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# In the long run everyone will win

*ESADEgeo Position Paper 11*

*February 2011*

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## ***ABSTRACT***

- **The world is closely following the protests taking place in the capital of Tunisia.**
- **It is still too early to predict the fate of Tunisia and the region, where similar protests are emerging in Egypt, Jordan and Yemen.**
- **Each nation has its own characteristics, but the call for change, openness, and good governance is a shared demand.**
- **A successful transition in Tunisia may act as a catalyst for reform in other nations in the region.**
- **The European Union should focus its efforts on helping the Tunisian people develop a political structure – yet without interfering in national politics.**

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### ***In the long run everyone will win***

The protests led by the Tunisian people over the last month have attracted world attention and we are witnessing a major historical event for the country and the Arab world. Although uncertainty still hangs over the future of the country, the truth is that a successful outcome for the jasmine revolution may well act as a catalyst for reforms in the Middle East and north-eastern Africa. This is especially true in Sudan, where the January referendum showed that 98.8% of the southern population voted for secession. Juba and Khartoum will now have to negotiate sensitive issues such as debt, oil rights, borders,

international treaties, and citizenship. Any wrong steps could be devastating for both nations.

It is still too early to predict the fate of either nation. Developments in the future will be critical and a successful result may have a domino effect. Tunisia, Sudan, and the other Arab nations have unique characteristics and differing populations, societies, and institutions. For this reason, each nation must be examined separately. However, despite these differences, they share a common need for change and openness.

Demands by radical Islamists have fortunately been absent from the street protests that have gripped Tunisia. Although Al Qaeda, in an attempt to gain a voice in the uprising, was quick to welcome the departure of Ben Ali, the fact remains that the main demands have been for jobs, elections, freedom and democracy. In this sense, democracy is understood as much more than simply a political system for choosing governments through free and fair elections – and is seen as a system whereby citizens participate in public life, rights are recognised, and the rule of law is a reality.

These demands are essential for the long-term stability of the region. After the September 11 attacks, the Bush administration would call for democracy to bring peace and stability to the world. However, the mechanisms and instruments used would produce unwanted results, or at least, not the expected ones. And the ideas of authors such as Samuel Huntington—who considered the clash of civilizations as the main source of conflict in international politics after the fall of the Iron Curtain—would gain ground. However, the voices and banners that have filled the Tunisian streets are evidence to the contrary and remind us that the needs and hopes of the young are the same everywhere: they want to live and actively participate in a nation that produces goods and services while offering freedom.

The University of Maryland and Zogby International published last summer the results of an annual Arab public opinion poll. There were several results worth highlighting. The first is the considerable trust and support still shown for the

European Union. When asked: 'If there could be just one superpower, which country would you prefer to be that superpower?' three EU nations topped the answers (totalling 57 per cent of the vote). Similar confidence was shown in Europe on the questions: 'If you had to live in one of the following countries, which one would you prefer most? – some 68 per cent chose a European country – and: 'If a member of your family had to study in one of the following countries, which country would you prefer most?' – with 75 per cent choosing a European country.

These responses should make us reflect on the esteem and appreciation felt for the European Union by the people of Arab countries. At the same time, we should reflect on our obligation to help ensure that they win the same freedoms that we so proudly enjoy.

The Barcelona process recognised in 1995 the need to encourage reforms in the southern Mediterranean countries and strengthen links between both sides of the sea. Three main working areas were agreed (economic and financial; political and security; and social, cultural and human partnership) and the aim was to enhance economic growth in the Mediterranean region and so encourage the policy reforms needed to consolidate democracy. The results have fallen short of expectations. The lack of progress and escalations in the Arab-Israeli conflict often slowed down or even destroyed any improvements made.

In the case of cooperation in the Maghreb, the keys remains the relationship between Morocco and Algeria, whose borders remain closed; and the lack of a resolution to the conflict over Western Sahara. These facts have prevented cooperation and trade between the neighbouring nations and slowed potentially beneficial regional integration. As an example, intra-regional trade in the Maghreb in 2010 represented just 3% of total trade.

Tunisia lived under the rule of president Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali for 23 years. Transitions can be tumultuous when the same government remains in power for so many years. Tunisia is now faced with great challenges on the road ahead,

especially with an unstructured opposition and the need for major reforms to reconcile different sections of society and calm the protests with tangible results. However, Tunisia also enjoys a great advantage: namely, the confidence and expectations of its people.

This is where the European Union could have a starring role. The EU should encourage this sense of confidence and concentrate on helping Tunisia manage its reforms, provide support for the population, and ensure the inclusion of new groups and leaders in a process of openness and political pluralism. It would also be useful if the EU could help Tunisians form political parties – yet without interfering in political issues. These actions could be similar to the help the EU provided to east European countries: but with the benefit of the lessons learned from that initiative.

Although the process will be complex, the EU can do much to help Tunisia structure its political life. Institutional support could mean that the transitional period is not doomed to instability and risk. This is something that the Spanish understand very well. The unfolding transition in Tunisia will have major implications – and success could have a positive regional impact. It is clear that the process of change and reform will be difficult in the medium term, but something else is also clear: in the long run everyone will win. And the Tunisians will be the first to win.

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