

Foreword

Malta's Foreign Policy Agenda in a Changing Mediterranean

Dr. Tonio Borg, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs, Malta

The changing socio-political realities in the Mediterranean that have resulted from the Jasmine Revolution have signalled the beginning of a new era, not only in the Arab countries involved in the uprisings but also the wider Euro-Mediterranean region. The grass-root revolutions particularly in neighbouring Tunisia, Egypt and Libya are producing a fundamental shift from the traditional geopolitical setting to a newly emerging political landscape. The Arab Spring has necessitated a change in the policy outlook undertaken by the European Union and its member states, and in this context, Malta has been at the forefront to advocate a more comprehensive approach to the countries of the Southern Mediterranean, whilst taking into account the respective sensitivities of the countries concerned.

In this regard, the review of the European Neighbourhood Policy has a vital role to play in providing these countries with considerable assistance in their transition processes towards democratic governance. Failing to do so with the necessary determination would allow a power-vacuum that will seriously compromise democracy and stability in the region for years to come.

The recently reviewed ENP must continue to support sustainable stability based on the respect of democratic values, human rights and fundamental freedoms but at the same time, it remains imperative, as past experience has taught us all, to avoid adopting a patronising attitude. We should avoid accentuating conditionality in relation to EU assistance as a means of inducing political and economic reform. Rather, the new “more for more”

approach should be focused on the EU's readiness to increase support through stronger incentives; any new approach should definitely not result in a reduction in financial assistance to countries needing it most and where specific challenges exist, as this would only serve to widen already-existing gaps.

The survival of the Union for the Mediterranean, through the dramatic events we are witnessing in the Southern Mediterranean, has certainly warranted additional attention to Mediterranean issues. There exists a real and tangible possibility that democracy will take root among the EU's Southern neighbours and the Mediterranean will move closer to become more politically homogenous. This opportunity cannot be missed and the UfM has an important role to play at this moment in history.

Malta remains fully supportive of regional political initiatives, as eminently demonstrated through the UfM. Malta, for instance, has fielded one of the six Deputy Secretaries-General of the UfM Secretariat based in Barcelona, responsible for the Division of Social and Civil Affairs, including Civil Protection. This Division is becoming ever busier with a number of project proposals that are being submitted to the Secretariat for its consideration.

Malta's commitment to the regional politics of the Mediterranean is also evident in its active participation in the Western Mediterranean Dialogue, better known as the 5+5 Dialogue. Malta will be honoured to host in Valletta the Second 5+5 Summit in 2012. Preparations are well under way and we are receiving very positive responses from partner countries. The Summit was scheduled for June 2011 but had to be postponed due to fast developing events in the region. The 5+5 complements the UfM in so far as it also includes sectoral initiatives in fields such as defence, education and transport which have continued to function, despite the socio-economic turmoil and the freezing of activity in other regional fora.

Malta's relations with the countries of the Southern Mediterranean have been strengthened following the wave of

democratic transition. The Jasmine Revolution in Tunisia provided the initial stimulus which resulted in a reverberating popular call for democratisation across the Southern Mediterranean. In Tunisia, the ongoing transition has already brought about changes of considerable magnitude. The 23 October 2011 elections for the Constituent Assembly have been the first truly democratic elections since Tunisia's independence.

On the political level, as one of the first European Foreign Ministers to visit Tunisia following the revolution, Malta had the satisfaction to announce a modest package of assistance granting a number of scholarships in a varied array of fields, as a demonstration of Malta's solidarity with a neighbouring country in transition, and in view of the role played by the younger generation. On the electoral front, Malta also sought to provide its support by contributing three Maltese electoral observers within the European Electoral Observer Mission, as well as one diplomatic observer.

Since the beginning of the Libyan crisis, and fully conscious of the overarching consequences of the Libyan conflict, the Government of Malta took a clear decision on taking the responsibility to provide humanitarian aid and assistance to the Libyan people. Malta had, from the outset, maintained that it would continue providing humanitarian assistance where and when needed, and had shown this by assisting in the evacuation of over 20,000 people of different nationalities from Libya when the conflict started. Malta's early statement about the loss of legitimacy by the Libyan Regime and later the recognition of the NTC as the sole and legitimate interlocutor of the Libyan people, followed by the recognition of the NTC as the ad hoc government of Libya, have earned the admiration and appreciation by the most prominent NTC representatives, who found in Malta a friendly EU partner willing to assist Libya generously in her path towards freedom and democracy.

The appointment of a Maltese Special Envoy, a further step in reaffirming Malta-NTC relations, laid the ground for my visit to

Benghazi in July 2011, where a substantial package of assistance was communicated, focusing mainly on a number of scholarships. The opening of a Malta Liaison Office in Benghazi, as well as the consecutive visits to Malta by NTC Chairman Jalil and Executive Council Chairman Jibril, have subsequently ensured a deeper understanding of the emerging situation. The prospective convening of the Maltese-Libyan Joint Commission will further cement the existing strong ties of friendship and respect.

In the short term, it is essential to address the security situation and to ensure that law and order is established. The Libya Coordinated Needs Assessment agreed in Paris on 2 September 2011 that is aimed at identifying areas where the international community will assist the NTC is crucial if this revolution is to be brought to a successful completion.

In the longer term, one can look forward to the first democratic elections in Libya. The road ahead is long and winding but the odds are in Libya's favour. In this context, Malta welcomes the leading role being taken by both the EU and the United Nations in supporting the aspirations of the Libyan people. In spite of the fact that it is ultimately up to the Libyans to sketch their own future, Malta will continue to be a supporting friend to our good neighbours walking with them down a road of freedom and democracy.

The Egyptian version of the Arab Spring is characterised by very interesting developments. While the establishment of a democratic system of government in Egypt would result in the largest democracy in the Arab World, the economic situation needs to be urgently addressed. We very much welcome the €100 million approved by the Commission directed at job creation and improving living conditions.

It is clear that Egypt is adopting a more independent foreign policy line, including vis-à-vis its neighbourhood. Nonetheless, Egypt's importance as a strategic Middle East partner remains critical. Irrespective of the political forces that may prevail in the

coming months, Egypt continues to act as a broker for peace in its immediate region.

Syria, on the other hand, is a country in turmoil. The near-daily reports that have continued to filter out, exposing the alarming brutality and lethal force being used against civilian protestors, are causing grave concern. There has been no concrete proof of the regime's professed willingness to reform. Persisting in blaming "armed terrorist groups" for the unrest, the regime continues to tread up the path of delegitimisation.

At the same time, Syrian opposition groups are expanding ranks and becoming better organised. The creation of the 'Syrian National Council' is an encouraging development in the effort to establish a united and viable opposition platform. The opposition forces both in Syria and abroad need to be encouraged to combine and coordinate their efforts in order to come across as a strong and unified group.

A UNSC Resolution is long overdue. It is still not easy to get consensus on an international level. The League of Arab States is an important interlocutor and has become more vocal on the Syrian regime's repression of its own people. It is hoped that the LAS will play a central role in bringing about the overdue reforms and breaking the current cycle of violence.

The Middle East Peace Process has dominated the agenda of Mediterranean politics for decades now. It has been through long periods of deadlock, where the only foreseen movement was down a spiral of violence. It is unclear how the issue of the Palestinian bid to Statehood, at the level of the United Nations and its agencies will continue to develop.

The dramatic developments related to the so-called "Arab Spring" make progress on the Israeli-Palestinian track even more urgent. While Arab neighbours claim their right to democracy, and popular gains are being attained in some countries, the people of Palestine have the same needs and rights, including the right to a

representational government. The reality of the present situation is that a Palestinian state is ready to come into being from the institutional perspective. What continues to prove elusive is a breakthrough on the political track. The creation of a Palestinian state living in peace and security with Israel would surely be the apex of the Arab Spring.

What is important now is that both sides do not act against the spirit of a durable solution to this longstanding conflict. Resorting to violence, as we still see now and again in Gaza will not yield any fruits, likewise building settlement units in the Occupied Territories will continue to present a major stumbling block on the road to peace. Such unilateral and illegal actions continue to undermine the resumption of negotiations and the goal of two viable states living side by side in peace. At the end of the day, it is the political will on both sides to resume meaningful negotiations that matters most.

Malta must continue to fulfil its vocation of promoting stability and dialogue in the Mediterranean, inspired by newly-reinforced values and driven by a shared vision of durable stability in a common neighbourhood.