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Europe and the Wider Middle East: New Challenges to European Security

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During the past two years EU member-states found themselves increasingly involved in events in the Wider Middle East (the Arab world plus Israel, Iran and Turkey). Initially, Europe and the USA were ill-prepared for the eruption of popular unrest in both Tunisia and Egypt; then in an attempt to seize the initiative NATO countries used the UN Security Council resolution to launch protracted series of NATO air strikes against Gaddafi's forces that led to the fall of his regime; consequently some leading democracies formed the core of the *Friends of Syria* international group that support the opposition forces in Syria. In another development, as it completed the withdrawal of American forces from Iraq, Washington strengthened its military presence in the Persian Gulf, enhanced its defense partnerships with Gulf states and stepped up the anti-terror campaign against al-Qaida groups in politically volatile Yemen. Meanwhile, the Euro-Atlantic community led the international efforts to curb the alleged Iranian race for nuclear arms, espousing Israeli fears of a potential attack by Teheran. In pursuing these aims and activities the Euro-Atlantic community forged new regional partnerships, while new inter-state and sub-national tensions emerged in a dramatically changed regional security landscape.

The security implications from the seismic changes which transformed the regional order of the Wider Middle East are far reaching and seriously affect the whole international system. One example is the negative repercussions of the increased confrontation with Iran on the stability of world oil trade, which necessitated urgent compensatory measures to stabilize rising fuel prices.

The active Western involvement in the Arab Spring events has so far produced one major setback, namely – an open diplomatic clash with Russia and China over the implementation of the UN Security Council resolutions on Libya. Its follow-up was evident in Moscow and Beijing vetoes on a somewhat similar resolution on Syria. Further developments in and around Syria deepened the divide between OSCE member-states. Several analysts consider the Syrian and Iranian crises as a new Cold War in the region, where an old fashioned confrontation opposes two distinct camps of regional countries and their allies. Reigniting a Cold War II could be the single most serious security threat resulting from the current crisis of Wider Middle East political order.

Accordingly, a new ideological confrontation is opposing proponents of the traditional mantra of nation-states' sovereignty to those defending the "humanitarian intervention" arguments without adequate efforts to reconcile the two approaches in a way that respects international law. It became plainly obvious that the 21-th century sensibilities further enhanced by internet-based social networks make indiscriminate abuse of human rights by autocratic regimes intolerable. On the other hand, the application of this doctrine in Libya provides proof to skepticism about importing democratic revolutions in an Arab/Muslim milieu: so far, the demise of Gaddafi's regime produced neither stable democracy, nor put an end to human rights violations, tortures and killings in that country (largely ignored by EU member-states' governments and the international media), as darker scenarios of its disintegration along tribal lines and continuing security chaos look a likely possibility. Similar skepticism surrounds the so-called "Syrian uprising", which increase risks of an open sectarian strife that could affect neighboring Lebanon (whose political system is based on a frail sectarian balance). Another emerging risk is the infiltration in the war-torn country of terrorist groups that have a stake in regional instability and growing Sunni-Shia divide.

Another major threat for Europe is fuelled by the politics of self delusion about the nature of "Arab spring". While in the recent past the EU-countries were backing the regional status quo, paying lip-service to Arab peoples' legitimate concerns, nowadays they are faced with the emergence of political Islam as the logical, but somehow unanticipated by both EU politicians and the public at large, consequence from the dismantlement of secular nationalistic dictatorships in the Muslim world. This potentially illiberal trend which is already obvious in both Tunisia and Egypt, not to mention Iraq, where sectarian divisions are threatening stability even beyond national boundaries, belies easy but largely false analogies with the Velvet revolutions in Eastern Europe. The coming of age of Muslim democracy in the Wider Middle East is yet another test for European politics.

To make things worse, elsewhere in the region, Western governments demonstrate selective approach by backing the status quo. Geopolitics, rather than democratic principles and concerns define Western support for the ruling dynasties in Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and Qatar, who, in a peculiar shift of political wisdom, are treated as genuine democracies, but in reality represent reactionary autocracy and theocracy in their purest forms. Up until now European efforts to solve the Israel-Palestinian problem failed as a result of EU member-states governments' complacent and/or inefficient reactions to Tel Aviv's West Bank settlement policies and the prevailing negative stand on Palestinian bid for independent statehood.

Why should the OSCE be concerned with the Middle Eastern quagmire? Here are some reasons to worry about our security, but also to take some urgent steps to counter the emerging new threats:

- The widening security gap in the Arab world and the growing prospects of the emergence of new failed states and conflict zones that will constitute a breeding ground for terrorist groups of the al-Qaeda type and a potential source of illegal immigration to the EU countries, which will give a boost to transnational organized crime. On the other hand, growing regional confrontation will provoke a new cycle of militarization and arms dissemination. These trends demand an urgent initiative by the OSCE and the creation of a continent-large forum to review the Middle Eastern policies and priorities of OSCE member-states.

- The danger of a further isolation between Europe and the reforming Arab societies underline the necessity of initiating a North-South dialogue on Muslim democracy and the future of European-Middle Eastern relations in the future in parallel to EU initiatives in the region. The OSCE could contribute to it by sharing its experience in the field of security, reconciliation and democracy building in a much larger geopolitical context.
- The current attempts to restructure and revitalize relations between emerging democracies and established regimes in the Wider Middle East, and the necessity of new pan-Arab tools to foster regional integration demand systemic efforts to share OSCE experience in regional cooperation in Europe with Arab governments and Pan-Arab organizations.