

The prospect of EU membership could help North African states make the move to democracy

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Professor Anand Menon contributed an article to European Voice on the European Union and democracy promotion in North Africa. Professor Anand Menon argues that the European Union can play a more active role in promoting democracy in North Africa and suggests that the prospect of EU membership could encourage the North African uprisings to develop in a democratic direction.

Momentous change demands bold action. The wave of uprisings across north Africa could – possibly – represent such a change. Europe, because of its proximity, has a particular interest in helping to entrench democracy in the region.

The stakes could hardly be higher. North Africans have arrived at a fork in the road. To one side lies a return to some kind of authoritarian rule, continued poverty and frustration among their overwhelmingly youthful populations and the consequent lure of migration or, even, extremism. To the other is the prospect of the creation of a democratic, prosperous zone of stability linked to Europe by friendship.

Yet the well-intentioned half-measures currently being discussed in EU circles fail to recognise what is at stake. The offers of partnership, funds or trade concessions smack of Europeans fiddling while their neighbourhood burns.

Europe must do more. Specifically, it must offer at least some of these states the prospect of EU membership should they continue along the path of democratisation. There are historical precedents. The cases of Greece, Spain and Portugal in the 1980s and the central and eastern European states two decades later illustrate how enlargement can be used to entrench democratic reforms and foster economic development.

Enlargement would not negatively affect the workings of the Union. The Union has continued to operate effectively since taking in its 12 newest members. The dire prediction of institutional gridlock has been revealed to be what it always was – a political ploy intended to delay the prospect of enlargement (particularly to Turkey), rather than a serious assessment of the ability of a larger Union to work.

Nor should geographic pedantry be an obstacle. When the French thought Algeria belonged to them, they insisted – successfully – that the 'Algerian departments of France' be covered by the NATO treaty. Europe, in other words, is a vague concept that can (within limits) be stretched according to necessity.

Enlargement is, quite simply, the most effective policy tool that Europe possesses to deal with instability on its borders. It ensures that member states have a stake in the fate of their neighbours. Economic aid can be withdrawn as easily as it can be given; once enlargement is on the table, however, member states have every incentive to remain committed to reform. A corollary is that the prospect of enlargement is the only incentive capable of inducing prospective members to carry out difficult and unpopular reforms. The prospect of EU membership could help north African states make the move to democracy, writes Anand Menon.

This is not altruism. A democratic north Africa drawing on the skills, creativity and energy of its young, highly educated population could conceivably become a powerful engine of economic growth. Moreover, border police and naval patrols are an inadequate longterm solution to the problem of migration (following the revolution in Tunisia, Italy, remarkably, suggested sending troops to Tunisia to stem the flow of migrants).

Ultimately, the solution lies in ensuring that people from the region feel they have a future at home – and this means bringing about real political and economic reform.

Of course, even assuming that stable democracies emerge from the revolutions, joining the Union would be a slow process. Not all applicants would meet the criteria. Indeed, some might prefer not to join at all. Yet the leverage that the accession process provides, along with the symbolic message it sends about Europe being willing to engage meaningfully with its southern neighbours, makes it worth the effort.

Enlargement is not a policy tool that should be deployed lightly. It implies costs to member states and accession countries alike. But the potential dangers of continued long-term instability in north Africa, and the potential rewards of seeing the emergence of stable liberal democracies there, mean risks have to be taken. Half-measures and rhetorical gestures will not work. Europeans have hardly distinguished themselves with their tepid responses to events thus far (or, for that matter, by their policies and attitudes previously). If brave enough, they still have a chance to redeem themselves.

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