# *The European Union and the "Arab Spring": An Assessment* – An Interview with Saïda Bédar

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**The European Union's response to the wave of protests in the Arab world in 2011 – what came to be known as the "Arab Spring" – appeared inadequate, as it focused primarily on European security concerns, particularly the management of migration flows and the protection of borders. Could you outline the other aspects of the EU's policy?**

The European response consisted of three main pillars. The political pillar was marked by significant internal disagreements. After a period of hesitation, support was eventually given to the transition in Tunisia. However, in Libya, the military intervention – carried out without any plan for political transition – proved problematic. France and the United Kingdom led this initiative, later joined within a NATO operation by Belgium, Denmark, the Netherlands, Italy, Spain, and Sweden. Greece, Bulgaria, and Romania provided naval support. Italy initially showed reluctance, while Germany remained opposed, abstaining from the vote on UN Resolution 1973.[1] The remaining EU countries did not take a clear stance, and the security-humanitarian operation announced by the EU in April 2011, "EUFOR Libya," was never implemented due to a lack of agreement. At the time, Berlin warned its allies about the potentially destructive effects of such an intervention – not only for Libyan society and state structures, but also for other protest movements in the Arab world, as fears of Western interventionism could have a clear deterrent effect.

As for the idea of a military intervention in Syria targeting the Assad regime, only France advocated for it – even refusing to bomb Islamic State positions after the January 2015 attacks on *Charlie Hebdo* and the *Hyper Cacher*, so as not to benefit the pro-regime Syrian forces. The EU supported the Syrian political process, particularly through backing negotiations within the framework of the International Support Group for Syria. In Egypt, Europeans supported the nascent democratization process but failed to rationalize their political stance in response to the rise to power of the Islamists, followed by Marshal Sisi's coup d'état and his repressive policies (targeted assassinations of opponents, enforced disappearances, torture in prisons, swift justice, control of the media and the associative sector, etc.). In Bahrain, the EU merely called for national dialogue and for the fulfillment of the "legitimate demands of the Bahraini people" through the implementation of reforms, but

[1] The resolution of March 17, 2011 authorized intervention to enforce the ceasefire and establish a "no-fly zone," but NATO's operation somewhat exceeded this mandate by destroying the military capabilities of Gaddafi's regime in favor of the rebel forces.

it became directly involved in the conflict resolution process in Yemen, notably by providing technical support to the UN special envoy.

The humanitarian dimension remains central to the EU's policy to support Arab countries that experienced protests followed by a difficult transition to pluralism (Tunisia) or civil war (Libya, Syria, Yemen). Aid is primarily directed toward displaced persons and refugees – 9 million Syrians, 2.4 million Yemenis, 860,000 Libyans (2015 UNHCR figures). Financial and technical assistance for hosting refugees in the region is complemented by a policy of hosting some of the refugees within EU countries who cross the Mediterranean via Libya or Turkey – 853,000 arriving in Greece and 154,000 in Italy in 2015. This humanitarian component is inevitably coupled with a security component, insofar as the management of refugee flows involves sea rescue operations and the fight against human trafficking, as well as cross-border regulation (in force since 2004 through the Frontex system).

A major component of the EU's policy remains institutional, through the strengthening of its European Neighborhood Policy (ENP), which aims to promote democratization via direct economic assistance, access to European markets (through free trade agreements, with the establishment of a Euro-Med Economic Area by 2030), enhanced cooperation agreements, and the facilitation of citizen mobility from the "neighborhood" into the EU. Although the ENP is not as effective as the enlargement process enjoyed by Eastern and Balkan European countries, it nonetheless represents an instrument to support transitions by encouraging economic reforms that may lead to gradual political openings, and by promoting the peaceful resolution of conflicts. Following the 2011 uprisings, the EU bolstered this framework with instruments for direct support to the civil society sector — namely, the Civil Society Facility and the European Endowment for Democracy.

From these three pillars, we get a policy whose coherence remains limited by two main factors: 1) Persistent and often irreconcilable political divisions (notably regarding military interventionism and reception of refugees); 2) The cumbersome and indirect nature of EU foreign policy-making — due to complex arbitration between the Commission and the Council, bureaucratic and legal intricacies, and the impact of related public policies (energy, environment, defense).

**This European approach, which might be referred to as a form of *soft power*, proved largely ineffective in supporting the Arab Spring. But can it have more positive effects in the long term?**

Rather than speaking of *soft power* [2] in the case of the EU, it would be more accurate to refer to "civilian power" – a concept developed by François

[2] *Soft power*, as defined by American political scientist Joseph Nye, refers to a set of intangible, non-violent tools (cultural, moral, political influence, normalization through "agenda setting") used to co-opt actors rather than coerce them, and which is combined with *hard power* (coercive tools, whether violent or non-violent, such as economic sanctions).

Duchêne, advisor to Jean Monnet. The notion of civilian power includes, alongside diplomacy and trade, a normative and legal (even ethical) dimension, which is central not only to the EU's internal construction, enlargement, and association processes, but also to its crisis and conflict management strategies. The idea is to distance Europe from the specter of war, while promoting a mode of conflict resolution that avoids the use of force whenever possible. By contrast, *soft power* is merely a tool serving state power; when combined with *hard power*, it is meant to produce the most efficient policy (known as *smart power*). Civilian power, on the other hand, is not an instrument, but a posture: post-national, rooted in a political will to compensate for the impotence of European states taken individually, as well as for the destabilizing effects of great-power military interventionism.

The Treaty of Maastricht (1992) created a common foreign and security policy, subordinating national interests to higher norms (rule of law and ethical standards). The Treaty of Lisbon (2008) created the position of High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (held by Catherine Ashton, then Federica Mogherini), with the rank of Vice-President of the Commission. This role coordinates and leads the EU's foreign and common security policy, now integrated and strengthened by the establishment of a European Union Military Staff, created in June 2011.The European External Action Service (EEAS) streamlines EU external actions and aims to enhance its global influence – 139 Commission delegations now serve as EU embassies. As a result, non-European states have established powerful diplomatic representations in Brussels, concentrating their lobbying and influence efforts there. The EU's experience in the Western Balkans – including the Stabilization and Association Process launched in 1999, the "Althea" peacekeeping operation in Bosnia and Herzegovina since 2004, state-building assistance in Kosovo (2000–2008), and Serbia's accession process (initiated in 2009) – helped to build and legitimize the EU's normative and peace-building capacity, both in the eyes of Europeans and the international community.

The Union surpasses its Member States in terms of its ability to: build institutions; adopt and export the rule of law; seek international partners; create and promote norms; take a proactive stance using graduated coercion (justice, economic sanctions, law enforcement, and military response as a last resort). The handling of the Iranian nuclear dossier demonstrated that the EU has become the leading European power-actor. Indeed, while France and the UK – both members of the UN Security Council (P5) – were not seen as neutral due to their national interests and ideological biases (with historical Iranian distrust of the British especially strong), and Germany lacked sufficient political weight, only the EU was in a position to balance the influence of the US, Russia, and China.

Contrary to the most widespread analyses, it is neither an increase in European military resources (independent of NATO), nor a move toward

political federalization, that gives the EU's diplomacy its strength[3]. Instead, its international legitimacy stems from its normative capacities, multilateralism, values, and goals of regional integration and transregional association. In this light, it becomes clear that the EU can indeed play a meaningful role and exert significant influence during transition phases in Arab countries, especially those within its neighborhood. As a civilian, pluralistic, normative, and inclusive power, the EU has been built through a long institutional process – evolving from treaties and intergovernmentalism toward a more assertive and decision-making executive – but also through practice (targeted socially effective action), particularly via interaction with its neighbors. However, to exert such influence over its neighbors and partners, the EU must expand its economic and political offer linked to normative conditionality. If the three major concerns of the countries on the southern shore of the Mediterranean – agriculture, migration, and the creation of a common production and job-generating area – are not part of negotiations, regimes in the region will continue to dismiss the EU's Neighborhood Policy. It is difficult to ask authoritarian regimes to reform if, in return for liberalization (economic, legal, social, and health-related standards), they are not offered substantial support to address their impoverished and unemployed populations.

**How can we explain the failure of the Arab Spring? Is it due to a lack of support from the European Union and the international community, or to geopolitical rivalries? What are the structural causes?**

Indeed, the Arab Spring movements were doomed to fail, not only because they were poorly organized or insufficiently supported, but also because, structurally, they were mere protest movements, symptomatic of an ongoing socio-historical transition, but not genuine social revolutions capable of reshaping the entire system.

The current picture is bleak: Tunisia saw the fall of a dictatorship, but now faces a dire socio-economic situation with unprecedented levels of poverty and unemployment, along with a jihadist threat on its borders; Libya is mired in civil war, with three competing governments, dozens of militias, and a major city once controlled by the Islamic State; Egypt is once again under authoritarian rule; Syria's civil war has spilled into Iraq; the Kurdish-Turkish conflict has been reignited; Yemen is engulfed in a protracted civil war.

The stakes in the region are so high that it has become nearly impossible for the international community to adopt a unified stance. The EU may impose sanctions on repressive regimes, the US may suspend its military aid, but this has little impact if Gulf States step in to fund these regimes. A potential US/Europe/Russia/Iran coalition could intervene directly in Syria to combat jihadist factions, but it is hindered by the financial and logistical support that certain Gulf countries provide to these groups. These states wish to maintain

[3] This is, among others, the thesis of Zaki Laïdi in *Norms without Force: The Enigma of European Power*, Fondation Nationale des Sciences Politiques, 2005).

influence over actors in the Levant and oppose any democratic experiment (which would inevitably be part of a political settlement to the conflict). Meanwhile, Türkiye does not want an autonomous Kurdish-PKK entity on its border.

These geostrategic factors only add further complexity to the issue of transition, which, ultimately, must find answers within Arab societies themselves. The experience of the Arab Spring teaches us that — aside from a handful of regional actors (monarchies fearing their own downfall, or Türkiye facing its national question) — no rational actor has any interest in promoting a violent social rupture that would dismantle the established order and lead to chaos. The real challenge is to foster reform while preserving state continuity – in terms of territorial control, population protection, and the maintenance of institutional instruments necessary for implementing reforms.

The difficulty in reforming a state dominated by an authoritarian and illegitimate regime lies in the fact that anti-democratic forces have become structurally entrenched. Personalized networks (clan-based, nepotistic) have infiltrated central power and maintain relations of co-optation and/or bargaining with informal clientelist power structures, contributing to the fragmentation of authority and state sovereignty. Behind the façade of strong states, dictatorial regimes preside over hollowed-out state institutions, which collapse rapidly in the event of external intervention. Clientelism and corruption permeate all levels of social relations, to the point where emerging elites, from the economic and cultural spheres, can no longer serve as viable alternatives or political relays. As a result, the economic liberalization policies promoted by international financial institutions in the 1990s and 2000s not only failed to produce the expected virtuous circle (i.e., the emergence of a middle class and private economic actors contributing to political decision-making), but rather reinforced predatory systems at the top of the state, encouraging the privatization of public assets by oligarchic leaders. In Egypt, for example, it is estimated that around 60% of the national economy is controlled by the military, leading some economists to refer to the phenomenon as "Military Inc."

**It is well understood that the "Arab Spring" was made up of poorly organized movements, but was it thought out in advance?**

The diverse and often fragmented nature of the movements involved in the “Arab Spring” makes it difficult to identify a coherent or unified intellectual foundation. The spectrum of currents represented — ranging from liberals to Islamists, including politically ill-defined protest movements (often corporatist) — inevitably reflects a debate undermined by political repression, lack of freedom of expression and interaction, and the decline of academic institutions and cultural life. The protest was certainly not merely an emotional reaction amplified by new social media, but neither was it a revolution conceptualized and led by intellectuals or charismatic leaders.

Historically, however, in the Arab world and more broadly in the Arab-Muslim world, there has been a nearly uninterrupted discourse on transition, which resurfaces at every moment of rupture: Western and Russian colonization (in the Arab world, the Caucasus, and Central Asia) in the 19th century; the fall of the Ottoman Empire and the caliphate at the beginning of the 20th century; decolonization in the mid-20th century; the Islamic revolution in Iran at the end of the 20th century. A vast intellectual corpus exists that addresses the question of the reconfiguration of social bonds, the role of religion, the reinterpretation of tradition, reform, and the management of socio-historical change.

This corpus would undoubtedly benefit from being revisited in order to foster a critical analysis of recent developments, and especially from being enriched by a new, transversal, multidisciplinary approach. Such an approach would make it possible to move beyond purely historiographical or anthropo-sociological analyses, particularly through the contribution of philosophy. In general, the human and social sciences tend to avoid the question of subjectivity. Yet this very question lies at the heart of the crisis in Arab-Muslim societies — insofar as it relates to the ethical underpinnings of social structures. Refocusing reflection on subjectivity could bring a new understanding of the difficulties in establishing political systems and social models freed from relations of domination. Civil wars, social conflicts resolved through recurrent outbreaks of violence, growing inequality and poverty — these cannot be fully understood within a framework limited to politics, history, and knowledge. The symbolic and the spiritual must be taken into account when thinking about crisis resolution and transition.

**For Arab countries, does the strategic relationship with the United States appear as an alternative to the relationship with Europe, which struggles to reach a strategic level?**

Under no circumstances can the relationship with the United States become an “alternative” to the relationship with Europe for the Arab world. For historical and geopolitical reasons—the “neighborhood” that potentially constitutes a shared space for co-development, the geostrategic continuums from the Mediterranean to the Black Sea, and from the Sahelo-Saharan belt to the Gulf—as well as to preserve the very possibility of having an alternative. The U.S. strategy of “regime change” through violent rupture, as seen in Iraq, has encouraged Arab countries to broaden and diversify their alliances and partnerships so as not to be dependent solely on relations with Washington.

The United States, like Europe, aims, in a way, to promote the option of democratic transition in the Arab world, insofar as it is the only option that would guarantee the stabilization and durability of their strategic gains and interests. Access and influence cannot be guaranteed solely by military power, and it is by combining their unmatched power in the techno-military domain with criteria of soft/smart power (cultural, diplomatic, and normative) that the United States believes it can maintain and develop its influence in the “Greater

Middle East" (from the Mediterranean to Central Asia). Their posture is preemptive, aiming to influence an inevitable process of regional transformation driven by globalization, the emergence of regional powers, and deepening integration of the region. In this sense, the idea of an American "disengagement" from the Middle East in favor of an Asian pivot is purely a misconception held by some European commentators. The Middle East is part of Asia for Washington (South West Asia), and regardless, the logic of geostrategic continuums no longer allows Asia to be dissociated from either the Middle East or Africa.

***— Interview conducted by the editorial staff***

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