



European Round Table

“Europe and its Role in the Transition Process in North Africa and Middle East”

24 March 2011, Brussels

Belgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Room DV01

Karmelitenstraat/Rue des Petites Carmes 15, 1000 Brussels

2:30 pm to 5:30 pm.

*This Roundtable was the sixth in the series of events organised by CEIPA (Centre for European and International Policy) and hosted by the Belgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. It was conveyed in order to discuss the European response to the ongoing uprising in the Middle East and North African countries. The round table was chaired by Mr. **Peter von Bethlenfalvy, CEIPA Executive Director.***

Mr. Frank Felix, Director of Asylum, Migration and Anti trafficking Department at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Belgium opened up the round table meeting by welcoming the participants. He pointed out to the special situation which is developing in the Middle East and acknowledged that the EU and Member States didn't see it coming, as they hoped that the change would take longer and would evolve more gradually. Taken off guard by the pace of events the EU underestimated the young people's urge for democracy and failed to provide the immediate response to what turned out to be the the end of an era. Although the EU Lisbon Treaty empowered the EU with more

competences in the field of external action the EU is still grappling with the implementation. The uprising in the Middle East and North Africa is by and large the biggest challenge after the EU enlargement, requiring considerable financial resources in times of the budgetary restrictions. But because of its attachment to human rights, democracy and the rule of law Europe needs to take action, by speaking in one voice and showing the path to those Arab countries that should still undertake profound reforms to prevent the uprising. Mr. Felix also referred to the situation in Libya, pointing out to the importance of the UN resolution, as the basis for intervention of coalition forces as well as the support of the Arab League. He also stressed the necessity of common action, as no single country could cope on its own with the evolving situation in the Arab world. While addressing the issue of migration and initial fears of EU member states of illegal immigration, as the consequence of the events in the North of Africa, he reminded that people migrate out of necessity, not because they want to. (16000 Tunisians immigrated so far to Europe). Unless supported in their hopes for the better world in their own countries people will start to move towards Europe. That's why Europe should forge partnership for democracy and prosperity with these countries, while supporting democracy, human rights social justice and the rule of law. However, what is needed is differentiated approach, adapted to each country. In the long term, Europe needs to strengthen political dialogue, institutional changes and support to the civil society. Promoting mobility partnership is also recommended not only as a means to prevent illegal migration, but as a tool for building local economy of the immigrant countries. Scarce public sector resources should be underpinned by the private sector investments that can tap into the potential of the large population, ready to work and consume. But in order to contain the risks and to limit potential losses of the private sector a sort of the guarantee fund should be established.

Among reforms to be undertaken, education must be one of the top priorities, even though it might take years to see the results of the educational reform. Regarding trade facilitation, faire trade and better access of agricultural products to the EU market should be enabled. The EIB should provide loans to help restructuring projects and in the field of energy the agreements between the EU and North Africa countries should be signed.

Mr. Frank Felix ended his intervention on a positive note, by stating that the current situation is an opportunity more than a difficulty, provided that we know how to grasp it.

Mr. Terek Mahmoud, *journalist to the Middle East News Agency* began by stating that the events in the Middle East should be qualified as an uprising, not a revolution, as they haven't yet achieved the change of the system. What caused the uprising is that after 30-40 years of dictatorship, people are claiming their dignity after loosing their faith in the regime that awarded only those loyal to it, regardless of their merits or education. Concerning the specific situation in Egypt, he went on by explaining how Mubarak regime destroyed most of the institutions through corruption and claimed that he was the only one capable of maintaining stability in the country. Referring to the EU relationship with Egypt Mr. Mahmoud

recalled the 2001 EU-Egypt Association agreement and the EU Neighbourhood policy, mentioning that the main question is not about increasing the financial assistance but the way how to spend it. He called the EU to focus its support in education and vocational training because they are the only way to insure sustainable development and economic growth and which will help to fight illegal, immigration. He reminded of the lost opportunity of the 2002 summit held in Tunisia and dedicated to reforms in the Arab world. Back then, Egypt was considered as a state of strong institutions, dominated by a strong president. Today, in spite of the damage caused by the Mubarak regime, Egypt still holds potential for development, possessing valuable assets such as tourism, Suez Canal, agriculture, industry and motivated youth who could be a qualified manpower for building a bright future not only for the country but also for the entire region. The big problem however is corruption and poor education system that started to deteriorate in the 70' ties. Religion plays an important role in Egypt, but is more of a spiritual than fanatic nature. Education will help to understand better the essence of religion. The Muslim Brotherhood is a force to be reckoned with, although the voters should have a choice between them, the National Democratic Party and others. He highlighted the risks to democracy from corrupted generals in the army and the security who are still manipulating the situation from the back stages, like the use of religion during the last referendum to support the "yes" and the continuous attack on Mohamed El Baradei. Mr. Mahmoud winded up his intervention by stressing the need for the change of the 1971 constitution, indispensable to prevent Egypt descending into chaos with unforeseeable consequences not only for Europe but for the whole world.

Mr. Eberhard Rhein, EPC senior adviser on neighbourhood policy and former EC Director responsible for the Mediterranean and Arab world started by recalling the German reunification path which took 10 years, with Germany having control of the both parts of the country. In case of the Arab world movement, Europe had no influence on the uprising and will not have influence in building the institutions. The European experience is needed, but in form of advice and support, rather than as a recipe on what kind of system to build. What is important though is to keep focus and be able to differentiate among priorities, as Europe cannot support everything. Our focus should be primarily on Tunisia, Egypt and Libya, and less on Morocco, Jordan and Syria. Basic approach should consist of differentiating what to do and where, while concentrating on those countries that are serious about undertaking economic and institutional reforms. Focus should be different for each country. As an example, he mentioned Tunisia, where the EU can participate in infrastructure projects that can help alleviate unemployment. Education and vocational training must be the prime target, followed by job creation, as without jobs there is no prospect for better life. However, Mr. Rhein reminded that in the 10 past years Arab countries experienced the strongest economic growth, which didn't prevent the uprising to occur. EIB, EBRD and the World Bank will have to come to support of the infrastructure projects, as the EU does not dispose with necessary financial means. Additional money should come from the seized assets of former rulers

and some Middle East monarchs that have amassed a considerable fortune (i.e. Morocco king). With reference to trade Mr. Rhein stressed the need to boost the global competitiveness capacity of the Middle East countries, as trade with the EU is already free of charge.

The EC representative, speaking in her own capacity, reiterated that the present crisis had occurred at bad moment for a still fragile European External Action Service. The EC assigns 200 000 € for the Multi-annual strategy for Migrant protection and Asylum seekers, which is a rather modest amount when spread over the world. Moreover, the EU's request for the respect of human rights has at times proved to be a difficult exercise when confronted with regimes such as the Libyan one.

The debate which followed the speakers' interventions was initiated by the Jordanian representative who reiterated the legitimacy of Jordan monarchy, while adding that the current demonstrations do not claim the change of the regime. He also stressed the need for promoting mobility of people from the Arab world, instead of stoking fears about illegal migration.

The ILO representative underlined the necessity to include social dialogue when negotiating reforms, whereas the Euro- Arab Forum representative inquired about the blue/green card for migrants from Tunisia and Egypt. Mr. Frank Felix provided extensive response, explaining that the mobility partnership is still in a testing phase, applied to a few countries of a small size, while the idea of circular migration is not yet implemented. Mr. Mahmoud for his part said that the fears of migration are exaggerated and that the rapid socio economic improvement of the situation in the south and east of the Mediterranean will help in stopping the illegal immigration. He also confirmed that Turkey represents a good model for the Arab world, adding that the Turkey accession to the EU could be a great asset, serving as a bridge between Europe and the Arab world.

On the question why do we not have a Marshall plan for the Arab world, Mr. Robert Zeldenrust, Ambassador and Special Envoy for the Security matters at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in the Netherlands explained that the Marshall plan intended to bring back Europe where it was before the war, whereas the Middle East economies are still to be developed. He repeated the need for imposing conditionality when allocating aid, while highlighting close relationship between Europe and the Middle East

Ms. Patsy Sörensen, the founding member of CEIPA concluded the debate, while adding a few words on her experience with Syria in the framework of the project on fighting trafficking in human beings. She denounced corruption, double standards and inappropriate use of EU aid, while calling for the respect of human rights and the rule of law

Mr. Peter von Bethlenfalvy, CEIPA Executive Director thanked the speakers and all the participants for their valuable input and lively discussion.

