

The OSCE and the Arab Spring

An agenda for action

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In 2006, the Helsinki Monitor published my article entitled 'Towards a new strategic goal: The OSCE and the dialogue of civilizations'. It argued that in view of the cardinal geopolitical changes in Europe after the end of the 'Cold War' the OSCE could not pretend to play any pivotal role there in terms of security and that the Organization should adopt a new strategic goal by reorienting its efforts toward its periphery, the Arab world. Furthermore, the article stated that bold measures should be taken in order to establish a new framework of interaction with the Arab partners for cooperation. In that context it was suggested inter alia to establish two OSCE Information and Liaison Centres in, respectively, the Mediterranean and the Gulf regions. The idea was that the field presences should undoubtedly enhance the OSCE involvement in the region, contribute to the promotion of common values and further the dialogue and mutual understanding, thus mitigating the conflict- and instability-generating factors.

However, the OSCE participating states preferred to remain within the usual framework of activities such as Mediterranean seminars and workshops, the participation of the delegations from the MENA region in OSCE events, etc., which had proved to be useful but not sufficient to give a fresh impetus to the cooperation. The following events clearly demonstrated that the Organization should have really thought about drastic and bold measures to secure its permanent presence in the MENA and the effectiveness of its involvement there. This is not to say that the OSCE's presence and activities could have a decisive impact on the historic events in the region. The root causes of the wave of the 2011 Arab uprisings were too firmly embedded in the Arab societies to be mitigated by an international organization. Nevertheless, the OSCE might have been much better prepared and, hence, could have come up with a timely and adequate response to the tremendous challenge triggered by the events in the MENA, had it been able to demonstrate solidarity and political will in making difficult but necessary decisions.

Such direct OSCE involvement in the MENA region, in particular the Mediterranean, has been rejected by many. Indeed, for this idea to materialize a number of questions should first be answered. Could the OSCE overstep the zone of its responsibility and, if so, what would be the concrete forms of engagement and, finally, what would be the added value in comparison to other structures which already have a long record of involvement in the region, such as the UN and the EU?

The last question seems to be the most important one. If it had a clear answer, a consensus on the remaining problematic areas could be found more easily and modalities of involvement could be elaborated based on the wealth of the OSCE's experience in promoting its values, particularly among the participating States admitted after the collapse of the communist system. In the context of the Arab Spring, the necessity of the OSCE's direct involvement could be explained from the viewpoint of the Organization's possible impact on the developments in the countries in question through the application of its principles and tools in a new political, socio-economic and cultural environment.

Therefore, before suggesting any agenda for action in terms of the OSCE's involvement in the MENA region, one should have a clear understanding of the purpose of such an involvement; one should calculate, as far as this is possible, the pros and cons, the risks and challenges, as well as the Organization's comparative advantages. To put it bluntly: what has the OSCE got to do with the Arab Spring, and, if it really has something to do, how should the Organization proceed?

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In order to define the purpose and the scope of a possible OSCE involvement in the MENA region in the aftermath of the Arab uprisings, one should make an attempt to realize the current situation and the development trends in the Arab countries. It is little wonder that due to the geo-strategic importance of the region, the largely unexpected and drastic turn of events there, and the necessity to elaborate for policy- and decision-makers more or less comprehensive and systematized approaches vis-à-vis the emerging new situations, innumerable articles, analytical papers, reports and the like have been published by academics, practitioners, journalists and other people on the Arab Spring. Although the tone of these articles and papers has changed from an initial euphoria about a new era of democracy in the Arab world to a more moderated and sober attitude after it became evident that not everything was so simple and straightforward, one basic element has remained unaltered. The bulk of the analysts have characterized the events as a 'regime change'. This, however, is far from true. The regime or, to put it another way, the nature of power has not so far changed in any of the countries of the region. True, the leadership in Egypt, Tunisia, Libya and Yemen has changed, but the arrival of new persons at the helm of power does not automatically mean that a given country has in reality chosen the path of cardinal reforms. Certainly, reforms can hardly occur without a change of leadership, but a change of leadership is not enough to initiate political, socio-economic, cultural reforms which are so necessary in the Arab world.

Thus, the critical question nowadays is whether or not the leadership in the above-mentioned countries (and also the leadership in the countries where no revolutionary events have occurred) would be able to undertake bold and drastic measures in order to initiate those cardinal changes and reforms, without which the situation in the Arab countries will remain virtually the same, and the new persons will replace names and titles but not ideas and beliefs.

It is remarkable that in a number of countries steps have already been taken toward changing the old mentality and structures. These steps include presidential and legislative elections, the adoption of a new constitution which should be followed by the adoption of a new legislation, the involvement of broader segments of society in the decision-making process, the proliferation of political parties and civil society organizations, etc. All these factors bear witness to the beginning of a movement that may or may not end up with cardinal reforms, a condition sine qua non of real regime change. Indeed, whether the constitution and the laws -- however democratic they are -- will work in the interest of society as a whole, whether the representatives of the legislative and judiciary branches of power and government structures will get rid of corruption and serve the nation, whether the basic freedoms will be respected in a sustainable manner -- all these questions remain, and quite naturally at this stage, without a definitive answer.

The answer will be given by the leaders, the society and, in the final analysis, by the peoples of those countries. So, the matter is basically internal. However, the international actors also have to play a crucial role, first and foremost, by supporting the cardinal reforms which already in the foreseeable future may pave the way towards political pluralism, socio-economic progress, sustainable development, security and stability.

The purpose of the OSCE's involvement in the MENA region would thus be to promote universal values and fundamental freedoms through supporting the necessary changes in the legal and administrative framework, enhancing civil society and its participation in decision making. In one word, the purpose of the OSCE's involvement in the MENA region would be to facilitate a real regime change. As stated above, the Organization

has accumulated a wealth of experience in those areas, and this experience could be applied in the context of the MENA region provided that the participating States come to a common understanding on this issue.

There is another no less important reason for the OSCE's involvement in the context of the Arab uprisings. Conducting cardinal reforms aimed at progress and democratization will remain an unachievable goal without appropriate conditions and a favourable environment, without a minimum of security and stability. In this sense, the OSCE can activate its preventive diplomacy skills, experience and mechanisms in order to contribute to peace and stability in the Arab countries still in turmoil through its well elaborated and tested tools of conflict prevention or conflict management or post-conflict rehabilitation.

This is all the more important as the OSCE, and this is obvious for whoever has closely followed the Organization's evolution, has lost one of its most remarkable features: a determination to activate its preventive diplomatic mechanisms. Indeed, for objective and subjective reasons the OSCE has ceased to be identified with an organization whose primary task would be promoting stability and security through soft political/diplomatic actions.

Objectively, the situation of the 1990s, when the Organization deployed field missions in the Balkans and the former Soviet Union with the primary mandate to prevent or restore peace and stability there, has substantially changed. The Balkan crisis is, basically, over and in light of the European Union's expansion it is not difficult to predict the political destiny of the Balkan countries. As to the conflicts in the former Soviet Union they have thus far not been settled and have been transformed into so-called 'frozen conflicts'. One cannot blame the OSCE for being unable to solve these conflicts, since the reasons for such a situation are beyond the Organization's control.

Subjectively, the OSCE's major asset, its field deployments, have been reoriented by the participating States to become a poor man's UNDP, insofar as they have become mostly a project implementation mechanism but with no adequate mandate and, perhaps most importantly, no capacity and financial means. One can argue that project implementation is the only concrete way to perform the tasks. A given field deployment can undertake concrete steps and achieve improvement in this or that field, this or that village or town, this or that segment of society. Actually, this seems to be convincing and could be accepted. But project implementation cannot become an overwhelming idea or a major modality of action. Rather, project activities should support the political agenda and serve as a kind of facilitator, when need be, for promoting a given participating State's performance in the context of its commitments, first of all, respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. The OSCE should remain a political/diplomatic conflict prevention organization. Involvement in the MENA region could exactly promote this major objective and, finally, justify the *raison d'être* of the Organization.

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Another serious counter-argument to the OSCE's involvement in the MENA region could be the presence and long-standing activities of other international actors, such as the UN and the EU, as well as separate activities undertaken by individual countries. Hence, it would not be superfluous to very briefly touch upon this issue, also taking into consideration the OSCE's comparative advantages.

To start with activities undertaken separately by countries, it should be noted that none of them, even those boasting big democratic achievements, can provide considerable help in terms of a real 'regime change' in

the Arab countries. The reason is as simple as it can be. Separate states or groups of states pursue their own interests and the attitude toward the situation in one Arab country or another depends on a number of factors, among which is the state's own interest which is always given primary consideration. Very often this leads to applying double standards by those states, and this seriously undermines their image and credibility as well as the sincerity of their intentions.

The issue of the EU's involvement is less straightforward but *grosso modo* goes along the same lines. Notwithstanding the internal contradictions, conflicts and critical situations, one should always keep in mind that the EU represents a kind of loose confederation with common foreign political goals and relevant structures. This in turn means that like separate countries the EU pursues its own interests and cannot avoid bias and double standards however useful its intervention and assistance might be.

Another problem is that the EU standards are higher than those accepted by the international community as enshrined in the UN international instruments and other documents. Paradoxically, the EU values are not universal and, thus, cannot be referred to as being an example to be followed by the Arab countries in transition.

The UN might be considered as the most appropriate international organization to promote the regime change in the Arab countries. It is not restricted by a zone of responsibility; its major instruments, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, other covenants and instruments, have been signed by the Arab states; it has a well-developed network of field representations in all Arab countries and could undoubtedly rely on its institutional memory, its wealth of experience and sophisticated staff to contribute to the transitional processes in a number of Arab states. The UN system has played an important role in humanitarian, development and democratization issues and will continue to contribute to the Arab countries' transition towards progress.

Nevertheless, UN field deployments, representing its different agencies and bodies, are too fragmented; they are deprived of a political mandate; the main political structure, the UN Security Council, is more and more divided and the activities of the UN Secretary-General's special envoys or representatives might be less efficient due to the political juncture.

Therefore, the OSCE might be considered as having comparative advantages such as well elaborated principles and a long-standing record of preventive diplomacy: the political/diplomatic nature of field deployments and the unique principle of comprehensive security. In the context of the Arab countries, one should also add its experience of involvement through cooperation with Mediterranean Partners for Cooperation. Furthermore, this provides room for the elaboration of concrete steps in terms of the OSCE's direct involvement in the MENA region.

Before suggesting such steps, it would be important to clarify a number of controversial questions.

Zone of responsibility. True, the OSCE has been set up as a pan-European organization, and its participating States belong to a concrete geopolitical area associated with Europe in its geopolitical sense. This, however, did not prevent the Organization from establishing partnership relations with a number of Mediterranean and Asian states. In doing so, the Organization has virtually overstepped its zone of responsibility. Direct involvement, in the sense of establishing a presence in the partner states, will be a qualitatively new

development in terms of the intensification of relations but not in terms of deploying in an entirely new environment. Finally, the question of Central Asian states' participation after the disintegration of the Soviet Union was not clear either, but at present nobody would imagine arguing against it, and in 2010 Kazakhstan even assumed the responsibilities of the OSCE's chairmanship.

Attitude of the Arab states. Another important question is the willingness of the Arab states to accept closer cooperation in the form of OSCE direct deployment. Previous experience of interaction has demonstrated that the Arab countries have a keen interest in cooperation on issues pertaining to combating new threats and challenges to international peace and security; they may be interested in promoting relations in all three OSCE dimensions, including the promotion of human rights and democratic values through OSCE/ODIHR election monitoring, the implementation of projects aimed at enhancing good governance, civil society, economic/ environmental aspects of security, etc. This experience gives enough ground to believe that the Arab states in question would be willing to deepen the cooperation with the OSCE under new forms and content.

Contradictions among OSCE participating States. It goes without saying that the contradictions and sometimes conflicting interests among the participating States will not disappear by the mere fact of acting within the OSCE framework. Different and often opposite attitudes will be dominant in the deliberations, debates, decision making and the like. On the other hand, a consensus might be built thanks to the fact that all the participating States realize the importance of the MENA region and agree upon an intensification of the Organization's efforts there. Decision No. 5/11 on "Partners for Co-operation" adopted on 7 December 2011 at the Vilnius Ministerial Council testifies to that. The question is to have enough will and courage in order to take bold, unexpected and non-standard measures. The hope is that the participating States could finally demonstrate unanimity in, first, realizing the necessity and then adopting an agenda for concrete action and direct involvement in the MENA region.

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In light of the above-mentioned the following steps aimed at the OSCE's further involvement in the MENA region could be considered by the participating States.

Broadening the geopolitical area

The OSCE partnership with the MENA region includes Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, Egypt, Israel and Jordan, countries which have been considered as Mediterranean Partners for Cooperation. The OSCE's partnership with countries outside its zone of responsibility stems from the principle of the indivisibility of security. But in this concrete case, security concerns and the necessity of cooperation cannot be confined to the Mediterranean basin only. They spread over virtually the entire MENA region. Consequently, the cooperation should be broadened to cover the other MENA countries as well.

In case of a willingness by the other Arab countries to become partners for cooperation and successful negotiations with and consent by the OSCE participating states, the term 'Mediterranean Partners for Cooperation' should be changed to 'MENA partners for Cooperation' reflecting the new realities.

Field deployments

The suggestion to deploy an OSCE presence in the MENA region should be reiterated. While the rationale for this proposal could be subject to a separate sound analysis, here one should briefly underline that the field

deployment could have multi-faceted functions, among them the whole set of preventive diplomacy measures, monitoring and reporting on the political and human rights situation, project implementation in all three OSCE dimensions, promoting democratization processes, including capacity building, enhancing civil society, regional cooperation, etc.

The OSCE presence could also assume the role of an exchange of information and experience by organizing the dissemination of the relevant materials, seminars and brain-storming meetings, and public events, which would undoubtedly contribute to public awareness of the OSCE values and commitments.

Apart from a static presence, the OSCE might also think of establishing a thematic roving mission not linked to a certain country but to the region in order to follow, report on and suggest solutions for the most acute problems.

Fact-finding mission


These suggestions might be considered by the participating States, discussed with the partners for cooperation and, in case of a common understanding on possible actions in that direction, the dispatching of a fact-finding mission could be decided upon. The role of such a mission would be to explore, together with the host governments and civil society, the opportunities for OSCE field deployment, as well as discussing the concrete mandate and modalities of its deployment.

The OSCE participating States might seriously consider the proposed steps which at this stage represent a general outline of possible actions to be taken by the Organization, if it wants to be engaged in promoting peace, stability, prosperity and dignity in the Arab world. These outlines may be further elaborated to become a real agenda for action.

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It is only through bold measures that challenges can be met and problems can be tackled. The alternative is continuing to think by inertia and remaining within the usual framework of half-measures.

Despite the prevailing pessimism, one should still hope that the OSCE participating States will be able to overcome the conflicting interests and act in the best spirit of the Organization's principles and commitments. They would be able to use the OSCE's comparative advantages and become involved in the MENA region directly and comprehensively, guided by a broad vision of common responsibility and shared values.



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