

EU Policies in the Middle East: Changes and Effects on Regional Politics

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Abstract: The shift towards far-right politics and the rise of support for authoritarianism have been two marked trends in international politics. These trends can be linked to the phenomenon of the retreat of liberalism as its promise of economic prosperity along with progressive democracy has failed to deliver on both terms. The effect of these trends is palpable when considering the EU policies towards the Middle East region, and especially in Egypt in the aftermath of the January 25 revolution. In the last eight years, the EU policies towards Egypt have been characterized by two features: turning a blind eye to the unprecedented Human Rights violations committed by the regime, and the focus on making economic gains through business deals, and pushing drastic reform measures regardless of their impact on the Egyptian people. However, the current trend is expected to increase political and socio-economic tension both in countries of the EU and in Egypt and will set the region into another cycle of violence.

Introduction

The world has been in great flux over the last three to four decades, depending on which event one chooses as the true tipping point. The rise of neoliberalism to global dominance, as it tightens its grip on one state after another through the hegemony of the institutions holding the final say over the global economy; namely the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank, and the World Trade Organization (WTO). The triumphant conquests of far-right parties, groups, and politicians throughout the world, but most visibly and alarmingly in western democracies. The expansion, and intensification of the war against terrorism whose glaring failures far outweigh any imaginary successes its politicians use for marketing and promoting the effort to their disgruntled citizens. The rise of far-right violence and ISIS-affiliated militia in different parts of the Middle East continues. These are the main trends that shape today's world economy, politics, as well as people's everyday lives.

And by the beginning of the current decade, the winds of change swept through the Middle East, home to some of the most stable dictatorships, whether they are militaristic republics, or tribal monarchies, principalities, or sheikdoms. But what started as a Spring of hope, has quickly turned into a hot feverish Summer of turmoil and civil war, some seemingly with no end in sight, and some ending in shattered dreams and the return of even more vicious, and vindictive dictatorships.

The cycle of events in the aftermath of the Arab Spring uprisings has indeed contributed to intensifying the trends that brought it around, and down in the first place. Now a West whose politics had been hovering for long around the center, has received a vigorous nudge that sent it farther to the right than it has ever been since WWII, is much more willing to become more intimate with the dictatorial regimes of the region.

A turn to the right ...

The recent boom in electoral support of far right and populist parties in the EU have been a pressuring concern for the last decade. The nationalist League Party's populist coalition government in Italy, the success of several far-right parliamentarians elected for the first time since 1975 in Spain, the Freedom Party's coalition with the center right in Austria, the unprecedented rise of authoritarian rule in Hungary along with the storming influx of migrants escaping war and state-terror in Syria, Yemen, and Egypt, are all signs of increasing support for extremism across different parts in Europe and the Middle East.

In recent national elections, three parties: Switzerland's Swiss People Party, Austria Freedom Party, and Hungary's Fidesz, scored 29 %, 26%, and 49% of electoral votes respectively while Sweden's Sweden Democrats won 17.6%, Finland's The Finns 17.7%, and Italy's The League 17.4%¹ This trend was on the rise in the recent EU elections, as well. Austria's Freedom Party maintained their score coming third with 17.2 percent. In France, analysts were expecting President Emmanuel Macron to beat his far-right competitor after succeeding a vote-of-no-confidence during the height of 'Yellow Vests' turmoil. Surprisingly, his rival Marine Le Pen won first place by 23.31% of votes. On the other side, Germany's Social Democrats won the elections, again, but their impaired performance raised concerns about the popularity of Angela Merkel's coalition with them. In Italy, the League's winning with 34 percent of the vote increased expectations of early elections to overcome the divided government. The overall rise of far-right parties is explainable by the alliance that Italy's Matteo Salvini, of the League, formed with Germany's AfD, the Finns Party, the People Party of Denmark, Austria's Freedom Party and France's National Rally. Eventually, traditional ruling parties preserved their position in the EU Parliament but the share of far-right populists was on another surge.²

Discontent with globalization, immigration, the quest of affirming and even finding out national identity, critiques of the European union, and the rejection of the rule of bankers and bureaucrats, are all driving forces of far extremism. In Germany the Alternative for Germany (AFD) booted

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the strongest opposition to immigration and the spread of Islam, while Italy's Salvini came on top of the League Party, before his partial winning of elections in June 2018, due to the intensive influx of Sub-Saharan refugees who flooded into Italy in 2016. His party includes members who promote the idea of leaving the EU and, when he was an interior minister, he used to turn away rescue ships from Italian ports. This act was then formalized and since even the rescue of migrants has become a criminal act. On June 12th 2019, a female boat captain was accused of cooperating with smugglers when she rescued 1,000 migrants in the Mediterranean. Recently the government moved to ban her from sailing near their coasts as laws began to criminalize sea rescue missions³. These were all enacted under Salvini's government despite the significant decrease in the number of immigrants from 181,436 in 2016 to only 2,252 in 2019⁴. However, the figure 22.3 million migrants living in Europe as of January 2018⁵ mean that tension is expected to transform the European continent and its neighboring region in the coming years, especially when framed within existing state-society crises in the neoliberal world order.

The 2007 financial crisis has given way to political populism which beckons and gains more grounds in France, Italy, and many other Central and Eastern European countries⁶ in response to growing socio-economic inequality, dislocation, and blocked upward mobility of poor and middle-class electorates. This is how Europe turned to non-democratic liberalism. One interesting case is Hungary's Viktor Orban who openly describes his own country as 'illiberal democracy' in which one-party, 'Fidesz', has penetrated all government administrations, seized all powers and routinely deployed them to increase the regime's political control. Orban cronies and family members are favored recipients of government contracts, independent media is punished, opposition supporters face arbitrary tax investigations, state resources and even the EU's 3 billion Euro aid is funneled into the 'Fidesz' election propaganda and government networks, with just one tender announced in public procurements, according to reports by the 'Transparency International' and the 'European Commission'⁷. This is why 'Freedom House' unsurprisingly down-ranked the EU member state from a free to a partly-free democracy⁸.

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A recent report by the International Center for Counter Terrorism indicates that between 2001 and 2016 the number of violent incidents perpetrated in Germany by far-right offenders increased by 60 percent to reach 1600 incidents in 2016. The report explains:

‘many indications point to a growing or at least partially underestimated threat to Western countries posed by the extreme right.’ For years, Far right violence has not been accurately described in terrorism prosecution and legalization. Official ‘resources, threat assessments, and counter-measures have been potentially wrongly allocated in the past. Extreme right-wing violence directly targets the foundations of democratic culture: pluralism and tolerance. It instils fear among its victims and negates the status quo and monopoly of force established through the rule of law’⁹.

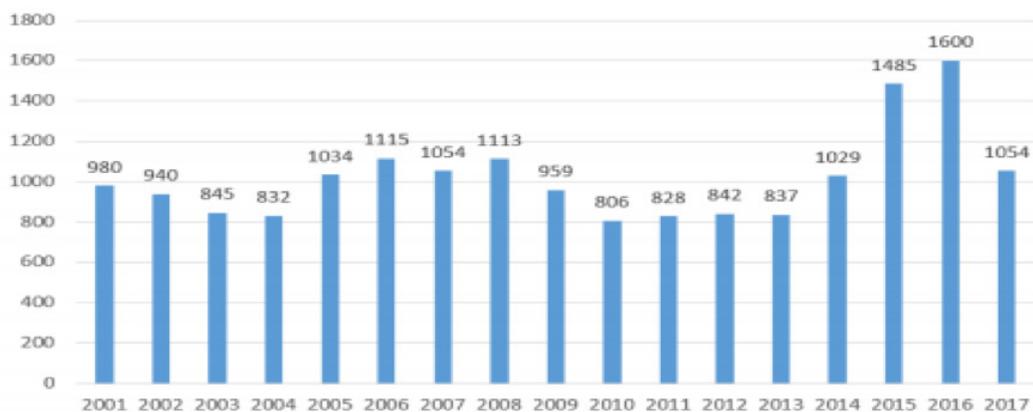


Figure 4: Extreme right-wing violent crimes, 2001-2017²¹

Source: Koehler, Daniel (2019) p.8

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The report presents another significant comparison between means of attack. Taking again Germany as an example, attacks using arson and bombings have increased to a 16-year high in 2016, calling for the need to reintroduce a legal framework to the phenomenon to go beyond 'terrorism' and 'violence' and reflect the psychological effects on the groups attacked.¹⁰ Extreme right terrorism is essentially concerned with undermining trust in the democratic governments' monopoly of force and the rule of law. To make the populations attacked by the far-right perceive themselves as less protected, and to smash the notion of plurality that lies at the heart of the democratic culture.

This means that far-right terrorism, even if classified as violence, will undermine the basis of its own 'national' society and inflict long-term deteriorating effects on democratic societies. Because it is ideologically motivated, and is practically perceived as 'permissible' violence by a growing number of supporters, it can eventually turn to attacking different originally-European groups inside of society and break down the legacy of the modern state.

Hence this part concludes that far-right violence will continue to threaten Europe's bordering and heartlands for decades, regardless of the significant decrease in the number of arrivals of migrants since 2016.

This is the case given that the rational of law enforcement, plurality, and merit-based socio-economic mobilization, have all been deeply undermined as a direct result of soaring neoliberal policies since the 1970s. This had long-term effect on Arab countries whose austerity policies towards middle class and poor citizens in the last few decades have persisted with the support, blessing, even conditionality, of the EU and leading European governments. The EU neoliberal policies towards the region have inflicted bitter consequences on political, economic, and humanitarian levels. The following part elaborates on these points as follows.

Democracy and Human Rights for who?

The end of the Cold War was a turning point for the EU's policies toward the Arab region. The bloc's support for democracy and human rights in the region, that used to be tied to the promotion of neoliberal policies, was dropped because of a heightened interest in security and stability. For instance, while the 'European Neighborhood Policy' launched in 2004¹¹ had been "promoting regional democracy,"¹² the EU was urged to flirt with the authoritarian leaders for short-term migration and economic interests, thus, for example, offering the then Libyan leader, Gaddafi, 50m euros, as an initial payment of the 5bn euros he demanded to stop the influx of migrants reaching the European coasts through his country.

For a short time after the 2011 uprising, the EU performed a revision of its policies introducing the concept of ‘deep sustainable democracy,’ which denoted “political reform, elections, institution-building, the fight against corruption, independent judiciary and support to civil society.” This short lived concept however, was dropped a year later in the ‘Strategic Framework’ adopted in 2012

In the case of Egypt, the EU has extended full support to the Mubarak regime, while tactically using the HR based reproaches occasionally and ineffectively. For a short time after the 2011 uprising, the EU performed a revision of its policies introducing the concept of ‘deep sustainable democracy,’ which denoted “political reform, elections, institution-building, the fight against corruption, independent judiciary and support to civil society.” This short lived concept however, was dropped a year later in the ‘Strategic Framework’ adopted in 2012.

The trends discussed in previous sections can explain the motives behind the EU’s overall policies towards the region. Most obvious are the policies of the two leading countries in the bloc; Germany and France. The shift to the right puts great pressure on ruling parties in both countries whose citizens along with other Europeans are getting less and less tolerant of migrants especially as the Syrian refugees crisis continues to get worse. Cooperation with seemingly stable regimes in the region is the main priority for the EU and its two leading countries to curb the flood of migrants coming from or through the region’s countries. This cooperation is paid for in the form of offering legitimacy and striking arms deals. For international economic and financial institutions, the economic and political crises in the region provide a great opportunity to accelerate the implementation of their neoliberal agenda, as the besieged regimes are more willing than everbefore to comply with the demands of these institutions. The economic elite in Egypt, that the military institution itself happens to be a major part of it, would welcome the opportunity to push more drastic structural reform, privatization, and austerity measures onto a population too intimidated to protest such measures.

With such priorities it is no wonder that democracy and Human Rights would end up taking a back seat, or even get left behind all-together. The EU started

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to see the region through a prism of migration and so-called ‘secure governments’ that would ensure ‘stability’, even if illegitimate. The traditional Human Rights agenda of the EU has suffered equal neglect. As an example, the EU-LAS summit represented a move from bilateral relationships with Middle East countries under the ‘European Neighborhood Policy’ to a collective bargaining¹³ model to assert the continent’s sphere of influence against regional competitors. Knowing the fine balance between both sides, President Sisi posed assertive remarks about the bloc’s long-standing allegations on human rights. He also felt immune from criticism for hanging 9 young men¹⁴ only days before the event amid international outcry condemning capital punishment and deeply flawed trials that were based on confessions extracted under torture. Hence, charges have preceded and followed this collective move by the EU, but neither side seemed apologetic. The final declaration,¹⁵ and news conference offered careful reference to HR: “we acknowledged that peace and security, human rights and economic and social development are mutually reinforcing (...) We condemned all acts of terrorism and human rights violations committed against the Syrian people”.

Meanwhile, accounts regarding private discussions on HR appeared contradicting. The Arab League Secretary General Ahmed Aboul Gheit asserted that ‘no criticism’ nor

dissatisfaction was expressed about ‘practices of any specific nation’, including Egypt’s abuses of human rights, while the European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker was giving a contrasting response confirming that HR was discussed ‘behind closed doors in bilateral meetings between leaders’.

What was awkward in the summit was the outspoken challenge to the EU’s long-standing external policy priorities that focus on the ban of the death penalty. The EU ‘Strategic Framework and Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy’ top priorities include “Promoting universality of human rights by achieving universal adherence through (a) Intensifying the promotion of ratification and effective implementation of key international human rights treaties, including regional human rights instruments.¹⁶ (b) Encouraging third party countries to fully cooperate with UN Special Rapporteurs and Independent Experts on human rights, including by issuing standing invitations and receiving such experts.” The plan highlights that: “the death penalty and torture constitute serious violations of human rights and human dignity. Encouraged by the growing momentum towards the abolition of the death penalty worldwide, the EU will continue its long-standing campaign against the death penalty. The EU will continue to campaign vigorously against torture and cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment.”¹⁷

The difference between rhetoric and discourse on mass violations in Egypt under the current regime is perplexing though. Facing condemnation on lending legitimacy to the brutal regime in Egypt, the response¹⁸ from EU officials described the 'no other way around' concept - Mark Rutte, the Dutch prime minister says :“sometimes you have to dance with whoever’s on the dance floor. We don’t always have a choice.”. According to another EU official: “Having to deal with autocrats is going to be daily bread and butter (....) Then you have no choice. Do you not deal with them?”

The summit which took place in February has not been the first eyebrow-raising instance of EU officials defending human rights abuse. On a trip to Egypt just one month before, in January 2019, President Macron was set to sign around 30 deals worth around a hundred million euros in transportation, energy, health and agriculture fields, following a number of arms deals that made Egypt an essential customer of fighter planes, warships and military technology. this in part explains why broad efforts to push Macron to denounce rights violations in Egypt has only brought modest success¹⁹.

Rights violation and Arms trade... a two-sided coin

The price of the EU turning a blind eye to the HR violations committed by the Egyptian regime was paid by the Egyptian people

not only in terms of more violations but in justifying them by defying the universality of Human Rights using arguments of cultural specificity, as exemplified in the following words of President Sisi:

“When a human being is killed in a terrorist act, the families tell me that we want the right of our children and their blood (.....) This culture exists in the region and that right must be given through the law”²⁰.

Likewise, the statement made by France’s Macron,“I don’t accept any leader to lecture me on how to govern my country, I do not lecture others (on human rights”, came along with and continued after the French arms deliveries to Egypt had increased from 39.6 million euros to 1.3 billion between 2010 and 2016²¹. This came as the two presidents repeated statements on how different cultural values justify the eroding support of, and continued offense on human rights. As Macron refuses²² ‘to lecture Egypt on human rights’ because “state sovereignty contradicts with intervention on how leaders govern their own countries”, Egypt’s Sisi said in January 2019 “We have a special nature in this region. We are not Europe”²³ both in clear defiance of the state’s “responsibility to protect their own populations (from) crimes against humanity and accept a collective responsibility to encourage and help each other uphold this commitment” as according to the ‘Responsibility to Protect’ UN General Assembly act of 2005.

To avenge itself for continued assaults by ISIS militias in the Sinai, the Egyptian regime has detained tens of thousands, forcefully kidnapped and killed hundreds either through capital punishment on faked allegations or extra-judicial killing. In Sinai, more than 100,000 households were deported and a shameful record of 76 women and 33 children killed, 149 women and 88 children injured, and 59 women and one child detained, in the ugly face of authoritarianism in Egypt.²⁴

Offense on human rights did not spare foreigners who might have nurtured academic interest in the Sinai region. Julio Regeni, a Cambridge doctoral student and visiting scholar at the American University in Cairo pursued his interest in discovering the humanitarian turmoil in the North Sinai governorate, only to meet torture then death at the hands of Egyptian security officers in 2016. Right after the incident, Egypt signed arms deals with the Italian government raising its purchases to 69.1 million euros (around 77 million dollars) and scoring the highest figure for the period between 2013 and 2017. Shortly afterwards, Egypt has become the first African country in terms of the volume of arms purchases from Italy, raking in front of Turkey, Qatar, Germany, Pakistan, Spain, and Britain²⁵.

A similar course of action taken by Germany led to sale of arms worth 800 million euros in July 2019, following a sale of 300 million euros of arms in 2017, leading arms exchange between Egypt and Germany to double nearly ten-fold since 2016 (when €45 million worth arms exchange has taken place)²⁶. Official disclosure of both governments, France and Germany, did not show which arms were sold and for how much, but in 2018, the main German contractors included company Thyssen Krupp, which provided one submarine in 2017 worth 250 million euro, Diehl Defence, which provided 330 air-to-air missiles to Egypt, Airbus Defense and Space, the Keller and Koch company, which provided light weapons to the Sisi regime, and Kraus-Maffei Wegmann (KMW), which sold armored personnel carriers and tanks²⁷.

Also, to control migration flows through Egyptian shores, a treaty between France and Egypt to exchange four Gowind 2500 corvettes worth around €1 billion²⁸ since 2014 was followed by an additional two corvettes worth 500 million euros- signed during Marcon's visit to Egypt in May 2018 as means

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to transfer the technology’s ‘know-how’ and to cut short the time needed for building the 6 contracted corvettes. Additionally, military cooperation treaties worth at least €6 billion included the sale of a 24 Rafale combat aircraft, a multi-mission frigate, and two Mistral warships since 2013²⁹.

While conventional military equipment was partly justified to combat terrorism in northern Sinai, many French companies remain involved in supplying law enforcement agencies in Egypt with powerful digital tools that allow security services establishing an ‘Orwellian control’³⁰ system to disperse and offset any attempt to demonstrate or mobilize dissent against the government’s overwhelming anti-poor and anti-human rights policies³¹.

In a report published 02/07/2018³², FIDH stated that “some companies have sold to the security services technologies for individual surveillance (AMESYS/NEXA/AM Systems); mass interception (SUNERIS/ERCOM); personal data collection (IDEMIA); and crowd control (Safran drones, an AIRBUS/THALES satellite, and Arquus (formerly RTD) light armored vehicles adapted to the urban environment). In so doing, they have all participated in the construction of a

widespread surveillance and crowd control architecture aimed at preventing all dissent and social movement and leading to the arrest of tens of thousands of opponents and activists.”

But even conventional weapons such as “Mistral warships (DCNS); Fremm frigates (DCNS); gunboats (Gowind); Rafale fighter planes; armored vehicles (Arquus); Mica air-to-air missiles and SCALP cruise missiles (MBDA); and ASM air-to-surface missiles (SAGEM)” were responsible for killing, torture, and detention of thousands of peaceful civilians under the ‘fight against terrorism’³³.

More recently, an Amnesty report³⁴ published in 2018 asserted that since 2011 France has been a leading supplier of arms used in military and civil suppression purposes alike and that much attention was given to the multi-billion dollar deal for fighter jets and warships while French companies supply routine security equipment like Sherpa and MIDS light armored vehicles that have appeared several times in repression operations of civilians since 2013.³⁵ Hence, both Amnesty and FIDH organizations condemned governments and military companies for indulgence towards repression in Egypt and pushing the region into more instability and chaos.

The real war is on democratic pluralism, and at stake is the notion of modern statehood, the fair rule of law, and enforceability of human rights and enabling equal livelihood opportunities

Conclusion

The rise of far-right extremism in Europe has entailed a heavy price on the Middle East. Instead of implementing the redistribution policies necessary to tackle poverty and unemployment in the EU, the far-right continues to scapegoat migrants who escape civil wars in the neighboring region. And yet, after the January 25th revolution, EU policy makers have only learnt to support authoritarian regimes even more strongly by providing up-to-date state of the art spying and surveillance technology, in addition to submarines and fighter jets to curb the flow of migration and violence. As this creates more hope for democratic governance in Egypt and the Middle East in a current state of unknown destiny, it meanwhile undermines the rationale of existing democracies whose rule of law and freedom-driven state-society relationships are at stake.

By linking current EU policies toward the region and Egypt in particular to structural trends in its domestic and international politics, it is clear that only a change of these trends can yield a change of the aforementioned policies. In the bigger picture under globalization, the destinies of people around the world are more connected to each other than ever before. In the case of the peoples of Europe, and those of the Middle East, however; it seems that at this historical juncture, their destinies are interdependent of violence, be it at the hands of ISIS-affiliates or far-right extremists. The real war is on democratic pluralism, and at stake is the notion of modern statehood, the fair rule of law, and enforceability of human rights and enabling equal livelihood opportunities. Indeed, the Yellow vests in France and recent democratic uprisings in Sudan and Algeria are echoing this fact and voicing out the grievances of the 'normal' and 'poor' citizens whose interests are traded off in arms sales and taxation laws.

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ABOUT ALSHARQ FORUM

The Sharq Forum is an independent international network whose mission is to undertake impartial research and develop long-term strategies to ensure the political development, social justice and economic prosperity of the people of Al-Sharq. The Forum does this through promoting the ideals of democratic participation, an informed citizenry, multi-stakeholder dialogue, social justice, and public-spirited research.

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