

The OSCE response to the Arab Spring and the implications for the OSCE Mediterranean Partnership

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DOI: [10.1163/18750230-99900014](https://doi.org/10.1163/18750230-99900014)

The Arab Spring brought about processes of deep transformation in the Countries affected, both in their internal setting and external relations. Such processes inevitably affect also the OSCE Mediterranean Partnership for Co-operation, the long-lasting relationship between the Organization and six countries in the region (Algeria, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Morocco and Tunisia).

Predicting the final outcomes of the developments initiated through revolutions or reforms in some Mediterranean Partners is clearly premature. The OSCE hopes that, through the Partnership, it can provide useful support to a more democratic and peaceful region. In this connection, a process of rethinking the OSCE Mediterranean Partnership began in response to such historical events and the Ministerial Decision on the Partners for Co-operation, adopted in Vilnius in December 2011, provided a new impetus for stronger and more operational relations.

The Arab Spring brought to the forefront some key questions with regard to the relationship between the OSCE and its Partners that are likely to have an impact on the Mediterranean Partnership and probably also on the Organization itself. The future of the OSCE Mediterranean Partnership will depend on the choices that participating States and Mediterranean Partners will make with regard to shaping the framework of their relations, committing the necessary resources and defining the boundaries of the Organization and of its work.

The OSCE reaction to the Arab Spring

Since its inception, the OSCE Mediterranean Partnership has experienced a noticeable development. Starting from a status similar to those of observers enjoyed by the Mediterranean countries associated with the CSCE process, Mediterranean Partners gradually became more and more integrated in the work of the Organization.¹ Despite the evident growth in the framework for dialogue and co-operation between the OSCE and its Partners a sense of dissatisfaction has prevailed in recent years among both Mediterranean Partners and participating States for not being able to develop the Partnership to its full potential.

The nature of the regimes in some Mediterranean Partners seemed to limit the scope of dialogue and co-operation with the OSCE, avoiding any interaction on issues perceived as sensitive or challenging, especially in the human dimension. Furthermore, divisions among the Partners and the strained relations deriving from the Israeli-Palestinian conflict prevented the development of positive dynamics. Such a stalled situation caused frustration and consequent disengagement on the part of several participating States. In this context, the Arab Spring generated hopes for a renaissance of the Mediterranean Partnership.

Since early 2011 the developments in Tunisia and later in Egypt have received high political attention in the OSCE. They were repeatedly raised at the weekly meetings of the Permanent Council, the regular OSCE decision-making body, and Partners were invited to provide information about the evolving situation in their countries. Such an opportunity was used on various occasions at meetings of the Mediterranean Contact Group by Tunisia, Egypt, Morocco, Jordan and Algeria.

The 2011 Lithuanian Chairmanship of the OSCE fostered an internal debate on how the OSCE could assist its Mediterranean Partners.² The significant expertise developed by the Organization in assisting its own participating States in building democracy and regional security appeared to be of immediate relevance. Such experience was also at the disposal of those Mediterranean Partners embarking on complex democratic transitions. It was also clarified that the OSCE saw its potential engagement with the Partners as strictly demand-driven: a clear request from the interested country was required for the OSCE to act.

At the same time, Lithuania actively promoted effective co-ordination among international organizations under the umbrella of the United Nations in their support, in most cases still potential support, for the countries in transition in the Southern Mediterranean. This was done through direct contacts between the Chairperson-in-Office and the Secretary-General of the United Nations and a special meeting of international organizations on the margins of the Vilnius

1 A detailed account of developments concerning the OSCE Partnership can be found in the Background Paper for the 2010 Review Conference on co-operation with the Partners circulated under RC.GAL/23/10/REV.1 on 22 October 2010.

2 On 18 March 2011, the Lithuanian Chairmanship circulated to this end a Background Paper on 'Instruments that the OSCE could offer to its Partners for Co-operation' under CIO.GAL/41/11.

Ministerial Council.

Throughout 2011, the OSCE continued to offer its experience and support to the Mediterranean Partners, also on the occasion of visits by representatives of the Chairmanship and OSCE executive structures to Tunisia, Morocco and Egypt.³ In the course of such visits, originated from an expression of interest by those Partners for possible OSCE support, the countries consistently appreciated the potential value of the OSCE experience in their current situations. Some areas of higher immediate relevance were also identified, varying from country to country, but in the main including elections, democratic institution building, good governance, the security sector and police reform.

Nevertheless, despite the clear and repeated message stating the OSCE readiness to help and the need to be formally asked in order to engage, no official request emerged from any of the Mediterranean Partners. The only exception was an invitation from Tunisia to a number of international organizations to monitor its elections to the Constituent Assembly in October. The offer was taken up by the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly.

At the same time, some concrete progress in the OSCE Mediterranean Partnership could be noticed in 2011. For the first time Mediterranean Partners were ready to use the annual OSCE Mediterranean Conference to discuss issues that previously had been mostly off the agenda. The Conference held in Budva, Montenegro, in October 2011, focused on the challenges and opportunities of democratic transformation in the Mediterranean region.⁴ However, the level of attendance by most Mediterranean Partners turned out to be quite low.

Some steps forward were made in the relations with civil societies in the Partner countries. Responding to the interest expressed by NGOs on the occasion of the visits by OSCE representatives, the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) organized training events on the monitoring of human rights and elections for Tunisian and Egyptian NGOs. A Civil Society Conference was held ahead of the Vilnius Ministerial Council gathering NGOs' representatives from the OSCE and Mediterranean regions to enhance interaction and exchanges of experiences.

Finally, the consensus reached on the Ministerial Decision on the Partners for Co-operation marked the importance that participating States attached to the developments in the Southern Mediterranean and stated the OSCE readiness to share its experience with the Partners.

The adoption of the Vilnius Ministerial Decision...

Discussions and negotiations that preceded the adoption of the Vilnius Ministerial Decision on the Partners for Co-operation provided a clear illustration of the different positions of participating States on the key issues at stake in relation to the Partnership.

The agreed text struck a balance between those participating States willing to be more forthcoming in offering the OSCE support and those less favourable to an expansion of the OSCE outreach. It also emphasized that co-operation should respond to the Partners' needs and priorities, it should be more operational and result-oriented and cover the three dimensions of security.

Most of the elements included in the Vilnius Decision reflect existing practices and commitments.⁵ The main new element is the task given to the Secretary General to explore options for practical co-operation with the Partners in order to make proposals for further action to the Permanent Council. This has the potential to initiate a process that could bear significant results.

In short, the message of the Vilnius Ministerial Decision on the Partners could be summarized with a call to do 'more of the same', with a strong determination to make the Partnership more operational, but without allocating new resources or

3 OSCE visits in various formats were made to Tunisia (April), Morocco (May) and Egypt (June). In all three cases, representatives from the OSCE Chair, the Secretariat and ODIHR held high-level discussions about possible OSCE assistance, providing each Partner country with concrete proposals for potential engagement to be chosen according to their specific needs and priorities. The OSCE delegations also reached out to civil society in the three countries.

4 For more details, see the Consolidated Summary, circulated under SEC.GAL/199/11 on 12 January 2012.

5 For example, see the Madrid Ministerial Declaration on the OSCE Partners for Co-operation (MC.DOC/1/07).

undertaking new commitments.

It might be interesting to note that, in the course of the negotiations of the Ministerial Decision, Mediterranean Partners were informally consulted and they expressed their desire for more ownership and concrete results in their relations with the OSCE as well as their dissatisfaction with the limited influence they could exercise in the decision-making process.

...and its implementation

In implementing the Vilnius Ministerial Decision, the Secretary General initiated a process of informal consultations with the Mediterranean Partners in order to identify preferred areas of engagement and ways of making the Partnership more operational. As a result, a list of proposed projects for potential co-operation⁶ was offered to the Mediterranean Partners in an effort to attract their explicit expression of interest for engaging in concrete activities. The list was also intended as a tool to focus donors' interest in view of future support.

In the following months, Tunisia and Morocco formally signalled their interest in some of the activities proposed while some participating States indicated their readiness to financially support some of the projects listed. In particular, Tunisia expressed an interest in activities in the fields of energy security, anti-terrorism, combating human trafficking and police matters. Morocco selected activities related to energy, women's political participation, combating human trafficking and media freedom. Donor countries anticipated their support for projects on disseminating the OSCE Code of Conduct and combating terrorism and human trafficking. While sometime will be needed before such activities are effectively implemented, a positive dynamic seems to have taken off bringing Mediterranean Partners and the OSCE to move their practical co-operation forward.

Advancements can also be noted in the high-level dialogue with Mediterranean Partners. Since the beginning of 2012, the Foreign Ministries of Israel and Jordan have addressed the OSCE Permanent Council in January and March respectively. Consequently, the OSCE Secretary General was invited to visit both countries in June, providing an occasion to discuss the next steps for more practical co-operation. Strengthening co-operation in responding to transnational threats and environmental challenges emerged as areas of main interest for Jordan.

Combating human trafficking, promoting women's political participation and water management were identified as areas of Israel's interest in sharing experiences. Furthermore, the Director of ODIHR was invited to visit Tunisia in April to identify ways to support the democratic process.

In parallel, closer contacts and exchanges of experiences with relevant regional organizations are being sought. Representatives of the Organization for Islamic Co-operation visited the OSCE Secretariat in June in order to explore venues for enhancing co-operation and sharing expertise, especially on countering transnational threats. The League of Arab States had stated its willingness to enhance its knowledge of OSCE best practices for possible dissemination with its own Member States already on the occasion of the visit to its Headquarters by the OSCE Secretary General in September 2011. A first workshop covering a wide range of topics including democratic control of the armed forces, community policing, migration management and election monitoring is being planned for this purpose in the early 2013. In the context of an enhanced attention by participating States towards developing the potential of the Mediterranean Partnership, new and old ideas are being debated. One recent proposal suggests the creation of a centre for permanent track-two diplomacy on the OSCE Mediterranean dimension in order to expand dialogue beyond governmental circles, allowing for an enhanced mutual knowledge and the generation of new ideas. The old idea of initiating a Conference for Security and Co-operation in the Mediterranean pointing to the merits of a multilateral framework for advancing comprehensive security in the region has also been discussed on a few occasions.⁷

⁶ List of Potential Projects and Topics of Potential Co-operation with the OSCE Mediterranean Partners, circulated on 15 March under SEC.GAL/51/12

⁷ International Peace Institute Meeting Note, December 6, 2011: The OSCE-Mediterranean Partnership and the Arab Uprisings. (www.ipacademy.org/publication/meeting-notes/detail/343-meeting-note-the-osce-mediterranean-partnership-and-the-arab-uprisings.html) and Report of the Conference 'The OSCE and the new context for regional cooperation in the Mediterranean' held in Rome on 28 May 2012 (www.esteri.it/mae/ministero/Servizi/Archivi_Biblioteca/20120618_relazione_osce_EN.pdf)

About 18 months after the beginning of the Arab Spring the OSCE response appears to be still in the making, though potentially gaining momentum. The fact that the Arab Spring did not generate a major breakthrough in the OSCE Mediterranean Partnership or an immediate tangible OSCE support to some Partners might be seen as a missed opportunity. Nevertheless, given the still uncertain outcomes of the developments in some of the Mediterranean Partners and the slowness of an Organization managed through the rule of consensus among 56 participating States, the OSCE role and impact in supporting a more democratic and peaceful Mediterranean region is more likely to be seen in the long term. Thanks to its Mediterranean Partnership, its comprehensive approach to security and broad membership, the OSCE is well placed to represent a valuable interlocutor and partner in the long run. At the same time a number of challenges still lie ahead.

Looking forward

The adoption of the Vilnius Ministerial Decision on the Partners contributed to stimulating an internal debate on and greater attention to the potential of the OSCE Mediterranean Partnership. These are essential preconditions for a possible revamping of the framework.

In elaborating a new vision for the OSCE Mediterranean Partnership, the key issues to be considered might be grouped into three main clusters.

Adjusting the framework

Two issues come into play when looking for ways to make the Mediterranean Partnership more effective: the format (favouring a group-based or an individual approach to co-operation with the Partners) and the interlocutors (how to expand interaction beyond governmental interlocutors).

So far, the OSCE has mostly interacted with the Mediterranean Partners as a group. In this way, the Organization can maintain balanced relations with all the countries involved and use the Partnership as a venue for fostering dialogue and co-operation among Mediterranean Partners. This approach at times faces the obstacle of finding a common ground among countries that are so diverse and divided. It also prevents Partners that would be ready to further their relationships with the OSCE from progressing at a faster pace.

Only after the Arab Spring was the possibility of pursuing a more individualized approach — in order to make the Partnership more dynamic — taken into consideration. This could constitute a positive development, allowing for more flexibility in enhancing co-operation with the course, the two approaches are not mutually exclusive and the success of the Partnership is likely to depend on striking the right balance between the two.

The second issue refers to the fact that the dialogue between the OSCE and its Mediterranean Partners is frequently confined to interaction among diplomats and government representatives. For an Organization characterized by a multidimensional approach to security this represents a clear limit. A better knowledge and understanding of the values and work of the OSCE among the civil society in Partner Countries could have a number of positive effects. It could broaden the scope of potential interlocutors and of areas of co-operation, helping to generate new ideas and to foster public support for engagement with the OSCE.

Additional important interlocutors in sharing the OSCE experience with neighbouring regions are regional organizations, like the League of Arab States, the Organization for Islamic Co-operation and the African Union. They can act as a multiplier factor and ensure local ownership in disseminating the OSCE values and experiences. Efforts in pursuing this approach more effectively have been put in place over the years and are being currently intensified. This is probably another area where a long-term perspective would be needed together with stronger political support by Partners and participating States, especially those that are also members of such organizations.

Committing resources

For the OSCE to be capable of providing a meaningful contribution in assisting democratic transitions in the Southern

Mediterranean adequate financial, political and human resources need to be made available.

The prospects for an increase in the financial resources devoted to the Partnership in times of economic crisis seem unlikely, as it appears from the negative trend in the allocation of extra-budgetary contributions to the Partnership Fund.⁸ At the same time, should Mediterranean Partners take seriously the OSCE offer of support, more financial backing would be needed to provide a credible and effective response.

While economic support is generally a good indicator of an underlying political commitment, more bare political support towards the Partnership by some participating States could also make a big difference. Participating States could consider being more proactive in reaching out to the Partners to offer OSCE support. While a demand-driven approach reflects the voluntary nature of the Partnership, ensuring ownership and a meaningful engagement, the interdependence of security on which the Partnership is founded gives the OSCE a direct interest in actively promoting its experience so as to expand and consolidate such shared security.

On the Partners' side, meaningful interaction is sometimes hindered by the limited resources available to delegations in charge of bilateral relations with a number of States, UN agencies and the OSCE with little personnel. This could be read at the same time as the symptom and the cause of little awareness in the respective capitals of the OSCE value. On the other hand, for the Partnership to work more effectively, Partners would need to be given reasons, in the form of concrete outcomes, to invest more time and energy on the part of their staff in the OSCE.

Defining the boundaries

In recent years, the OSCE has been faced with a number of questions related to whether it sees itself as a finite project or as one that could be broadened. Such questions relate to the possible expansion of the Mediterranean Partnership, the OSCE work beyond its territory and the Organization's own geographic scope.

The expansion of the OSCE Mediterranean Partnership has been on the table for several years and is one of the most contentious issues in the relations among Mediterranean Partners. The Palestinian National Authority (PNA) formally applied to become an OSCE Mediterranean Partner twice, in 2004 and in 2008, but no positive reply could be given as participating States could not reach a consensus.

Suggestions to expand the OSCE Mediterranean Partnership to other countries have been put forward and debated on various occasions.⁹ The most recent proposal was made in 2011 by Austria, supported by other participating States,¹⁰ to invite Libya to join the Partnership, arguing that the OSCE expertise in border management and institution building would be valuable in the current situation. Such a desire to provide substantial assistance to a third country would seem to clash with the fact that, when requested twice for assistance by Afghanistan (an OSCE Asian Partner for Co-operation since 2003),¹¹ the OSCE could only respond with projects to be implemented exclusively within the Organization's territory. While the declared security concerns did carry some weight in the arguments of those opposing out of area engagement, a more general resistance to expanding the OSCE area of operation is understood to be a strong underlying factor.

Such a view found its expression also in deciding upon the creation of the Partnership Fund and approval by the Permanent Council of any activity outside of the OSCE area was required, therefore limiting the flexibility of the OSCE outreach with regard to the Partners.

8 For more details: Report of the Secretary General to the Permanent Council on the Operation of the Partnership Fund (SEC. GAL/192/11 of 14 December 2011).

9 For example, at the US Helsinki Commission Mediterranean Seminar on OSCE Mediterranean Partner Engagement on 5 October 2009, Summary Digest: www.csce.gov/index.cfm?FuseAction=ContentRecords.ViewDetail&ContentRecord_id=464&Region_id=149&Issue_id=0&ContentType=G&ContentRecordType=G&CFID=3287190&CFTOKEN=57519697

10 The MFA of Austria circulated a letter on this issue on 13 September 2011 (PC.DEL/858/11), which received the support of a number of other pS.

11 Important Ministerial Council Decisions to this end were adopted in Madrid (MC.DEC/4/07/Corr.1 on OSCE Engagement with Afghanistan) and in Vilnius (MC.DEC/4/11 on strengthening OSCE Engagement with Afghanistan).


The application by Mongolia in 2011 (an OSCE Asian Partner since 2004) to become an OSCE participating State prompted an internal discussion on the geographical limits of the OSCE. Such a debate indirectly but inevitably raises the broader question of whether OSCE security could be better maintained by limiting the Organization's scope of action or by expanding its area of influence. This issue is of potential interest also with regard to the Mediterranean Partnership since some governmental and academic fora have informally discussed the possibility of offering OSCE membership to those Mediterranean countries undergoing democratic transformation as a recognition of the adherence to common values and as a channel for more effective support in institution building.

Conclusions

The OSCE is currently debating how to realize the vision of a comprehensive, cooperative and indivisible security community throughout the OSCE area.¹² In the process, the issue of how to shape the OSCE relations with the Partners will also have to be considered. This could provide an excellent opportunity for participating States and Mediterranean Partners to clarify what they would like to gain from the Partnership and how to achieve it.

Like any relationship, also the Mediterranean Partnership reflects the degree of interest and commitment that the partners devote to it. Therefore, for the OSCE Partnership to become more effective, a stronger engagement by Mediterranean Partners and participating States will be necessary. At the same time, partnerships reflect also the nature of the partners involved. Since some of the Mediterranean Partners are undergoing a profound process of change, this will inevitably produce changes also in their Partnership with the OSCE. While it is still early to determine how, it is already time to work for ensuring that changes will be for the better.

¹² A process launched at the 2010 Summit with the Astana Commemorative Declaration Towards a Security Community (SUM. DOC/1/10/Corr.1).



This article was first published with Brill | Nijhoff publishers, and was featured on the Security and Human Rights Monitor (SHRM) website.

Security and Human Rights (formerly Helsinki Monitor) is a journal devoted to issues inspired by the work and principles of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). It looks at the challenge of building security through cooperation across the northern hemisphere, from Vancouver to Vladivostok, as well as how this experience can be applied to other parts of the world. It aims to stimulate thinking on the question of protecting and promoting human rights in a world faced with serious threats to security.

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