

THE ARAB WORLD AND EUROPE – NEW CHALLENGES FOR THE UNION FOR THE MEDITERRANEAN

A major change is sweeping through the Arab world, moving from country to country. While national differences remain vast, the same slogans and demands are being heard everywhere: more freedom, more democracy and more individual rights for the citizens. Without knowing where it will end and what the Arab world will look like in the future, it is already time to ask what it means for Europe, and to Europe's relations with the region.

The first question: did this all come as a surprise or not? Most official reactions tend to lean toward the notion of surprise, perhaps to compensate for the unpreparedness of so many governments – even those geographically close to the area and with traditional links with their leadership.

But I would argue that the social and political situation had been clearly worsening for some time and had been becoming ever-more explosive in many Arab societies. Nobody would have been able to predict the snowball effect that would be set into motion when a young, unemployed Tunisian man who was banned from selling vegetables on the street set himself on fire in protest against the authorities on 16 December 2010. Such occurrences might normally have been ordinary police affairs – as they have been so many times before – only this time it was the straw that broke the camel's back.

The fact that then-President Ben Ali's regime reacted to the spontaneous demonstrations with plain violence, treating the youngsters as if they had been manipulated into terrorism and were Islamic agents, only made things worse. And this was still the story high-ranking Tunisian officials were trying to sell to foreign diplomats in the final hours before the departure of Ben Ali.

Clearly, the only effect this hard-ball attitude had was in unmasking the true nature of the



© Christophe Ena/AP/SIPA
Protestors shout slogans during a demonstration in Tunis driven by anger over joblessness, corruption and repression.

regime. The rapid tempo of the events and the extraordinary mobilisation of young Tunisians came certainly as a surprise, but ultimately the tragic event served only to ignite the already volatile powder keg.

Young people in many places around the world (though here in particular we are speaking about North Africa) are living in a rather desperate situation. They go to school, they learn all the basic, required knowledge and are growing up much more educated than before; many go to universities, learn new skills and gather a wider understanding of the world. They are aware of all the possibilities the 21st century can offer individuals.

Yet too many are condemned to unemployment – to make their way in life through humiliating, low-paid and temporary jobs, preventing them from planning a normal, decent adult life.

It is still unclear what the unemployment figures are, but I believe it is much higher than the 20-30% frequently quoted. In fact, when President Nicolas Sarkozy proposed his idea about

* Risto Veltheim is Finland's Roving Ambassador to Algeria and Senior Official of Finland for the Union for the Mediterranean

enhanced Euro-Mediterranean cooperation in the form of a Union for the Mediterranean (UfM), unemployment was one of the strongest arguments in going ahead with the idea: if we are unable to create some 20-25 million jobs by 2020, the number of unemployed will rise to intolerable amounts, augmenting the risk of social explosion and encouraging illegal migration.

The only durable way to pursue enhanced Euro-Mediterranean cooperation, though, is to attract more investment, particularly from Europe and European companies. This issue had been on the agenda of the Barcelona process since its beginning in 1995, but with few results on the ground. The southern countries had pleaded for enhanced Euro-Mediterranean cooperation in all major meetings related to economic and industrial cooperation, but the answer of the Europeans was always the same: the governments do not command flows of investment or the decisions of the companies. The southern partners were advised that they must take care of the investment climate themselves and create conditions lucrative enough for potential investors.

But the North African markets are seen as small, fragmented and rather complicated to penetrate, so many companies prefer to make productive investments instead in Asia, the Far East or even Latin America, rather than their near-neighbourhood across the Mediterranean sea. So the many inter-regional free trade agreements the EU has signed with these regions have only served to boost this tendency.

Thus the basic idea behind the UfM was to involve the private sector more closely in the development of the region by creating new investment opportunities in the form of public-private partnerships on the southern side of the Mediterranean. Already the first documents produced for the Paris Summit identified sectors

where promising initiatives would – with a little bit of imagination and a little push from the governments – be transformed into “bankable” business opportunities and joint ventures. Renewable energy, the environment, traffic, transport, civil protection, and higher education were all seen as priorities.

Unfortunately, the UfM has been hindered by unexpected political obstacles and its building-up has remained way behind schedule. The political leaders of the 43 countries who launched the UfM, in a solemn declaration, expected the first UfM-labelled projects to get underway quickly; no project has yet seen the light of the day.

In fact, the political dimension of the UfM has been constantly paralysed by the deadlock in the Middle East Peace Process. The UfM Summit, which was due to be held in 2010, has been cancelled twice. The Foreign Ministers have not been able to meet since December 2008 (during the previous Israeli administration). This year, no senior official meeting has been held yet due to the turbulent events in various southern partner-countries.

Some of the problems may be seen as “acute” – related to the situation of the day. But in the long run we have to ask ourselves the question: will the new governments in the Arab World, with a stronger voice from the Arab Street and with the likely participation of Islamist movements, be more willing to engage in institutional cooperation with Israel, especially if settlement building in the West Bank and East Jerusalem continues as it does today?

My assessment is, that if the Peace Process in the Middle East is not back on track soon, the construction of the Union for the Mediterranean, with all the high-level expectations it created in 2008, will be skating on a thin ice.

The opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the EUISS