

The spirit of Helsinki in the Middle East and North Africa

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In September 2011 I stood with several other members of the OSCE election observation mission to Tunisia in Sidi Bouzid, ground zero of the Arab Spring barely ten months after the start of the revolution. As we observed the vote in one polling place, a woman standing in the hot sun in traditional Muslim dress, who had clearly been waiting in line for some time to cast her ballot, was asked by a journalist just how long she had been waiting. 'Forty-five minutes and 42 years,' she replied.

Her story, and that of thousands of other Tunisians who waited with patient determination to take part in the democratic process, made Tunisia an inspiration to us all. The fact we were there observing, at the invitation of the Tunisian officials, is also a testament to how the OSCE is as applicable to the Mediterranean region today as it was in 1975, when the Helsinki Final Act proclaimed 'the process of improving security should not be confined to Europe but should extend to other parts of the world, and in particular to the Mediterranean area.' The welcoming attitude we felt from the Tunisian transition government officials was a positive sign of the country's commitment to its partnership with the OSCE as it turned onto a new path toward democracy.

One forum, less duplication

To be a successful partner in the region, the OSCE should not only be a model for multilateral diplomacy, but also should build a forum for dialogue, and encourage a comprehensive approach to security that encapsulates the OSCE vision of human rights, economic, environmental and political military security.

The OSCE comprehensive model is inclusive, rather than exclusive, and available to all who wish to participate. The OSCE is not a stranger in this region. Egypt, Israel, Morocco and Tunisia have all been associated with the Helsinki process since its inception in 1973.

Just as Europe found a new way toward comprehensive security, including in the eventual demolishing of the Berlin Wall, and just as South East Europe worked through a multilateral framework to establish peace and stability after years of conflict, today a similar approach could serve the Mediterranean region.

The OSCE should play to its strength as a unifying organization and take the lead in co-operating with other multilateral organizations to reduce redundancy in our work. The OSCE Parliamentary Assembly can play an important role in this regard, but in order to do so, we need to co-ordinate with other inter-parliamentary bodies.

Our Assembly brings together parliamentarians annually from across the region for a Mediterranean Forum. The Inter-Parliamentary Union, the European Union, the NATO Assembly and the Council of Europe have similar mechanisms, meetings and approaches.

Considering limitations, primarily on time, there should be one setting to bring Europeans together with parliamentarians from across the Middle East and North Africa each year. Why have multiple meetings that unite only a select number of states when one meeting can be more effective, focused and cover all States? Organizations could adopt a rotation to determine hosting responsibilities. In votes at our annual sessions in Belgrade in 2011 and Oslo in 2010, our parliamentarians strongly supported this co-operative approach.

One model, the OSCE

As former OSCE Parliamentary Assembly President Petros Efthymiou has said, OSCE work in the southern Mediterranean should be based on international co-operation aimed at eliminating the social and economic causes of instability, reinforcing democratization, and restoring inter-cultural dialogue.

While the OSCE model, with its holistic approach to security and its basis in voluntary political commitments, cannot be imposed on the Mediterranean countries, their leaders would be well served by following its example. This must be done in a true partnership, where the OSCE executive structures, including representatives of all participating States, along with the governments from the Mediterranean, show a steady willingness to engage. In our effort to be so careful to not impose the OSCE values on the region, we may have been too quiet.

The Assembly was pleased this year to see the OSCE enact parliamentary recommendations to establish exchanges where young diplomats from Partner States are placed within OSCE executive structures. The fact that Egypt and Jordan

took part in this program is a good start. However, it is not enough to have one or two people visit Vienna and hope they take their OSCE knowledge back home to make a difference. There needs to be a regular, robust, formalized exchange program so a wide range of government officials from the Middle East and North Africa gain OSCE experiences and build relationships.

Part of achieving such a program depends on solidifying financial commitments from partners and participating States alike. The OSCE Partnership Fund was created in 2008 expressly for this sort of work. Unfortunately, in 2011, the very year when so much attention was focused on the Arab Spring, the OSCE Partnership Fund received less than € 35,000, a 92 per cent drop in three years. The Assembly has called for partners to play a leading role in developing the agenda of their OSCE interaction and meetings, but all countries connected with the OSCE need to show a greater, more consistent commitment to this cause if the OSCE model is to be useful.

OSCE experts and parliamentarians remain willing and able to be a constructive partner for change, but despite a track record of involvement with some Mediterranean countries, the OSCE may not be known at all by new government leaders. It is our responsibility to showcase the Organization more. Given that the largest common denominator that all our countries share is a population that simply wants to have its voice heard and reflected in its government, the Parliamentary Assembly has voted for the OSCE to hold a civil society forum in a Mediterranean Partner State to supplement the 2012 OSCE Mediterranean Conference.¹ This would help educate people about the link between human rights and security. While that did not happen in 2012, the OSCE should work to ensure such a program occurs in 2013.

One comprehensive approach to security

Political pluralism and democratic institutions alone cannot guarantee security in the Mediterranean region. For the region to embrace its own OSCE-like structure to bring together all Middle East and North African nations, leaders need to embrace a vision of holistic security that relates the maintenance of peace to the respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, and recognizes the central importance of economic development and environmental protection.

In order to eliminate the socio-economic causes of instability, we must create conditions that encourage economic investment and enhance economic co-operation throughout the region. While recent political transitions in Egypt, Tunisia and elsewhere may encourage increased trade and investment in the southern Mediterranean, mutual trade between countries in the southern Mediterranean is equally important. We have seen how the removal of trade barriers has contributed to peace and security in Europe, which is why the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly has repeatedly called for the creation of a free-trade area in the Mediterranean region.²

Regional water and food insecurity and energy unreliability should be tackled decisively. In this light, the OSCE has organized workshops on water security, land degradation and desertification in the Mediterranean.³ By bringing leaders together on issues like these that affect the daily lives of citizens, we strengthen relationships in the region and avoid having every international forum devolving into a debate on the status of a stalled peace process. The OSCE should continue to express support for the work of the Quartet to create a lasting peace between Israelis and Palestinians, but this issue need not overshadow every other multilateral, regional discussion.

The OSCE's proven expertise in conflict management and border security stems from times when security north of the Mediterranean was far less self-evident than it is now. I am happy that the Mediterranean Partner States now can benefit from this expertise through a national network of border security officials in which countries share best practices.⁴ These partnerships benefit countries on both sides of the Mediterranean, longstanding OSCE members and newer partners alike.

But the power of co-operation is only as great as the investment made by all government and parliamentary officials. When we see thousands of refugees fleeing violent dictatorships in Libya or Syria into the OSCE states of Italy, Greece and Turkey, it is impossible not to see the interconnectedness of Mediterranean and European security.

1 Belgrade Annual Session 2011, Resolution on Mediterranean Political Transition.

2 Vilnius Annual Session 2009, Resolution on Mediterranean Free Trade; and Astana Annual Session 2008, Resolution on a Mediterranean Free Trade Area.

3 OSCE workshops on water, land degradation and desertification held in 2007 in Valencia, Spain and in 2009 in Barcelona, Spain.


4 OSCE Border Security and Management National Focal Point Network as referenced in Belgrade Annual Session 2011, Resolution on Mediterranean Political Transition.

Therefore, as we question the role of the OSCE in the Middle East and North Africa, participating States must also look inward. To live up to their own commitments, when crisis breaks out, are they doing their share to host refugees, and when migrants arrive, are policies and attitudes in place to do more than give them a place to sleep? After all, how OSCE countries treat citizens from the Mediterranean region greatly influences, more than any speech, how those countries' policies toward the region are perceived.

In a part of the world where some countries are now wrestling with how to establish a democratic government that respects religious and ethnic diversity, the OSCE is filled with examples that have worked on that same issue for decades. I have seen leaders in the Baltic and the Balkans chart their own course for democratic development, using the OSCE as a partner. And the 1993 Russian elections were not unlike those in Tunisia in 2011. The passion and excitement I saw in voters was quite similar. Sadly, since then, we have seen the powers that be in Russia follow a far different path than the one their OSCE commitments would suggest.

The Mediterranean region will bring its own rich cultural traditions on its journey forward, but in Tunis I never had the impression a vote was being held just to give the appearance of democracy. Officials organized the election and people, like the woman who had waited 42 years to vote, participated because they know when it comes to freedom there is no substitute for the real thing. I look forward to the OSCE being a model for the region, but I know each country will have its own vision of how best to use it.

No State is perfect. No government is finished with the work to live up to its democratic commitments signed in 1975. But all have something to offer, and our experience in Tunisia showed me that the Mediterranean Partners just may be more willing than many people realize to engage with the OSCE, and perhaps use it as their own model — or at least a common forum — to discuss regional security.



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