



High-level lectures on the Neighbours of the EU's Neighbours

Egypt, Morocco, Syria and their neighbours in the context of the Arab democratic revolutions: Taking stock of recent developments and regional repercussions

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Vers un échec des révolutions démocratiques arabes?

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Le conflit syrien et ses répercussions régionales

Abdallah SAAF, professeur à l'Université Mohammed V-Agdal de Rabat
Le Maroc en transition et son environnement régional

Summary of the high-level lectures, Department of EU International Relations and Diplomacy Studies, College of Europe, Bruges, 19.9.2013

This roundtable of high-level lectures was the last event in a series of conferences in 2012-13 which, with the financial support of the European Commission, were devoted to the 'neighbours of the EU's neighbours' (www.coleurope.eu/neighbours).

The concept of the 'neighbours of the EU's neighbours' was introduced by the European Commission in 2006 in a Communication on 'strengthening the European Neighbourhood Policy' (ENP), and refers mainly to countries in Saharan Africa, the Middle East and Central Asia (COM(2006) 726). The high-level lectures focussed on the recent (r)evolutions in the EU's neighbours and their potential regional impact in a broad sense.



The Rector of the College of Europe **Jörg Monar** welcomed the many participants to the conference, before **Sieglinde Gstöhl**, Director of the Department of EU International Relations and Diplomacy Studies, introduced the high-level speakers. The roundtable was moderated by **Erwan Lannon**, professor in the Department of EU International Relations and Diplomacy Studies. He underlined the constitutional duty for the EU to develop "privileged relations" with its neighbours

(Article 8 Treaty on European Union). At the same time new bridges between the ENP countries and their neighbours or neighbouring regions should be created. He also stressed the need to reconsider the so-called ‘deep democracy criteria’ introduced by the 2011 revision of the ENP.

As first speaker **Álvaro de Vasconcelos** provided an overview of the recent developments in the Arab Mediterranean region before he focused in particular on the situation in Egypt. He contextualised the current developments as a continuation of the democratisation wave that started in 1974 in Portugal, but halted during the 2000s, inter alia due to the events of 11 September and the subsequent policies of the Bush administrations. Having now regained momentum, Álvaro de Vasconcelos noted that the events of the Arab Spring showed that there was no incompatibility between democracy and the Arab world, as Samuel Huntington suggested, although he acknowledged that the democratic transitions in the Arab countries will have plenty of ‘ebbs and flows’.



He identified four different types of situations in the Mediterranean: countries in a democratic transition, including Egypt and Tunisia; regimes that violently repressed the uprisings such as Libya and Syria; monarchies undertaking democratic reforms, for example Morocco and Jordan; and countries like Algeria, Lebanon and Palestine where nothing really changed. Also in the Gulf countries Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Qatar no reforms were implemented. However, the democratic revolution in Bahrain, which was violently

repressed with the military support of Saudi Arabia, showed that there was no correlation between monarchies and the absence of revolutions. Referring to the situation in Egypt, Álvaro de Vasconcelos identified four reasons for the failure of the transition so far: the role of the ‘deep state’ and the army; the polarisation of society between Islamists and Liberals; the distinction between ‘revolutionary legitimacy’ (those who actually did the revolution) and ‘parliamentary legitimacy’ (those who won the elections); and finally, the impossibility of the Muslim Brotherhood to govern and to implement reforms in a climate of economic crisis while failing to realise that ‘parliamentary legitimacy’ did not suffice. Expressing a negative opinion about the coup of the army in the country, he stressed that democracy was not possible in Egypt without the Muslim Brotherhood, since this would mean a return to the old power structures and the neglect of a large portion of the Egyptian population.

Turning to Tunisia, Álvaro de Vasconcelos pointed at the main differences between the Tunisian and Egyptian situation, such as the role of the army, the attitude of the Islamist ruling party (Ennahda) towards the secular movement and the will of the Tunisian people to reach consensus. He highlighted the challenges that Tunisia must face to overcome the current situation. He also addressed the instable situation in Tunisia’s neighbouring countries, mainly Libya and Algeria. Moreover, he criticised the insufficient role of the EU and called for greater European involvement in the country.

In an emotional and lively intervention, **Salam Kawakibi** denounced the passive role of the international community regarding the rising number of victims in Syria caused by the al-Assad regime over the past months. He tried to demystify some of the often heard assumptions about Syria, questioning not only the secular and socialist nature of the regime, but also the nature of the ruling Alawite minority.

His intervention then focused on the influence of neighbouring countries on Syria. First, he pointed to the Gulf states and the fact they need the support of external powers to ensure their stability. Besides, Salam Kawakibi reminded that these countries should not be regarded as unitary actors; other (non-state) actors may support and finance Jihadist groups in Syria, which the ruling elite cannot oppose without risking domestic mayhem in their own countries. Second, in spite of the distance between Shiites and Alawites, he described the relationship between Iran and Syria as a ‘marriage of convenience’, in which both benefit from each other, while at the same time the relationship could be terminated any time. He also criticised the negative stance of the EU vis-à-vis Iran and its refusal to further engage with Iranian leaders. The speaker then turned to Turkey, arguing that the strong ties that existed between Presidents Erdogan and al-Assad were not sufficient to prevent Turkey from turning against the latter’s regime. He regretted that Syria was the only foreign affairs issue not subject to consensus in Turkey, as the opposition (CHP) was instrumentalising it to attack Erdogan’s government.

The role of Russia as the long-lasting supporter of the al-Assad regime was also evoked. For Salam Kawakibi, an important reason that lead Russia to show such an unconditional support were its fear of democracy and of its own large Muslim population. Finally, the speaker discussed the importance of the role played by the United States in the conflict. For him, the real motivation for the US to consider intervening militarily in Syria was not the use of chemical weapons within the country, but a potential use of those weapons in Israel. Nevertheless, he noted that Israel might be more inclined to preserve al-Assad’s regime due to previous agreements assuring the respect of the 1967 borders. Salam Kawakibi concluded by arguing that the regime of al-Assad can claim its victory over the rebels in the short term. However in the long run, should the situation remain as it is right now, victory could be attributed to Jihadist groups and extremists.



The last speaker to take the floor was **Abdallah Saaf**, who addressed the transition in Morocco. He argued that many things were already changing before the Arab Spring. He also stressed the role of the Moroccan monarchy and the rapid response that it provided to the protestors by initiating a constitutional reform that, in his opinion, went beyond the protestors' demands. Abdallah Saaf acknowledged the difficulties that developing the new constitution entails, especially taking into account the perennial clash of views between Islamist and non-Islamists. He was confident that Morocco will succeed in its transition to democracy. For him, the path that the kingdom is taking is not a revolution as such, as is the case in other countries in the region, but is nevertheless quite a revolutionary process for the country.

Abdallah Saaf concluded by arguing that the regional factor was essential to understand the situation in every country. He referred, for instance, to the axis established between South Africa, Nigeria and Algeria and emphasised that Morocco decided to concentrate on Western Africa at political and economic levels. For him the monarchy-republic categorisation made earlier was not relevant; rather the two models to be considered in the Arab world are a model based on the containment of Islamists (Algeria, Egypt, Syria) and a model based on the inclusion of political Islam.

The high-level lectures were followed by a stimulating question and answer session with the audience and a reception.

Álvaro de VASCONCELOS is currently working at the Arab Reform Initiative. From 2007-2012 he was Director of the European Union Institute for Security Studies in Paris. He previously led the Institute for Strategic and International Studies in Lisbon, which he co-founded. He is the author of numerous books and articles on the CFSP and relations between the EU and the Mediterranean countries, including: 'La PESC: Ouvrir l'Europe au Monde', 'The European Union, Mercosul and the New World Order', and 'A European Strategy for the Mediterranean'. Álvaro de Vasconcelos is Chevalier of the order of the Légion d'Honneur (France) and 'Comendador do Ordem do Rio Branco' (Brazil).

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Abdallah SAAF is Professor at the Faculty of Legal, Economic and Social Sciences at Rabat Adgal, Morocco. From 2003-2006, he was responsible for the Department of Political and Social Development, Faculty of Legal, Economic and Social Sciences, Rabat, University Mohammed V. He was previously Minister of National Education (2000-2001), Minister for Secondary and Technical Education (1998-2000) and Dean of the Faculty of Legal, Economic and Social Sciences of Mohammedia (1996-1998). He has published extensively.