

# As mass protests return in Middle East and North Africa, Europe must rethink its approach

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*The Arab Spring began in Tunisia. [scossargilbert/Flickr]*

A decade on from the Arab Spring, it is clear that the EU's strategy of working with existing regimes in its Southern Neighbourhood has delivered neither stability and security nor any progress towards democratisation and government accountability. It is time to start listening to the word on the street, writes Dylan O'Driscoll.

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It is almost a decade since the death of 26-year-old Tunisian street fruit vendor Mohamed Bouazizi. His dramatic suicide is often seen as the trigger for the Arab Spring, a wave of pro-democracy uprisings, mass demonstrations and political upheavals across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA).

For optimists both inside and outside the region, it seemed like the long-awaited but inevitable transition to democracy was finally here. History had other plans.

## **Europe's response**

Like much of the international community, Europe responded to the developments in MENA by redoubling its calls for democratisation and transparent and accountable governance in the region.

But this rhetoric has not always been matched by adequate policies to empower forces of change or strengthen change processes. Instead, European countries' economic and diplomatic relations with many of the region's governments have gone largely unchanged.

That Europe prioritises stability and security when it comes to dealing with its 'southern neighbourhood' is understandable. The region is a major trading partner, and the EU hopes to negotiate a free-trade area.

On top of that, several MENA countries are key markets for European arms manufacturers, as well as major investors in Europe through their sovereign wealth funds. When it comes to security, the geopolitics of the region are complex and sensitive.

The question is whether shoring up the status quo is a viable strategy for the EU. Libya, Syria and Yemen are locked in civil wars that have taken a grim toll on their civilian populations. In most other parts of the region, the same regimes have held on to power, or leaders have changed, while the system has remained in place.

Only Tunisia is significantly more democratic than it was in 2010, and even there progress remains fragile.

While it is impossible to say what a different European approach might have delivered, the region is certainly not stable and is still linked to serious security threats to Europe.

There have also been heavy political costs. Not the least, by 2015, much of the public discourse in Europe had shifted from idealism to increasingly bitter disputes over how to deal with the growing numbers of MENA citizens seeking refuge from the region's wars and political repression.

## **A new opportunity**

Although the season has changed, discontent over social and economic inequalities and lack of political voice in MENA have not gone away, as the return of large-scale protests in several countries since 2019 has shown.

And other factors—especially climate change, water insecurity, demographics and the global move away from hydrocarbons—add new complications.

For better or worse, profound change is on the cards for states and societies in MENA, change that could have serious implications for security and stability.

This time around, Europe needs a new, revitalised approach. Or, rather, a set of new approaches tailored to the individual contexts of MENA countries. These could ideally be taken by the European Commission, the European External Action Service (EEAS) and its delegations in MENA countries and individual member states.

Four principles should guide this policy realignment.

*Rethink.* European approaches to MENA need a rethink, both overall and country by country. This rethink must be informed by a better understanding of the region today, and by a thorough review of past policies, their successes and failures, as well as how they have looked from the perspectives of MENA's governments and citizens.

It would therefore involve listening to a range of regional voices. The significance of the EU as an actor in MENA would be considerably increased if member states, through the EEAS, could reach a consensus on their approach to the region.

*Refocus.* The needs and expectations of MENA countries' populations should be the starting point for any new approach intended to achieve regional security and stability. This likely means questioning local elites' propensity to see every challenge as sabotage and instability. The EU's current tendency to view MENA in terms of security risks only acts as a self-fulfilling prophecy.

*Reform.* Trying to generate or lead change inside MENA countries from outside is not viable. But Europe can support positive developments, such as small steps towards greater transparency and dialogue.

*React.* The European approach must be responsive to the evolving needs and aspirations within the region. Given current trends, investment should prioritize economic diversification to ease the transition away from reliance on hydrocarbons, and that diversification should be geared towards environmental sustainability in order to address, rather than worsen, potentially destabilising environmental change.

Investment should also be targeted locally to tackle local issues, rather than through national governments.

With the COVID-19 pandemic, low oil prices and popular demand for change, governments in MENA may soon have little choice but to adapt. The EU and its member states are strategically well-placed to help guide these processes in a positive direction. But to do it successfully, they need a new playb

