

# The OSCE and the Arab Spring: Two years after

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This special issue comes almost two years after the momentous events began unfolding in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). The popular revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt, followed by reforms announced in Jordan and Morocco, all OSCE Mediterranean partners for co-operation, raised much early optimism in many OSCE quarters regarding both the change in the region and the reinvigoration of the four-decade old OSCE Mediterranean partnership.

The political attention paid in the OSCE to the MENA region and Mediterranean partnership throughout 2011 had probably never been higher. Many believed in the utility of the OSCE's toolbox and experience in support of democratic transition in the region and in the relevance of the organization's concept of cooperative and comprehensive security that emphasizes the inclusiveness and interdependence of the three security dimensions. The intensity and level of political dialogue between the OSCE and its Mediterranean partners has increased dramatically, with the OSCE Chairmanship, the Secretary General and other senior officials paying visits to the region and high-level representatives from partner countries being invited to address the OSCE decision-making bodies and relevant OSCE events.

Despite the fact that the Arab spring took everyone by surprise and despite rather different assessments of the situation in the MENA region by participating states, the OSCE was quick to respond to the historic developments with offers of support to its Mediterranean partners, varying from electoral assistance in the short term to police reform in the long run. In addition, the subsequent uprisings in Libya, Yemen, Bahrain and Syria and the overall 'wind of change' throughout the region renewed the old debate on the possible relevance for the Mediterranean of the CSCE/OSCE model of a broad regional framework for security and cooperation.

This OSCE's upbeat and proactive stance received, however, a rather subtle initial response by its Mediterranean partners. Given the fluidity of the situation in the countries concerned and the interim nature of the first post-revolutionary governments, their immediate reaction to international offers of support, including those by the OSCE, in particular in the domain of domestic political reform, was rather cautious. The interest in the OSCE proposals turned out to be stronger on the side of civil society. Consequently, the OSCE/ODIHR conducted training programmes on election observation and human rights monitoring for NGO representatives from Egypt, Tunisia and Morocco, and a big OSCE-Mediterranean Partners' Conference for Civil Society was hosted by the OSCE on the margins of the Ministerial Council meeting in Vilnius in December 2011.

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By now, fully-fledged governments are in place and new constitutions have been drafted in both Egypt and Tunisia. The two countries held their first ever free presidential and legislative elections, with the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly being invited to observe the Tunisian elections to the Constituent Assembly. Yet democratic progress is fragile, transition proves to be a long-term and uneven process faced with numerous political, economic, social and security challenges, its final outcome is far from clear, while the overall situation in the region remains volatile and uncertain.

In recent months, the OSCE Mediterranean partners have signalled a stronger interest in some of the activities proposed by the organization. This might be a promising development, corresponding to mutual interests, as a democratic, peaceful and stable Mediterranean is indispensable for the OSCE's vision of a free, democratic, common and indivisible Euro-Atlantic and Eurasian security community.

At the same time, the experience over the past almost two years has revealed the OSCE's own limitations when it comes to providing support to its partners. The nature of the OSCE Mediterranean partnership designed mainly as a diplomatic tool to interact with national governments, the need for the latter's formal request in order to provide practical assistance, and the requirement for an agreement by all participating States to carry out activities beyond the boundaries of the OSCE area, as well as the absence of the OSCE's presence on the ground in the MENA region, and limited financial and human resources, have all constrained the OSCE's engagement with the Arab spring.

What might then be practical ways to strengthen the OSCE Mediterranean partnership? How can the OSCE best support the aspirations of its Mediterranean partners and their people? How can the OSCE's assistance to them become more efficient and concrete, bringing timely and tangible results? Should the OSCE only respond to partners' needs or act more boldly in sharing its values and commitments?

And will the Mediterranean partners become more open and forthcoming to engaging with the OSCE and to the organization's support?

This special issue aims at contemplating these and other relevant questions. It comprises 13 articles, presenting voices from the MENA region, from partner organizations, and from within the OSCE, including participating States, the Parliamentary Assembly and OSCE executive structures.

Rita Marascalchi from the OSCE Secretariat analyses efforts taken by the OSCE in response to changes in the MENA region as well as the existing challenges that restrain any further development of the OSCE Mediterranean partnership, such as its current format and boundaries as well as the available resources.

Elizabeth Abela Hampel looks at the early stages of the OSCE Mediterranean partnership, starting from the inclusion of the Mediterranean Chapter into the Helsinki Final Act. She recalls that in those days nine Mediterranean countries (compared to the current six Mediterranean partners)

participated in CSCE meetings and suggests that following the Arab Spring some of those might again be re-engaged. The author describes further how the OSCE Mediterranean cooperation became institutionalized over the years and shares her views on possible new perspectives for cooperation at present.

Nathalie Tagwerker, Ruben-Erik Diaz-Plaja and Bernhard Knoll overview the OSCE engagement efforts in support of democratic transition in the MENA region, in particular those by ODIHR, and identify critical challenges for further consideration by the OSCE in its future work. The article contemplates whether the CSCE/OSCE model could be transferable to the MENA region, and whether the OSCE's tools could be used in the context of the MENA region. The authors argue for a measured approach for the OSCE's engagement in the Mediterranean.

Spencer Oliver, the Secretary General of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly, accentuates the importance of a comprehensive approach to security and the role of parliamentarians in promoting partnership with the Mediterranean. He calls for closer coordination with other inter-parliamentary bodies and argues for the establishment of one setting to bring European parliamentarians together with their colleagues from the MENA region.

Ambassador Ihor Prokopchuk, the Permanent Representative of Ukraine to the OSCE, writes in his capacity as the 2012 Chair of the OSCE Mediterranean Contact Group. He presents the Chair's vision and activities in enhancing political dialogue and developing practical and action-oriented cooperation with the OSCE Mediterranean partners.

Ambassador Colin Scicluna of Malta, a Mediterranean country itself and traditionally a strong champion of the OSCE Mediterranean partnership, calls for encouragement to be given to a new Libya to join the partnership and emphasizes the roles of ODIHR and RFOM in sharing the OSCE's expertise and experience with its partners. He also notes an idea of a Mediterranean security and cooperation organization based on the OSCE model, but points to a lack of regional appetite for such initiatives.

The Turkish Ambassador, Tacan Ildem, underlines the value of OSCE experience and expertise for the MENA region and outlines ways to maximize the efficiency of the OSCE's engagement with its Mediterranean partners. He in particular emphasizes the importance of patience and of an individual, demand-driven approach.

The Tunisian Ambassador to the OSCE, Samir Koubaa, describes the progress made since the beginning of the revolution in his country, including the holding of the first democratic elections to the Constituent Assembly, as well as political, economic, social and security challenges that Tunisia is facing in its aspirations of democratic transition. He also points to the role of the international community, including the OSCE, highlighting 'the appropriateness and credibility of the OSCE/MPC co-operation'.

Amine Ghali, representing Tunisian civil society, offers a glimpse of the ongoing transition process in Tunisia and its two phases. Stressing the success of phase one of the transition due to its broad and participatory approach, including

openness to international support and cooperation, he points to the limited success or even the failure of the phase two of the transition that started following the elections to the National Constituent Assembly. The author emphasizes the critical importance of domestic political consensus.

Omnia Taha from the League of Arab States (LAS) highlights the widespread aspiration for freedom in the region and the unique and historically new role of the LAS in legalizing those aspirations. She further indicates that there is a long road ahead before the Arab countries learn to successfully combine Islam, democracy and modernity, and notes a crucial role that the international community, including the OSCE, could play in this process, including through closer OSCE-LAS cooperation.

Vahram Abadjian stresses the importance of the OSCE's engagement with the region, to share its experience both with democratic transition and with conflict prevention, and points to the OSCE's advantages compared to the UN and EU. He further suggests the need to broaden cooperation to cover other Mediterranean countries, and to deploy OSCE field operations in the region.

Catherine Maffucci-Hugel and Zoltan Taubner describe the response of the Council of Europe (CoE) in support of democratic transition in the MENA region, in particular through the development of the CoE's Neighbourhood Policy, as well as through cooperation with the EU and OSCE.

Marietje Schaake analyses the role of the internet and new technologies in the MENA uprisings as well as more broadly in the realization of human rights, including freedom of expression and access to information. The author therefore calls on the European Union to develop a strategy to deal with new technologies.

Collectively, these contributions provide an interesting account of the OSCE's engagement with the Arab Spring to date and a variety of views on the past, present and future of the OSCE Mediterranean partnership. Looking to the future, the authors emphasize the importance of continuing supporting democratic forces in the MENA region, with a full understanding that democratic transition there will be a long and bumpy process.

The articles offer a number of perspectives and practical suggestions on what specific support could be provided and how the OSCE Mediterranean partnership could be strengthened further, such as through working directly and more intensively with Mediterranean civil society; expanding the geographic boundaries of the OSCE Mediterranean partnership by encouraging some other MENA countries to join; developing closer cooperation with the MENA-based regional organizations, in the first place with the LAS, and coordinating better with other partner organizations, such as the EU and CoE; addressing the OSCE's own constraints and limitations when it comes to its Mediterranean dialogue and cooperation; enhancing the role of the OSCE institutions, namely ODIHR and RFoM, as well as of the Parliamentary Assembly, in developing cooperation with the Mediterranean partners, etc.