Post-Arab Spring: way forward for the MENA region

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The Committee on Foreign Affairs adopted an own-initiative report by Brando BENEFEI (S&D, IT) on the post-Arab Spring: way forward for the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region.

The region that will be considered in this report is the Maghreb together with the Mashreq countries, thus comprising the Southern and part of the Eastern shores of the Mediterranean (Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Lebanon, Jordan and Syria). The aim of this report is to provide an assessment of the situation in these countries eight years after the Arab Spring, to identify trends and, especially, to assess the response by the European Union.

Insufficient progress

Members noted with concern that, eight years after the first upheavals, most of the legitimate aspirations of peaceful demonstrators for dignity, human rights and progressive social, economic and political reforms have still not been achieved in most countries. They are concerned about persistent and continuous violations of human rights and the rule of law and the persistence of a continued dire socio-economic situation in the region and, in particular, about the high levels of unemployment (affecting, in particular, women and young people) and social exclusion, which cause disillusionment and disenfranchisement on a large scale, especially among young people, making them more vulnerable to radicalisation.

In spite of considerable political and budgetary investments and ongoing political and economic outreach, the EU has not succeeded in acquiring real and concrete political and economic leverage, the impact of its policies remains limited and it is not perceived by the countries of the region as a game changer.

A stronger European commitment

Members called for a stronger commitment and firmer vision from the EU to enable it to become a more central player. The European institutions, its Member States as well as national development agencies are called on to strive to provide a unified European stance towards the region, focusing on our common interests, to ensure a single and coherent European strategy, in order to fulfil the EU’s full potential as a meaningful supporter of democratic, economic and social reforms.

Members supported the aspirations of all those in the MENA region, including the majority of young people, who want to establish free, stable, prosperous, inclusive, and democratic countries which respect their national and international commitments on human rights and fundamental freedoms.

In particular, the EU is invited to:

- engage with third country governments to end persistent and dominant control of state and economic resources and repressive laws and engage with the most vulnerable human rights defenders and civil society actors throughout the region;

- strongly support the EU's peace processes with a view to resolving conflicts in the MENA region;

- address the root causes of migration such as conflicts, environmental issues, extreme poverty and social exclusion and to re-orient political cooperation towards a more balanced and equal partnership with the MENA region, putting youth policies and investments towards local small and mediumsized enterprises (SMEs) at its heart;

- strengthen judicial cooperation programmes with partner countries in the region in order to promote the exchange of good practices and establish an effective legal arsenal in the fight against corruption;

- help its partners to address the root causes of radicalisation and open up new opportunities for young people, by strengthening cooperation with the MENA region and placing the population, and in particular young people, at the heart of this cooperation;

- secure adequate visibility for EU efforts and EU assistance and investment in the region by means of enhanced strategic communication, public diplomacy, people-to-people contacts, cultural diplomacy, cooperation in educational and academic matters, and outreach activities to promote the Union’s values;

- enhance its support to the countries more willing to advance on democratisation, the rule of law and respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms by using all the available financial tools at its disposal, from macro-financial assistance, through the European Neighbourhood Instrument, to the European External Investment Plan, as well as to the future Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI);

Members highlighted the importance of the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM), which is the only political forum that brings together the EU Member States and all the Mediterranean countries. They recalled the added value of parliamentary diplomacy and of the regular bilateral interparliamentary meetings which Parliament holds with its counterparts from the Southern Neighbourhood. They stressed that women can be powerful actors in the promotion and consolidation of peace, conflict resolution and stabilisation processes and supported a draft Euro-Mediterranean plan on inequality.

The report called on the Commission to act on Parliament's proposal to develop an ambitious Euro-Mediterranean Erasmus programme, separate from Erasmus+, and recalled its support for the financing of academic and vocational training programmes aimed at creating wide reserves of professional skills in the MENA region.

Lastly, Members called for renewed and intensive global cooperation to achieve a peaceful and lasting solution to the conflict in Syria.