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Putting a Face to Europe in North Africa: Why the EU needs a Special Representative to respond to the Arab Spring

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The European Union and its member states continue to struggle to find a response to the Arab Spring. Surprised by the force of events that unrolled on their front porch, spreading from Tunisia across North Africa and the Middle East, the EU has since been digging through its toolbox. Past policy approaches had little impact on the area's regimes, if anything doing more to support them than reform them. So it makes sense that the EU is now looking to counter its lack of credibility with the new movements and powers of reform in the southern Mediterranean area by strongly reorienting its policies. To this end, the EU should utilize one of its established and successful foreign policy instruments and name an EU Special Representative (EUSR) for North Africa.

The Special Representative— An Old Model that Still Works

Since their introduction about a decade and a half ago the EUSRs have made a significant, though often unnoticed, contribution to building an active and integrated EU foreign policy. They have established themselves as important contacts for non-EU countries and partner organizations while taking over the coordination of important European activities in the field. In the sensitive domain of European foreign policy, in which member states continue to be the most important actors and where collective positions require both distinctive political will and delicate adjustment, they have profited from being out of the spotlight and thus being able to work in peace.

In the past few years however, these Special Representatives have been caught in the firing line over the course of developing the European External Action Service (EEAS).² The EU's High Representative, Catherine Ashton, threatened in June 2010 to allow a number of mandates to run out because their duties would henceforth be taken over by the EEAS in accordance with the Lisbon Treaty. In fact, in the meantime EU delegations in non-EU states have formally come to cover all areas of EU foreign policy. Thus, one of the original reasons

for the deployment of the EUSR—to guarantee an EU foreign policy presence in addition to the Commission's representation—has since become moot. However, a large part of the foreign policy personnel in Brussels has come to a consensus that Special Representatives are still indispensable for regional crises or conflicts that concern Europe because they can provide real value for the EU. The February 2011 agreement regarding the phasing out of different mandates reached by Mrs. Ashton and the member states—after a lengthy conflict—is unfortunately inconsequential. While the duties of the previous EUSRs for Macedonia and Moldova could be taken over by the respective delegation leader, there is no comparable replacement within the EEAS for the abandoned mandates in the South Caucasus and for the Middle East peace process.

The dramatic upheavals in North Africa and their profound effects on the region raise the question: Does the EEAS have the capacity to support immediate and lasting developments toward democracy and economic and social stabilization for the foreseeable future? Doubts are beginning to mount since at this moment, when the course is being set, the EEAS and its delegations are still tasked with building up their presence in the region. Could a Special Representative for North Africa fill this role?

Conditionality Calls For A Presence

The European Commission in the meantime has developed some initial proposals for the realignment of the EU's North Africa policy. At the beginning of March 2011, the Commission submitted its first report under the title "A Partnership for Democracy and Prosperity in the Southern Mediterranean."³ A revision of the overall Neighborhood Policy followed in May 2011 with the report "A New Answer for a Changing Neighbourhood."⁴ In their report from March 2011, the Commission recommended that the EU place cooperation with countries in the southern Mediterranean on a qualitatively new level. The core areas are closer cooperation in the areas of building institutions, civil society, and support for socially sustainable economic growth. In addition, funds should be raised for the southern neighborhood policy—though only at a moderate pace—and new funding sources should be opened through the European Investment Bank (EIB), the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD), and through cooperation with non-EU countries and other organizations.

But this broad transformation approach hardly offers anything new. It can already be found in previous documents of the southern neighborhood policy. With their long established approach, the EU and its members have laid out a convincing model of promoting political, security, economic, and cultural cooperation—but only on paper. The problem until now has not been intention, but implementation. It is for this reason that the term "conditionality" has played a decisive role in the European debate over the past few months. Indeed, the EU has already made this the principle of its cooperation with partner countries in the past. In practice however, it has not been called for consistently. The principle of conditionality—changed to "mutual accountability" in the latest report from May 2011—should finally take effect. But the Commission's recommendations do not make clear how the sudden adjustment to conditionality should be brought about in practice. An EUSR with a strong presence in the region could be instrumental in this task.

What Kind of Mandate for a Special Representative for North Africa?

A Special Representative for the democratic uprisings in North Africa would fill the three criteria that apply for a re-authorization of and/or extension of a mandate.⁵

1. The upheavals in North Africa are a matter of cross-border developments in a region of strategic importance to the EU. The Union would be directly affected if the situation began to slide toward conflict.
2. The EU must cooperate with existing multilateral forums such as the Arab League, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), and the African Union (AU). The United Nations on the other hand has already appointed a Special Representative for Libya.⁶ NATO is also directly involved there. Especially if a common conciliatory proposal arises from this group, the EU needs to entrust someone with negotiating powers.
3. Finally, the EU has long-term interests in developments in this region beyond acute crisis management. It must therefore engage over the course of years and with a continuity of personnel instead of merely getting involved for a few weeks or months.

In order to accompany the protracted transformation processes and to influence them positively, a continuous presence on the ground—or at the very least intense travelling—are essential, as is a convincing policy approach. This is especially true in a region where personal interaction plays such a decisive role. The High Representative will not be able to accomplish this task on her own since she has an abundance of duties and is always facing deadlines and needing to make appearances. Even the managing director of the EEAS's North Africa and Middle East department, Hugues Mingarelli, who is very experienced in EU foreign and neighborhood policy, is working at full capacity to set up the department. The Task Force for the Southern Mediterranean called for by Catherine Ashton in June 2011—which includes representatives of the

EEAS, the Commission, the EIB, the EBRD, and other financial institutions—is quite sensible, but cannot replace the role of a trusted confidant. The High Representative should at least guarantee that the EUSR will take over the chairmanship of the Task Force in order to coordinate the new policy approach for North Africa among the multitude of actors involved.

An EUSR who commutes between North African countries and European capitals would offer a face for the future southern neighborhood policy both on location as well as within the EU. This continual presence would serve to build confidence between the EU and its (new) partners in North Africa—a quintessential buttress for a qualitatively new neighborhood policy. For it is with confidence that the feeling of “mutual accountability” called for by the EU can begin to arise. Since with the next Financial Perspective in 2014 an increase in funds for the southern neighborhood policy is not to be expected, it would be wise for the EU to underpin its sustained will for cooperation through this type of presence.

A further area where an EUSR could bring value is in the multilateral aspects of the neighborhood policy. It is a good decision for the EU to focus more on differentiation and bilateral cooperation in its promotion of transformation processes in the future. Indeed, the clearly unequal developments in North Africa and the Middle East since the beginning of the Arab Spring demand this. However, despite numerous criticisms of the errors of the multilateral Barcelona Process that was transformed into the Union for the Mediterranean in 2008, the EU needs to continue its attempts at multilateral cooperation. For it is because of the strong differences in Arab countries that it is important to maintain an additional common regional framework, at least in terms of its approach, to avoid further fragmentation in the region. There are a multitude of regional problems that have to be dealt with under a common framework (such as regional security questions, energy, and the protection of the environment). The EUSR could be a link between bilateral cooperation and the existing forums for multilateral cooperation, and if necessary promote regional ad-hoc cooperation.

In this context, the EUSR could maintain regular contact with the Arab League and the GCC. The League has a bad reputation, but two noteworthy things have happened in the last few weeks: The first was their support of the UN mandate for a military intervention in Libya, and the second was the quick agreement on a successor for current Secretary-General Amr Moussa, who has entered the presidential race in Egypt and who will be succeeded by the current Egyptian foreign minister Nabil al-Araby. This suggests that the League has maintained a certain room for maneuver despite the uprisings in the region, and the EU should use this. Concerning the GCC, the EU should lead an intense dialogue on where and how the EU and the GCC could work together in their response to the changes in North Africa, perhaps regarding the financing of projects.⁷ The Mediterranean Union, for example, is dedicated to procuring funds from non-EU countries and organizations.

Past experiences by the EUSRs have shown that a tailor-made mandate is essential if they are to work effectively. While the EUSR for North Africa would be affiliated with the EEAS and would have to chair the Task Force for the Southern Mediterranean, the High Representative should set clear goals so that the EUSR can bring added value without duplicating existing duties or responsibilities. This also means thinking about a sensible integration of a Special Representative for North Africa in the Union for the Mediterranean, in which the EEAS will play a larger role in the future. The Arab Spring brings a multitude of questions with it—and the EU does have in its tool box instruments that could help it respond, such as the EUSR. The Union need only grab for them.

The appointment of a Special Representative for the region would allow the EU to back up its proclamations of a realignment of its Mediterranean policies both personally and politically and allow it to credibly develop its intentions through a corresponding person. A Special Representative for North Africa would have to not only have experience in the region, but should frankly be an ex-politician who could interact with partners in the region at eye level. Ideally he or she would have credibility in the areas of transformation, democracy, and human rights

(it would be conceivable to have a former head of government or minister from Central or Eastern Europe). And their nationality would play a decisive role—why not send a representative from Sweden, Finland, or Poland who would not be hamstrung by old ties? The southern EU states are already well represented in the secretariat of the Union for the Mediterranean. And the last few months have shown

that North Africa can no longer be the pet project of the EU's Mediterranean states but requires answers from the whole of Europe.

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Notes

- 1 The authors would like to thank Olaf Böhnke and Dr. Sylke Tempel for their valuable suggestions in an earlier version of this text.
- 2 See Cornelius Adebahr, *Strategy, not Bureaucracy: The role of the EU Special Representatives in the European External Action Service* (DGAPanalyse kompakt No. 5), Berlin, July 2010.
- 3 See KOM(2011) 200 final, Brussels, March 8, 2011.
- 4 See KOM(2011) 303, Brussels, May 25, 2011.
- 5 See Cornelius Adebahr, *Working inside out: what role for Special Envoys in the European External Action Service?* (EPC Policy Brief), January 2011, p. 3.
- 6 Secretary-General of the United Nations, "Concerned about civilian casualties in Libya, Secretary-General urges end to disproportionate use of force, safety for all foreigners," SG/SM/13429, March 6, 2011.
- 7 Cf. Christian Koch, *The Arab spring is a real opportunity for Europe*, in: *Europe's World*, Summer Issue 2011 (forthcoming), p. 126–129.

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