4343451d-0db7-4451-a4c6-ba0e3a9ba008/publishable_en.pdf

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EU Response to 'the Arab Spring'

In their initial responses to the Arab uprisings, EU officials declared support for the 'democratic aspirations' of the people; called on the authorities to forego the use of force; and offered to engage in dialogue with both sides to help achieve a peaceful transition to democracy.¹⁰ In March 2011 the EU launched a new policy initiative, 'A Partnership for Democracy and Shared Prosperity in the Southern Mediterranean'.¹¹ This was followed in May with 'A New Response to a Changing Neighbourhood';¹² and in September that year, a programme of 'Support for Partnership, Reforms and Inclusive Growth (SPRING)'¹³ was announced.

The March 2011 initiative declared that the EU could not be a 'passive spectator' of developments, but should 'support wholeheartedly the wish of the people in our neighbourhood to enjoy the same freedoms that we take as our right'. Citing the EU's own 'proud tradition of supporting countries in transition from autocratic regimes to democracy' (in southern, eastern and central Europe) the EU promised support for those neighbourhood states 'able and willing' to embark on reform within a partnership. The EU would take a 'differentiated' and 'incentive-based approach' it said; a 'commitment to adequately monitored, free and fair elections should be the entry qualification for the Partnership'. Emphasis was placed on the importance of civil society, for which expanded EU support would include a new 'Civil Society Neighbourhood Facility'.

On the vexed issue of freedom of movement, the EU proposed 'Mobility Partnerships' to better 'manage' the movement of persons between the EU and partner countries and facilitate greater mobility for students, researchers and businesspeople. Embedded in this provision was a pledge to support 'capacity

¹⁰ See for example:

https://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_data/docs/pressdata/EN/foraff/118865.pdf ;
http://www.lcil.cam.ac.uk/sites/default/files/LCIL/documents/arabspring/Egypt_1_Statement_s_EUHR_28Jan2011.pdf

¹¹ Brussels, 8.3.2011 COM(2011) 200 final,

http://eeas.europa.eu/euromed/docs/com2011_200_en.pdf

¹² Brussels, 25/05/2011 COM(2011) 303,

http://eeas.europa.eu/enp/pdf/pdf/com_11_303_en.pdf

¹³ See Euro-Med Info Centre http://www.enpi-info.eu/mainmed.php?id=394&id_type=10

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building' in border management, 'preventing and fighting against irregular migration and trafficking in human beings, including through enhanced maritime surveillance; the return of irregular migrants...and for enhancing the capacity and abilities of law enforcement authorities to effectively fight trans-border organized crime and corruption'¹⁴.

With respect to economic development, the EU pledged more support for Small and Medium Sized Enterprises and job creation. Agreement was to be sought from EU member states for an increase in European Investment Bank (EIB) lending by EUR 1 billion and to extend the EBRD mandate to countries in the southern Mediterranean. On trade, the EU undertook to 'accelerate the conclusion and EU approval of trade liberalization agreements, notably on agricultural and fisheries products with Tunisia and Morocco'¹⁵ (Egypt and Jordan having recently gained preferential access for such products). The idea of 'Deep Free Trade Areas'(DFTA) was proposed, as was enhanced cooperation in the energy sector, education, rural development and communication technologies.

The message of the 'Partnership for Democracy' initiative was that the EU would provide 'more for more': more assistance (technical and financial), from existing and some new funds, for more progress toward reform in the southern Mediterranean countries. The 'New Response to a Changing Neighbourhood' initiative of May 2011 elaborated on the approach outlined in the March document, emphasizing that all support would be conditional upon demonstrable progress in the desired direction, in particular progress on building what the EU called 'deep and sustainable democracy'. This was to entail:

- free and fair elections
- freedom of association, expression and assembly and a free press and media
- the rule of law administered by an independent judiciary and right to a fair trial
- fighting against corruption

¹⁴ Brussels, 8.3.2011 COM(2011) 200 final, http://eeas.europa.eu/euromed/docs/com2011_200_en.pdf ; p.7.

¹⁵ Brussels, 8.3.2011 COM(2011) 200 final, http://eeas.europa.eu/euromed/docs/com2011_200_en.pdf; p.9.

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- security and law enforcement sector reform (including the police) and the establishment of democratic control over armed and security forces.¹⁶

The 'New Response' document also pledged a 'simplified and coherent policy and programme framework', such that in future ENP Action Plans and EU assistance would focus on a smaller number of priorities, backed with more precise benchmarks. It stated that the new approach would require additional resources of up to EUR 1242 million until 2013.

The SPRING initiative of September 2011, the budget for which was EUR 350 million for 2011/2012, re-emphasized the 'more for more' principle. Focusing specifically on Tunisia, Egypt, Jordan and Morocco, promised:

In the area of democratic transition, depending on the rhythm of reform in each country, the programme will provide support in the field of human rights and fundamental freedoms, democratic governance, freedom of association, expression and assembly and free press and media, public administration, rule of law and fight against corruption.

To assist countries towards reaching sustainable growth and economic development, SPRING will support a better regulatory framework for business, increased numbers of Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs); as well as a reduction in internal social and economic disparities.¹⁷

As this summary indicates, the EU was typically thorough in its articulation of the principles, goals, parameters and mechanisms of its policy. Yet therein lies part of the problem. The 2011 recalibration of EU policy in the Mediterranean Neighbourhood reads precisely like that – a recalibration of the EU's pre-existing approach to its southern neighbours. So elaborate and comprehensive had the EU

¹⁶ Brussels, 25/05/2011 COM(2011) 303,
http://eeas.europa.eu/enp/pdf/pdf/com_11_303_en.pdf p.3.

¹⁷ http://www.enpi-info.eu/mainmed.php?id=394&id_type=10

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vision of good-neighbourly relations become that its officials could not step outside or see above it. The documents embrace the aspirations voiced by Arab demonstrators as an affirmation that they wanted exactly what the Europeans have – in terms of freedoms and prosperity – and thence drew the conclusion that more rigorous and urgent implementation of programmes based on those adopted to promote democracy and economic development in new EU member states was the answer.

There was definitely an element of contrition in the way the policy was framed. The EU leaders regretted that they had all but given up on pressing Arab governments to democratize prior to 2011. Their reasons were understandable: the Arab leaders had simply rebuffed their pious words with accusations of cultural imperialism and/or reminders about their shared security agenda. Consequently, while the EU bureaucrats concentrated on pressing regulatory reform in narrow sectors that would achieve greater harmonization with the EU internal market, the leaders of EU member states focused on bilateral diplomatic relations and security agreements. Meanwhile, the EU institutions tasked with managing migration focused on increasingly elaborate schemes to control migration flows, for which the cooperation of Arab regimes was essential.

Arab civil society actors were marginalized in the process. In any case, Arab regimes resisted EU efforts to direct funds to civil society activists if the latter appeared dedicated to challenging authority in the Arab states. Over time, the EU obviously hoped that its economic reform programmes would enhance the capacity of the middle classes in the Arab partner states and that they might become the drivers of progress toward democracy. Yet, as noted above, in the decade preceding the Arab Spring the middle classes had gained little from economic liberalization – only business magnates in collusion with the regimes did. Middle-class youth were prominent in the uprisings. However, as subsequent developments revealed, they were not sufficiently well organized or practised in political activism to sustain the momentum through electoral processes that gave an opportunity to Islamists who did have an established societal base and defined leadership.

The problem for the EU, once the uprisings began, was to establish lines of communication with the new contenders for power without appearing to take sides in

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what were supposed to be transitions to democracy. Ideologically the EU placed itself on the side of the secular moderates, yet when they did not do as well as the Islamists in the first elections in Tunisia and Egypt, the Europeans felt bound to accept the will of the Tunisian and Egyptian people. Keen to make amends for their previous indulgence of dictators, meanwhile, they made their support of the new administrations more conditional than in the past – thereby penalizing the new democrats for the sins of the dictators.

Additionally, EU democracy and bureaucracy would not allow for unaccountable disbursements of aid to any regime – in stark contrast to the way Gulf Arab governments set about propping up their preferred clients in the transition states. Apart from EU humanitarian aid – which was forthcoming for Tunisia and Libya to help these countries deal with the refugee crises that followed the uprisings – EU aid was disbursed almost entirely through the pre-existing mechanisms of the European Neighbourhood Policy Instrument (ENPI) or in the form of development loans. Neither constituted cash in hand for governments facing economic crises brought on by the uprisings. In addition, as Federica Bicchì has pointed out, even though the EU increased substantially the amount of money it committed to support the Arab transitions: 'there can be a considerable time lag between the programming of funds, their commitment and their actual disbursement'.¹⁸

Another reason Bicchì identifies for why the EU actually spent less than it promised in 2011–2013 was that 'the rapid turnover of actors has left the EU with a limited set of interlocutors, as the more interesting developments occur at a faster pace than the EU reaction time'.¹⁹ In other words, the capacity of the designated recipient countries to absorb EU funding under its normal procedures had meant that funds committed remained unspent, though they were not cancelled as a result. In a sense, given the way the EU operates, the Arab transitional regimes would have to succeed first, before they could receive funding intended to help them succeed.

¹⁸ Federica Bicchì (2014) 'The politics of foreign aid and the European Neighbourhood Policy post-Arab Spring: "more for more" or less for the same?' *Mediterranean Politics* 19:3, 318–332, at p. 326.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p.328.

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Tunisia

When the uprising began in Tunisia in December 2010, the EU was in the process of negotiating a new agreement under the ENP with the Ben Ali government, which was praised for its record on reform. Initial reactions in Europe were mixed, with the French considering whether intervention to support Ben Ali was appropriate. However, events unfolded rapidly and when the Tunisian army refused to take up arms against the people, Ben Ali fled and revelations emerged on the extent of his family's extravagance and corruption, there was really no possibility of defending him. As would be the case with Libya later, the British and French leaders Cameron and Sarkozy were among the first to seize the moment and side with the people.

The EU signalled its support for the revolution in a series of high-level official visits, starting with the HR/VP Ashton on 14 February 2011. She was followed by Commission President Barroso, Commissioners Füle, Malmström, Georgieva, Barnier and De Gucht, as well as European Parliament President Jerzy Buzek. Reflecting the EU's previous belief in Tunisia's potential, as well as contrition about the EU's complicity with Ben Ali, there was initially a palpable sense of commitment to help the transition in Tunisia work. Although attention soon switched to developments in Egypt, where the stakes were considered much higher, and then Libya, because of the commitment of military forces – that was not totally to the detriment of Tunisia. The sense prevailed that the constituents for a successful transition were as present there as anywhere; and (as noted in Chapter 2) other regional actors were less inclined to interfere in Tunisia than they were in Egypt or in Syria, for instance.

Also, since Tunisia had already advanced along the path of economic reform under the ENP umbrella, and possessed a competent bureaucracy, there was a basis upon which to extend more aid and support through existing structures. The EU doubled the funds available for bilateral cooperation in 2011 and increased the budget for 2011–2013 from EUR 240 million to EUR 400 million. The new funds were earmarked to target economic recovery, civil society and democratic transition.²⁰

²⁰ 'The EU's response to the "Arab Spring"' MEMO/11/918, Brussels, 16 December 2011.

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Humanitarian aid was also made available to Tunisia to help cope with the refugee influx from Libya in 2011. The provisions of the three general EU initiatives of 2011 discussed above also encompassed Tunisia.

Under these initiatives, support was made available for Tunisian civil society organizations (CSOs) and technical support was extended to the transitional authorities in the preparation of elections. Following a request from the Tunisian authorities, the EU carried out an election observation mission and gave assistance to CSOs and to the three commissions set up to look into political reform, corruption and abuses of power under the previous regime.²¹ As detailed in Chapter 2, the Tunisians were discerning in their acceptance of the help offered, and found the Council of Europe (which is not an EU body) more useful than the EU per se. The Council of Europe is, as it proudly states, the European continent's leading human rights organization; all its 47 members are signatories to the European Convention on Human Rights, dedicated to the protection of human rights, democracy and the rule of law.

Tunisia was the first country for which the EU set up a Task Force, launched in Tunis in September 2011, a month before the first Tunisian elections. HR/VP Ashton and Tunisian Prime Minister Béji Caid Essebsi co-chaired the meeting. Also present were the President of the Swiss Confederation Micheline Calmy-Rey, members of the Tunisian Government, EU Commissioner Stefan Füle, the EU Special Representative Bernardino León, as well as representatives of the European Parliament, EU member states, the private sector and many international and regional financial institutions.²²

At its first meeting the Task Force for Tunisia agreed to start talks to establish a new 'Privileged Partnership' and agree terms for a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (DCFTA). The EU pledged to release EUR 100 million from the SPRING programme, together with an additional EUR 57 million for urgent water projects, and

²¹ http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-11-1087_en.htm?locale=en

²² http://eeas.europa.eu/tunisia/docs/20110929_taskforce_en.pdf

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EUR 60 million for a new job-creation project. Overall, Tunisia was to receive double the original EU allocation for 2011 and a 60 per cent increase in EIB loans.²³

EU member states also launched programmes to assist the transition in Tunisia. Germany channelled support to education and job training. Italy opened a line of micro-credit of EUR 150 million in Tunisia designed to help young people develop artisanal and other small businesses.²⁴ Representatives of British companies, Chambers of Commerce, the UK Foreign Office and other trade-promotion bodies conducted several trips to Tunisia to expand trade relations, promote investment and forge links with their Tunisian counterparts.²⁵ France, already Tunisia's leading European trade partner, increased its level of imports from Tunisia in 2011, though it also increased its sales to the country during the first year of its transition.²⁶ For their part, the Tunisians welcomed new business investment, and pointed to the reforms underway that would make the economy more conducive to new investors.²⁷

Against this backdrop, the EU's HR/VP Ashton and Special Representative Bernardino León took the lead in establishing links with key figures in the Tunisian government, through the first elections and subsequent power-sharing arrangements. These channels enabled the EU to lobby for a change to the draft constitution to drop a clause banning normalization of relations 'with Zionism'. In this connection, though, as reported by Richard Youngs:

One Tunisian activist observed wryly that European help in the constitutional drafting process was almost too extensive, to the extent that it led to a multiplicity of possible models being conveyed to the drafters.²⁸

However, Youngs added: 'In private, the senior Ennahda leadership professed satisfaction with European support and detected a greater EU willingness to follow a

²³ Richard Youngs (2014) *Europe in the New Middle East: Opportunity or Exclusion?* Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 66.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p.69.

²⁵ <http://www.abcc.org.uk/Opportunities-in-Tunisia-2013>

²⁶ <http://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/country-files/tunisia-286/france-and-tunisia/economic-relations-5170/>

²⁷ <http://www.abcc.org.uk/Opportunities-in-Tunisia-2013>

²⁸ Youngs (2014) p.73.

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locally set agenda.²⁹ Yet other reports indicate that some Tunisian human rights groups and journalists felt that EU officials were less inclined to listen to them than to Tunisian political leaders and bureaucrats. That would be in keeping with the past practice of the EU, whose officials gave precedence to maintaining their access to and engagement with partner-state governments over civil society contacts. To favour the latter over the former would have been impractical in any case, if not detrimental for the civil society pressure groups.

However, human rights activities across the Arab world could legitimately complain that the Europeans could have done more to use their official access to press the case for human rights and freedom of expression. After the revolution, the EU pledged to give more direct support to civil society groups, but faced a problem in deciding which ones and to what extent. Equally, once elections had taken place it would have been counterproductive to question the judgements of the new government, also one of an Islamist persuasion, on behalf of secular civil society critics. In the case of Tunisia, the EU was saved from having to choose sides when the leadership of Ennahda itself opted to engage in a national dialogue. That said, it appears that the EU did play a role in urging that leadership to do so.

Overall, the EU had a balancing act to perform in Tunisia, and erred on the side of caution and deferring to the preferences of the Tunisian leaders. A modest, pragmatic role was perhaps the best option for the EU in the circumstances. Where its performance was most disappointing was in terms of the time it took for EU financial assistance to reach the Tunisians, and this was because of the nature of EU bureaucratic procedures, as discussed above.

The 'Advanced Status Agreement' promised to Tunisia in 2011 was still not finalized in 2013. Also, the EU's new conditionality requirements were not applied consistently, with Morocco gaining some of the same benefits promised to Tunisia without having to demonstrate the same level of compliance with new rules. Equally, EU companies doing business in both countries were not subject to the same levels of scrutiny as were Tunisian nationals. Finally, even though EU funding to Tunisia

²⁹ Ibid.

Hollis, R (2016) 'The Role of the European Union' in Lodgaard, Sverre ed., *External Powers and the Arab Spring* Oslo: Scandinavian Academic Press, pp.163-198.

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was doubled in the wake of the revolution, the actual amount of money disbursed was not on a significant scale.

Egypt

As discussed in Chapter 1, on the eve of the Egyptian revolution of January/February 2011 Egyptians were suffering from high unemployment or underemployment, a reduction in subsidies for basic commodities, relatively low literacy rates, a bloated bureaucracy, corruption in government and business, and a police state. Some two thirds of the Egyptian population were living below the poverty line. The effect of the economic reform measures of the Mubarak regime was to improve macroeconomic indicators, to the satisfaction of the IMF and the US administration,³⁰ but also to increase the wealth gap between the rich few and the impoverished many. The middle classes were being squeezed to the point that they were 'middle class' only in their aspirations (for jobs and education for their children) but not in relative wealth. Middle-class youth were in the forefront of the demonstrations that took the country by storm in early 2011.

The potential for transition to democracy in Egypt was in no sense comparable to that in Tunisia. Whereas in the latter there was only a small professional army, in Egypt the military was a major institution, with significant business operations and interests and used to having the national presidency in the hands of former officers. In contrast to the shadowy and much-hated security establishment, the armed forces in Egypt enjoyed a level of trust and respect from the population and constituted a vehicle for social mobility. The population as a whole, aside from the minority Coptic community, was Sunni Muslim, conservative and observant. When faced with an Islamist insurgency in the early 1990s, the government had cracked down on the activists, imprisoning vast numbers, and co-opted Islam for the state.

The Muslim Brotherhood was outlawed, but some of its members had chosen to run as independents in the parliamentary elections of 2005. In part because the

³⁰ Rosemary Hollis (2013) 'Mubarak: The embodiment of "moderate Arab leadership"?' in Lawrence Freedman and Jeffrey Michaels, eds, *Scripting Middle East Leaders: the Impact of Leadership Perceptions on US and UK Foreign Policy* London: Bloomsbury, p. 175.

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Brotherhood had long been active in providing social services to the poor that the state had neglected, and was perceived to be far less corrupt than the political establishment and the ruling National Democratic Party, the Brotherhood candidates performed well in those elections. At this, the regime took fright and ensured that in the next elections it was made almost impossible for them to run again – leading the Brotherhood to boycott the poll. Nonetheless, the Muslim Brotherhood was a facet of Egyptian society, in its very fabric – alternately suppressed and tacitly tolerated by the regime. When the revolution came, the Brotherhood initially stood back, apart from some younger activist members, biding its time until capitalizing later.

In contrast to the Brotherhood, non-aligned and secular civil society groups were not well organized or established, even though they were in the forefront of the demonstrations in 2011. This is important, because they did not form a coherent group that external powers could readily adopt and promote once the revolution started. In any case, they were proudly Egyptian and from the start gave little indication of wanting external support, let alone interference.

The real power-brokers were the ruling establishment, including business magnates around the regime, the army and the Muslim Brotherhood. The revolution turned out to be a contest between them: in retrospect, the military high command, with its civilian allies in the establishment, was arguably always in the driving seat. It was the military high command that obliged Mubarak to step down, presided over the initial transition in the form of the Supreme Command of the Armed Forces (SCAF), allowed Muslim Brotherhood leader Mohammed Mursi to win election to the presidency, alternately quarrelled and coordinated with him, and then finally, when Mursi tried to surround himself with Brotherhood loyalists, masterminded his ouster in summer 2013.

Exactly how the EU could be expected to play a formative role in 2011–2013 to prevent that outcome and help manage a transition to enduring and stable democracy – 'deep democracy' to use the EU term – is not at all obvious. The path that the EU took was a logical one in terms of upholding the principles of democracy and human rights that, by its own admission, it had neglected in previous years. The EU supported the call for free and fair elections; accommodated to the results of the

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parliamentary elections in 2011/2012 (subsequently annulled by the Egyptian judiciary); extended cautious support to the government of duly elected president Mohammed Mursi; sought where possible to influence his decisions in favour of an inclusive and non-sectarian administration and constitution; and sought to arrest Egypt's economic crisis by deploying all the mechanisms at its disposal.

In the initial stages of the Egyptian revolution, the EU was not in a position to influence events – which, as in Tunisia, moved at astonishing speed. Neither the Europeans nor even the Americans were in a position to save Mubarak from himself, once he had chosen to unleash the security services and mobsters on the unarmed protesters. It was that spectacle that persuaded the Americans to abandon their efforts to induce Mubarak to offer real reforms and call on him to step down. The Obama administration has since been castigated by senior Egyptians and their Gulf allies, in particular Saudi Arabia and the UAE, for abandoning a faithful ally. However, at the heart of the US relationship with Egypt lies a military alliance that gives senior US military officers better access to their Egyptian counterparts than that enjoyed by US diplomats and politicians. It may be assumed, therefore, that they were content with the decision of the Egyptian army first to resist Mubarak's command to fire on the demonstrators, and then to manage his replacement.

For the EU , essentially the only recourse was to condemn violence and call for a peaceful transition, as it did. On 28 January 2011 HR/VP Ashton made the following statement:

I have followed very closely and with profound concern the reports of increased violence, clashes and arrests during today's demonstrations in Egypt.

The continued use of force against demonstrators by police and state security forces is deeply troubling. In order to avoid further deterioration of the situation in Cairo and elsewhere in Egypt, and to avoid more casualties, I reiterate my call on all parties to exercise restraint and calm and I urge the authorities to immediately and unconditionally release all peaceful demonstrators from detention.

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I also reiterate my call upon the Egyptian authorities to urgently establish a constructive and peaceful way to respond to the legitimate aspirations of Egyptian citizens for democratic and socioeconomic reforms.

I will discuss these developments with my colleagues in the Foreign Affairs Council meeting on Monday in Brussels.³¹

On 3 February 2011 the leaders of France, Germany, Italy, Spain and the UK issued a joint statement urging 'a quick and orderly transition to a broad-based government' in Egypt.³² Some individual leaders did show something resembling relief when the military took over – for fear of chaos. All through the transition the spectre of an ungovernable Egypt was more terrifying than dictatorship. Britain's David Cameron was the first foreign leader to visit Cairo after the military took over, holding talks with senior figures. The fact that he was accompanied by a group of British arms manufacturers, en route with the Prime Minister to a tour of the Gulf states, somewhat tempered Cameron's pro-democracy message.³³ It was also of note that, while he did meet some of the protest leaders, Cameron forewent the opportunity to meet any leaders of the Muslim Brotherhood.

As Cameron departed, HR/VP Ashton arrived in Cairo. In a statement following her meeting with the Egyptian Foreign Minister she said:

We have discussed this morning two different aspects of the future: first the progress of Egypt towards democracy, and secondly the economic requirements for Egypt. Let me be absolutely clear: it is for Egypt to determine its future, it is for Egypt to examine with all its expertise the economic issues that it faces, and it is for the European Union and the international community

³¹ EU/NR 01/11,
http://www.lcil.cam.ac.uk/sites/default/files/LCIL/documents/arabspring/Egypt_1_Statement_s_EUHR_28Jan2011.pdf

³² <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2011-02-03/european-leaders-demand-immediate-regime-change-amid-violence-in-egypt>

³³ <http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2011/feb/21/david-cameron-visits-egypt>

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to offer support if it is needed and if it is useful, but it will be Egypt that decides that that is the case.³⁴

The tone of her remarks is instructive. Throughout she emphasized that the EU was ready to help, but that the lead must come from Cairo. It was always the case that the Egyptians dealt with the EU with diplomatic correctness, but with no enthusiasm for the minutiae of the ENPI and irritation that so little straightforward development aid was forthcoming from the EU. They would have much preferred grants that could be disbursed as the Egyptian government deemed best.³⁵ The Egyptian diplomats also discerned the underlying cultural particularism of the Europeans in their admonitions on reform strategy, democracy and human rights. As of the Egyptian revolution, meanwhile, the EU clearly experienced difficulty in gaining cooperation from the Egyptians with any of its initiatives. In this the EU was not alone, however, since the normal business of government was totally disrupted in Egypt in 2011 and went through further uncertainties after Mursi was elected. All international donors therefore experienced difficulties assisting with economic recovery, and investors were deterred by the uncertainties and instability.³⁶

The actual amounts released to Egypt under the EU initiatives were not substantial. Immediately after Mubarak's departure, in a gesture to the Egyptian people calling for reform, the EU launched a EUR 20 million civil society package. That was in addition to EUR 132 million allocated for programmes in 2011. A further EUR 95 million was already committed for 2012; when the EU rolled out its revised programmes to support the Arab states in transition in 2011, it was clearly hoped that Egypt would be a beneficiary. Certainly the amount allocated to Egypt between 2011 and 2013 exceeded 2010 estimates. However, the Egyptians resisted conditionality, and the EU insisted it could not extend new loans, such as from the EIB, unless and until Egypt accepted IMF conditions for its new facility – which the Egyptians refused.

³⁴ http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_SPEECH-11-116_en.htm?locale=en

³⁵ Author interviews with Egyptian officials dealing with the EU, January 2006.

³⁶ For a full discussion, see Khaled Amin (2014) 'International assistance to Egypt after the 2011 and 2013 uprisings: more politics and less development', *Mediterranean Politics* 19:3, 392–412.

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The EU offered electoral observation missions for both the parliamentary and presidential elections, but, according to an EU report: 'The Egyptian authorities preferred to decline any offer from international observation missions.'³⁷ However, they did accept EUR 2 million under the EU's Instrument for Stability for the electoral commission and some civil society work. The EU's proposal for a 'Mobility Partnership' with Egypt was declined pending the installation of a new elected government, illustrating Federica Bicchì's point noted above that the EU could not readily find interlocutors with whom to agree programmes during the transition period. The EU's offer to negotiate a DCFTA would have to await the formation of a new government in Cairo.

It was not until November 2012 that the EU's Egypt Task Force was launched, under the joint chairmanship of HR/VP Ashton and Egyptian Foreign Minister Mohamed Amr. The launch was a key outcome of the visit to Brussels made by the new President Mursi in September 2012. The attendees at the launch included Commission Vice-President Tajani, Commissioner Füle, the EU Special Representative for the Southern Mediterranean Region Bernardino León, the EU Special Representative for Human Rights Stavros Lambrinidis, ministers of the Egyptian government, European Foreign Ministers, Members of the European Parliament, business leaders, senior officials from European and international financial institutions, as well as representatives from civil society. Ahead of the launch the EU approved two programmes for Egypt worth EUR120 million in new support for jobs and vocational training targeted at young people.

As recorded in the EU's press release after the Task Force meeting:

The EU undertook to provide a total of nearly €5 billion in the form of loans and grants for 2012–2013. The EU already provides 80% of inward investment into Egypt and the Task Force confirmed the European Union as Egypt's largest economic partner.

Vice-President of the European Commission Antonio Tajani organized

³⁷ 'The EU's response to the "Arab Spring"' MEMO/11/918, Brussels, 16 December 2011.

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a Business and Tourism Summit, ahead of the Task Force, where European and Egyptian CEOs discussed investment opportunities in Egypt.

102 European business leaders came to Cairo representing companies with a combined turnover of 600 billion euros – equivalent to the GDP of the Netherlands. Around 200 Egyptian business leaders were also present.

(...)

The European Commission committed to provide additional financial support to Egypt for an overall amount of nearly 800 million euros (LE 6.2 billion). This is made up of 303 million euros in the form of grants and 450 million euros in loans. This is on top of the 449 million already provided by the EU to Egypt for the period 2011–2013.

The President of the European Investment Bank (EIB), Werner Hoyer, announced potential lending of up to one billion euros per year (nearly LE 8 billion), more than doubling the bank's recent activity in Egypt and making the country the biggest recipient of EIB loans in the Middle East and North African Region.

The European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) confirmed the start of operations in Egypt this month and announced plans to ramp up lending volumes to 1 billion per year.³⁸

The EU also pledged to double Egypt's participation in the Erasmus Mundus and Tempus higher education programmes. EU Special Representative for Human Rights Lambrinidis hosted more than 40 civil society organizations to discuss Egypt's transition, including issues such as human rights, NGO registration, freedom of assembly, trafficking, police methods, media freedom, and Internet freedom. During the period when the SCAF was running the country, Egyptian Human Rights organizations and NGOs had suffered a curtailment of their rights, activities and funding which the EU and its member states proved unable to counter.

After Mursi was elected, many Egyptian activists criticized the EU for being too eager to forge a working relationship with his new administration and reluctant to confront

³⁸ http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_data/docs/pressdata/en/foraff/133513.pdf

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continuing human rights abuses. For its part the EU seems to have been anxious not to appear prejudiced against working with the Islamists, since they were the people's choice. Task Force efforts to promote civil society appeared not to make much difference, especially when Mursi subsequently introduced a new law to constrain NGO activities. EU objections to this, including a plea from Angela Merkel directly to Mursi to tone it down, were not successful, but the government was not penalized. In practice the 'more for more' principle could also mean 'more for less' in cases where keeping access to the government was deemed more important than defending its critics. Once Mursi had been ousted, the Sisi government cracked down even more harshly. When the 'G8 Forum for the Future' met in Cairo in December 2013, NGOs were barred from attending, for the first time since it had started to incorporate civil society groups at its meetings.

In retrospect it looked as though HR/VP Ashton and other senior officials began to assume that the relative ease of access they enjoyed with the Mursi administration, in contrast to the SCAF and the Sisi government, gave them more influence than was actually the case. The EU is assiduous in recording all official visits, meetings, statements, injunctions, pledges and intentions. The net effect can be to give the impression of meaningful action, when all they are doing is publicizing their side of the story. When Mursi finally fell afoul of the senior military in Egypt, Ashton offered to mediate, but was rebuffed. When the Americans urged the EU not to call Mursi's ouster a 'coup', the EU concurred.

Libya

The crisis in Libya, brought on by the determination of the Qaddafi family to crush all those who had risen up in the name of reform, produced a range of reactions in Europe. As violence erupted across parts of Libya and a rebellion surfaced in Benghazi, on 26 February 2011 the UN Security Council imposed sanctions on members of the Qaddafi regime. On 28 February EU governments approved a package of sanctions against Qaddafi and his closest advisers including an arms embargo and bans on travel to the EU. Beyond these measures, however, there was no consensus in the EU.

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Within days of an announcement by the Libyan National Council in Benghazi that it was the sole representative of Libya, on 10 March 2011 French President Sarkozy took the unilateral step of recognizing the opposition body, without even consulting the French Foreign Minister, let alone other Europeans. Sarkozy and British Prime Minister David Cameron took the lead in calling for more vigorous action and imposition of a no-fly zone to contain the Libyan government reprisals against the rebels. The German government opposed military intervention. International tensions mounted as Qaddafi launched a land offensive against the rebellious town of Benghazi in mid-March.

On 17 March the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 1973, to impose a no-fly zone over Libya and permit resort to force to protect Libyan civilians against attack. Germany, serving on the UN Security Council at the time, opted to abstain. Other international players were also divided on what to do. South Africa voted for Resolution 1973, but Brazil and India were against, and in due course the African Union became critical of the way the British and French used the Resolution as cover for a campaign that went beyond a strict interpretation of the UN mandate to protect civilians. China was opposed from the start, and Russia reacted angrily to the way the Europeans and Americans took charge of the military campaign and pressed their advantage once Qaddafi was eventually toppled. One of the legacies of the Libya crisis was that both Russia and China subsequently prevented the adoption of a resolution on Syria along the same lines as that adopted on Libya.

In Italy senior political figures were initially divided on what to do, not least because Italy was so dependent on energy supplies from Libya and had invested heavily in the Libyan economy. Once it became clear that Qaddafi was beyond redemption, the Italians, as well as the Turks, toyed with the idea of offering the Libyan leader a safe exit, even as the British and French advocated bringing him before the International Court in The Hague. Eventually, Italy and Turkey committed to supporting the Libyan opposition. The members of the Arab League, having called for international action to counter Qaddafi, subsequently adopted different approaches, with Qatar taking the lead in recognizing the Libyan National Council – subsequently the National Transitional Council (NTC) – and agreed to purchase oil directly from it.

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Disarray best describes the stance of the EU member states on the Libyan crisis. Initially, as violence engulfed the country, the task of evacuating foreign nationals was pursued without coordination. The Chinese had tens of thousands of workers in need of rescue and set about the task on their own. Individual European states struggled with logistics and requisitioning civilian transport to repatriate their nationals. Egyptian and other Arab and African nationals working in Libya swarmed to the airports, ports and borders, in scenes of desperation and chaos.

The military operation to intercept the Libyan forces' advance on Benghazi began with air attacks on 19 March 2011. Finding the US side reluctant to take a decisive lead, the French and British found themselves at the forefront, although heavily dependent on US firepower to deliver on their objectives. They decided to give charge of the operations to NATO. Not all NATO members were to participate in the operations, however. Of all the EU member states only Britain, France, Denmark and Belgium participated with the USA in targeting Libyan forces. Spain, the Netherlands, Greece, Sweden and Italy took part in the air operations but did not mount attack missions. As the campaign wore on, it was the UK and France that eventually dared to attack Libyan regime targets, but they incurred criticism for neglecting to protect pro-regime as well as other civilians in the process.

Having agreed to impose sanctions and an arms embargo in February, the EU took a while to come up with any further measures. For this the EU as such can hardly be blamed, given the absence of consensus among its members – which demonstrates just how constrained the EU can be as an international actor. In any case, erring on the side of caution, HR/VP Ashton declared that the EU position must be limited to neutral humanitarian support. In early March she sent a senior diplomat to Benghazi to establish contact with the NTC and subsequently sent a fact finding mission to Tripoli. By the time the EU finally came up with a detailed initiative, at the end of March, the momentum had already passed to the coalition operating under the NATO umbrella.

The European Council decision of 1 April 2011 was for 'a European Union military operation in support of humanitarian assistance operations in response to the crisis

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situation in Libya (EUFOR Libya)'.³⁹ The mission was to be for a period of four months, budgeted at EUR 7.9 million. For it to go into action, however, required a request from the UN's Office of Humanitarian Affairs – which never came. Germany was on board for EUFOR Libya, but Finland, Italy, the Netherlands, Sweden and the UK were critical – fearing that the operation would cut across and complicate existing NATO-coordinated air strikes. In other words, the EU as a body proved largely irrelevant in the initial stages of the Libya crisis. It came into its own when preparations began for the post-Qaddafi era, though again there were problems of coordination among member states.

On 13 July 2011, following a meeting with NTC Chairman Mahmoud Jibril, EU President Barroso issued a statement welcoming 'the vision' of the NTC for the future of Libya and announcing that the EU had already begun 'to mobilize our resources to support this political transition, in close cooperation with our international partners, especially the UN, and also the African Union and the Arab League'. Stressing that 'it is of course for our Libyan partners to define what they see as priorities' and that 'Libyan leadership, Libyan ownership are essential', he went on to say:

EU expertise with political transitions can play a key role: for instance support in the organization and supervision of free and fair elections; hands-on help with the creation of an effective administration and judiciary; support to the organization of the civil society and free media, all of which are vital for a stable country.⁴⁰

He also noted that the EU could be of help 'with the security sector reform and the design of macro-economic policies' and underlined that: 'The EU is by far the largest donor of humanitarian aid in and around Libya. Our support so far is worth EUR 140 million (EUR 80 million come from European Commission).' The thrust of Barroso's

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http://www.europarl.europa.eu/meetdocs/2009_2014/documents/sede/dv/sede240511cd2102011/_sede240511cd2102011_en.pdf

⁴⁰ http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_SPEECH-11-521_en.htm

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statement was very much in keeping with the line adopted by the EU on the transitions in other parts of the Arab world.

Qaddafi finally met his demise on 20 August. Presented with an array of offers of support, from the EU, the USA, Qatar, Turkey, various EU member states, the NTC declined the offer of a UN stabilization or protection force, asking instead for a UN technical mission.⁴¹ According to Guma El-Gamaty of the NTC, they were blessed with a range of detailed plans provided by the UN, the Americans and the British for how to proceed with state building, but lacked the capacity – the basic institutions – to implement any of the proposed measures on the ground.⁴² Moreover, the fall of Qaddafi was followed by skirmishes among competing factions and militia; in retrospect, insufficient effort was placed on disarming the militia quickly. As multinational companies returned to Libya, they actually employed competing militia to provide their personnel and operations with security. Libyans accused such companies of a grab for Libyan resources.

For its part, the EU's EEAS representatives decided that EU support to Libya should be channelled through the UN. They set great store by pursuing diplomatic efforts to persuade India, Brazil and China to re-engage. Sidelined in the military campaign phase of Libya's transition, the EU was intent on building a multinational programme for the rebuilding of Libya. However, other players were not listening. The UN, meanwhile, reduced its presence in the country and did not provide leadership. The EU nonetheless went ahead, initiating various programmes for emergency aid, support for the NTC in setting up an interim government, rebuilding the health and education sectors, civil society groups, vocational training, and the reintegration of militia members into the workforce.⁴³

Among EU member states, France and the UK were the most engaged, but others also offered technical assistance. Italy's contribution notably included technical help with border and migration control – providing a reminder that that aspect of

⁴¹ Youngs, pp.178–9.

⁴² Speaking at a meeting on Libya at the European Council on Foreign Relations London office on 31 March 2011.

⁴³ Youngs, pp. 179–80.

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European thinking on the Mediterranean was still a key consideration. Yet this was the period of austerity in Europe, and EU member states simply could not muster the amount of cash required to rebuild a country overnight. They looked to the Gulf states to do that, while the Libyans themselves tended to believe that their own oil wealth should be sufficient, but lacked the capacity to manage the energy sector for the national good, as sectoral interests began to compete for revenue streams.

The first Libyan elections in 2012 went off smoothly, and fears that Islamists would win a majority proved unwarranted. Consequently, through 2012 the EU was still operating on the assumption that development support could be delivered through the usual ENP mechanisms. However, one effect of the presence of Islamist groups alongside tribal groupings in Libya was to engender suspicion of Western and multinational motives in the rebuilding of the country. The fact that civil society groups proliferated was also not necessarily a positive sign, since it was almost impossible to tell which ones could be relied upon to act accountably and use the funds disbursed to them for the intended purposes. In short, the task of rebuilding a state from scratch in Libya proved too big for the elected government or the EU and its member states to manage, in the face of competing interests and disunity among the Libyans.

Conclusions

Judging the EU by its own rhetoric and initiatives, the desire to help the Tunisians, Egyptians and Libyans transit to democracy was genuine. However, as discussed here and in other chapters, the main drivers of events in all these countries were indigenous. There was only so much that any outside bodies, however well-endowed with skilled personnel and resources, could do to influence developments – short of occupation, and that was neither wanted nor on offer.

Equally, the EU member states could not abandon their own security agendas, and had become accustomed to mixing their aid policies with ever more complex deals and arrangements for controlling migration flows and combatting terrorism. These structures had developed in parallel with their reform policies and sometimes undermined them.

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The EU was also limited in terms of how much money it could spend and how quickly, not only by its own bureaucratic procedures, but also in terms of limited capacity on the receiving end. Had the EU been able to deploy really nimble, flexible small teams of technical experts with money to spend immediately and the ability (and language capabilities) to work on the ground, at the civil society as well as the government level, that might have proven more effective more quickly than the slowly grinding Brussels bureaucratic machine that devises the 'instruments' through which aid is disbursed.

However, the EU is captive to its own Neighbourhood Policy, with its Action Plans, statistical measurements, budgeting cycles, and distant promises of 'harmonization' with the internal market leading to economic rewards in the long run. This is a highly cumbersome machine for running relations with the neighbours, and the EEAS diplomats cannot exercise much initiative or flexibility outside the structure that binds the EU machine. Senior EU officials also have to make their mark and compete with their peers to gain access to foreign leaders, and may end up concentrating on announcements and visits more than strategy and content.

The EU is also a mindset as well as a machine. Initial talk by the EU of wanting to 'partner' the Tunisians, Egyptians and Tunisians in realizing their aspirations was presumptuous, not to say naïve; so was the assumption that the EU was uniquely qualified, by its experience of incorporating new member states into the fold, to help those outside. That experience was only very partially relevant, given that neighbouring countries were never going to be embraced within the European family.

Nor did the Arab states want to be thus embraced. They were and remain keen to realize their aspirations within their own polity and culture. Their history of being on the receiving end of European imperialism has left a legacy. Rather than chafing at this sensitivity about interference, the EU appears to have grasped the limits of its own potential in the context of the Arab Spring and opted for an approach that, while disappointing and somewhat disingenuous, was at least not overbearing or downright damaging.