

## THE EUROPEAN UNION'S NORTH AFRICA POLICY: A DEFENSIVE NEOREALIST PERSPECTIVE\*

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### *Abstract*

*North Africa is Europe's immediate neighborhood, hence is of strategic importance for European security. While Mediterranean Africa plays an important role in trade and economic issues for the Union; migration, terrorism, energy security and the issue of failed states have become the main security problems of the region through the post-Cold War era. Closely linked to that, the Arab Spring uprisings of 2010/11 triggered a troubled transformation process in North Africa, where the consequences and aftermath of the events seriously threatened European security and other important interests in the region. This has coupled with the rapidly expanding role of new rising powers, Russia and China in particular, fostering a new multipolar regional context in North Africa where the US and the EU have already had a competition in redesigning the architecture of the region, notwithstanding the considerable interaction and cooperation between the two. Accordingly, the years after the start of the Arab Spring has also brought the survival issue to the fore of the Union ever more. In search of balance, it has persistently sought to preserve its status quo in its Mediterranean South, seeking to survive, at the same time hesitant about its hegemonic ideals over the region. This paper aims to apply a systemic theory, namely defensive neorealism on European foreign policy behavior in North Africa by examining its interests on the region over years based on power calculations and future intentions under the international systemic pressure. The method of the paper is hence the application of a theory (defensive neorealism) to a specific case (the case of the EU's relations with North Africa). It suggests that the EU has arguably taken a defensive and soft power-projection attitude into the region by balancing its aims and security interests towards its southern Mediterranean neighbors.*

**Keywords:** *Defensive Neorealism, EU - North Africa Relations, Migration, Terrorism, Energy Security, Failed States, Trade and Economic Issues.*

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\* This article builds on the author's Ph.D. dissertation entitled "A Defensive Neorealist Assessment of the EU's North Africa Policy: Before and After the Arab Spring".

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## AVRUPA BİRLİĞİNİN KUZEY AFRIKA POLİTİKASI: SAVUNMACI NEOREALİST BİR DEĞERLENDİRME

### Öz

*Kuzey Afrika, Avrupa'nın yakın çevresidir ve dolayısıyla Avrupa güvenliği için stratejik öneme sahiptir. Akdeniz Afrikası, Avrupa Birliği (AB) için daha çok ticari ve ekonomik olarak önemli bir rol oynamaktayken Soğuk Savaş sonrası dönemde göç, terör, enerji güvenliği ve başarısız devlet konuları bölgenin başlıca güvenlik sorunları haline gelmiştir. Bununla yakından bağlantılı olarak; 2010/11'de Kuzey Afrika'da başlayan Arap Baharı ayaklanmaları, sonuçları ve sonrası açısından Avrupa'nın güvenliğini ve bölgedeki diğer önemli çıkarlarını ciddi bir şekilde tehdit eden sorunlu bir dönüşüm sürecini tetiklemiştir. Bu durum; başta Rusya ve Çin olmak üzere Kuzey Afrika'da yükselen güçlerin hızla genişleyen rolüyle birleşip, bölgede ABD ve AB'nin kendi aralarında dikkate değer etkileşim ve işbirliğine rağmen bölge mimarisini yeniden tasarlama konusunda bir rekabet yaşadıkları çok kutuplu yeni bir bölgesel oluşumu beslemektedir. Bu doğrultuda, Arap Baharı'nın başlamasından sonraki yıllar hayatta kalma konusunu AB'nin önüne daha fazla çıkarmıştır. Bir denge arayışı içinde olan AB, Akdeniz'in güneyinde statükosunu korumaya ve bölgede hayatta kalmaya çalışmakta, ama aynı zamanda bölge üzerindeki hegemonik idealleri konusunda tereddüt etmektedir. Bu makale; sistemik bir teoriyi, tam adıyla savunmacı neorealizmi, Avrupa'nın Kuzey Afrika'da yıllar boyunca süregelen bölgesel çıkarlarını inceleyerek uluslararası sistemik baskı altında güç hesaplamaları ve gelecek niyetlerine dayanarak bölgedeki dış politikasına uygulamayı hedeflemektedir. Çalışmanın yöntemi, bir teorinin (savunmacı neorealizm) belirli bir vakaya (AB'nin Kuzey Afrika ile ilişkileri) uygulanmasıdır. Çalışma, tartışılır şekilde AB'nin Akdeniz komşularına yönelik olarak amaçlarını ve güvenlik çıkarlarını dengelemek suretiyle bölgede savunmacı ve yumuşak güç projeksiyonu tutumu gösterdiğini önermektedir.*

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** *Savunmacı Neorealizm, AB-Kuzey Afrika İlişkileri, Göç, Terör, Enerji Güvenliği, Başarısız Devlet, Ticaret ve Ekonomi.*

### Introduction

Since the 1970s, Kenneth Waltz's neorealism swept the field of international politics. While core tenets of traditional realism presented a behaviorist approach, they enabled the systematic method after the theory was succeeded by Waltz's formulation. Instead of classical realism's central theme of "human nature", neorealists explain power politics in terms of relative distribution of power in the international system (structuralism). Thus, much of the neorealist

literature can be regarded as a new version to the main paradigms of realism rather than as a rival approach for the analysis of the international system. Neorealism –structural realism, as the name implies– can aptly be captured with the effects of the *anarchical structure* of the international system on the behavior of states in contrast to classical realism’s close association with the behavior of states and decision-making of actors. It is, in fact, the anarchic structure that forces states to pursue power. On the other hand, as neorealism has some relative blind spots, some features of the EU, such as cooperation, contradict neorealist predictions. Yet, in terms of analyzing the logic behind European policies in North Africa, it could be suggested that defensive-neorealist reasoning which emphasizes that interests of security and survival are the primary concerns of the EU, is more appropriate. Neorealism’s defensive branch, in particular, is primarily concerned with maintaining the balance of power and/or balance of threat to bring more security. Accordingly, cooperation is possible to achieve and maintain in resolving conflicts of interest before states end up in severe armed conflicts. Evidence suggests that changes in strategic economic and security interests and intentions of the EU have resulted in changes of its preferences for global strategies over the years. For example, the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) was established when the EU needed to strengthen its military capabilities in 1990s in the necessity of a security dimension as well as having a role as an international actor. Considering these arguments of defensive doctrine, one can argue that the EU is defensively-oriented in its motives and security interests towards its southern Mediterranean neighbors. Therefore, the role of European foreign policy can be examined in a wider context under the premises of defensive neorealism. As a result of such an analysis, defensive neorealism suggests helpful predictions and prescriptions to explore European security behavior in North Africa by looking through two theoretical lenses, namely balance of power realism and balance of threat realism.

The main purpose of this paper is to explore the extent to which European practices on the region can be explained by theory. While defense-oriented policies gained much prominence in the EU’s policy-making agenda, the sub-case of Arab Spring provides an ongoing laboratory in order to see if defensive neorealism tells much about anything on the case of EU-North Africa relations<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> There is a long and extensive discussion about the terminology of the wave of mass anti-regime protests and the following major changes occurred in North Africa, known colloquially as the Arab Spring that has swept the whole region since the end of 2010. So far, a combination of different connotations have been used for the dramatic cascade of events, mostly grounded on Arabist sentiments, such as the ‘Arab Awakening’, ‘Arab Democracy Spring’, ‘Arab Revolutions’, ‘Arab Uprisings’, ‘Arab Unrest’, ‘Arab Revolts’ and even ‘Jasmine Revolution’(Tunisia). From those, ‘spring’, ‘revolutions’ and ‘uprisings’ have been the most commonly used. In this study, the most popular phrase, the ‘Arab Spring’ is used to

The paper accepts the assumption that the EU acts in an anarchic system where member states position themselves to protect their relative gains at the EU sub-system level. The first part examines the key arguments of neorealism and compares both variants of neorealism, both offensive and defensive. By emphasizing the significance of the defensive camp, it attempts to establish that many of the insights provided by the theory are compatible with the implications for European behavior in its Southern Mediterranean neighborhood. It also reflects how the EU's defensive foreign policy orientation in a multipolar context is influenced by the emergence of new major powers in North Africa. The focus in the second part of the paper is on the significance of North Africa for Europe from a defensive neorealist argument in order to be able to explain the logic behind EU policies in the region. It offers a historical context on the evolving importance of the region for Europe. The third part explores a range of different institutional frameworks and arrangements created by the EU towards North Africa over the past decades. It aims to assess what has happened with respect to European policies in the region since the initial agreements of the 1970s, focusing more on the evolution of European efforts from the end of the Cold War to the end of 2010 –well before the Arab Spring started. Lastly, the paper determines the underlying causes and challenges of the Arab Spring together with an analysis of European response.

### **Neorealism and the Defensive Neorealist Variant of the Theory**

Looking at Waltz's explanation of the *systemic* determinants of international politics, Waltz groups the *structure* of the international system to three propositions (1979:79-101): "ordering principles, the character of the units and the distribution of capabilities". The first one is concerned with the principles on how the system is ordered. Notably, anarchy and decentralization are the defining features of the international system rather than a centralized and hierarchical realm. The second proposition shows that the units of an anarchical system are formally and functionally similar. For example, nation-states all share the main motive of survival and security. The third one is based on the premise that these units are "distinguished primarily by their greater or lesser capabilities for performing similar tasks" (Waltz, 1979:97). Although capabilities are a unit level self-regarding attribute, distribution of capabilities is a system-wide concept. Whenever the distribution of capabilities changes across the system, the structure along with the expectations and behavior of the units, such as war and peace or balance of power, also changes. Here, one can

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pinpoint the phenomenon, despite the questions whether or not the 'Arab Spring' is an empty or false slogan. While the phrase has been the most encompassing and widespread conception at all times, it is also used in this paper as a framing and umbrella definition in an attempt to provide a universal rhetoric for understanding the notion when referring to the events.

argue that certain external threats or challenges (in the condition of anarchy) have made sudden shifts in the course of European integration. As Youngs (2011:92) exemplifies, “post-war reconciliation created the European Communities; American and Japanese competition drove the Single European Act; the Cold War’s abrupt end gave birth to the Maastricht treaty and, less resolutely, 9/11 and international terrorism prompted a deepening of security co-operation”. Given that, the conditions and/or the pressures of the international system can be addressed as the reason of why neorealism views the possibilities of international cooperation, gains in capabilities, and the role of multipolarity mostly in pessimistic terms.

With its institutional structures, processes and mechanisms, the EU is unique (*sui generis*), dynamic and incremental in nature. Its complex and hybrid form brings about many difficulties in neorealist perspective thus makes it necessary to analyze the phenomenon through which the EU has been termed as a system structure. As such, how the EU can be analyzed in the view of systemic analysis comes to the forefront. In search of an answer to this question, one could say that the EU must be considered as a *sub-system* in neorealist perspective so that it could also be evaluated in its own dynamics. In the context of the sub-system structure, the EU can be seen as a “vehicle” of member states to maximize their own security and relative gains in an anarchic international system. In this way, both European balance of power and the aspirations, concerns and calculations of individual EU member states, along with their responses to the structural pressures (by pursuing their own national foreign policy preferences), can be emphasized.

While the intra-theory debate in neorealism opens up new and divergent assumptions between offensive neorealism and defensive neorealism, it could be put forward that defensive-neorealist reasoning, out of two systemic theories, is more appropriate to choose in terms of analyzing the logic behind European policies in North Africa. This is because it emphasizes that interests of security and survival are the primary concerns of all states, which is also true for the actions of the EU and its individual members as self-interested actors.

According to defensive neorealism, states merely aim to survive (Waltz, 1979:91) which is considered as a defensive motive. It highlights that states do not continuously attempt to increase power but maintain moderate and reasonable security-seeking policies. Security is the primary concern in the international environment rather than power and expansion. States might consider expansion only to achieve security. As Taliaferro (2000:152) asserts, only “under certain circumstances, defensive neorealism expects states to pursue expansionist strategies as a means to achieve security”. Contrary to what offensive neorealism identifies the inherent goal of states to be a hegemon, defensive neorealism pinpoints the ultimate goal of states as survival. States are

status quo powers and security-maximization suffices for them. Aggression is considered to be self-defeating and counterproductive in the pursuit of security. Basically, states seek power to the extent that it creates a balance. Security is relatively plentiful among states (Walt, 1987:49).

On this front, it can be said that the EU embraces defensive neorealism by mainly exercising and signaling self-restraint and pursuit of security. It has largely projected *soft power* in its neighborhood during the past few decades. It has also followed moderate *force for good* strategies in dealing with its neighbors through involvement in multilateral regional mechanisms and strategic alliances/partnerships rather than the exercise of military power. In this sense, it could be argued that the signals about multilateral cooperation and partnerships sent by the EU beyond its borders by underpinning civilian or normative dimensions of its foreign policy for years might be regarded as benign and reassuring regional motivations indicating no intentions of becoming a *hegemon* in its wide neighborhood. The EU's approach of stabilization and the creation of a 'ring of friends' surrounding the Union – within the concept of a 'wider Europe' – can therefore be viewed as a reflection of these ambitions.

In contradiction to these positive efforts of the Union, however, one can also look at the 1990s' Balkan crisis and the war in former Yugoslavia, a decade before the launch of the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP), to see how the EU's slow and ill-equipped reaction to these crises featured the limitations of its soft power, and more importantly how its general weak impact on its next-door neighbours has revealed the prevailing tendency in the EU to preserve the "status quo". One might suggest here that this tendency can also be found in the EU's relations with its southern neighbours both before and after the Arab Spring. Several years after the events of the Arab Spring, in a period of North Africa's stormy transition and "descending into ever greater levels of chaos and violence, the EU and its member states have been largely reduced to being bystanders, dealing with the symptoms of crises rather than impacting –let alone shaping– the path of developments" (Asseburg, 2014). One could argue that behind the contradictory and somewhat apathetic behavior of the EU – especially whenever turbulences arise in its close vicinity– lays the fact that the Union essentially pursues an interest-driven foreign policy approach with the mere aim of security maximization at its borders, consistent with defensive neorealist assumptions. So the conclusion that can be drawn from the above argument is that the EU's apparent desire to cooperate with these countries stems from a defensive motive in order to respond properly to the challenges surrounding it, albeit inspired by a hegemonic nature to a certain extent, by way of boosting its capabilities to be able to increase its impact on the future rules of

the game in a troubled and uncertain region prompted by the upsurge of a multipolar regional order and new security concerns to European interests.

Using defensive variant of neorealism, it could be suggested that anarchy has encouraged the EU, particularly after influenced by the security imperatives of the Cold War, to collectively maximize its security as an alliance, whilst preserving its status-quo power by using multilateral means that tend to be defensive practices (e.g. Euro-Med Policy, ENP and beyond). It is argued that although the EU has maintained its security interests and objectives through active engagement in North Africa –by consistently using normative means and rhetoric of democratic promotion– the Union’s shift to a more assertive approach to its Arab neighbors in the post-2011 period reveals that its previous policy was in fact “a temporary outburst of idealistic enthusiasm of the post-Cold War years, which now moves ‘back to normal’” (Kausch, 2010). Perhaps, more remarkably, “the EU failed to foresee the coming of the Arab Spring –in its own backyard– and was slow and fuzzy in its response, thus missing a spectacular chance to contribute to the democratic development of the area” (Bindi and Angelescu, 2012:28). The outcome of this drawback might be that it severely hampered the EU’s long-term holistic vision in the pursuit of expanding a zone of stability, security and prosperity beyond its borders, whilst it challenged Europe’s previous regional status-quo toward a step backward into Peter Seeberg’s (2009) description of the “EU as a realist actor in normative clothes”.

In a defensive neorealist mindset, states first and foremost seek for security, not for power. As such, external environment is of critical importance hence has profound impact on the EU’s foreign policy. That said, the EU, pressured by new security concerns in the last decade, has many reasons to fear instability located in close geographical proximity including North Africa. Here, it can be seen that a range of safety/threat dimensions to the security of the EU has had an impact on its policies over time. From this perspective, the development of European foreign policy towards its peripheries can be said to have been primarily motivated by security-seeking behavior (particularly in the post-Cold War era) due to gradual emerging security threats at the Union’s southern borders in time, coupled with the uncertainty of the roles of various actors shaping regional order in the wider Mediterranean context. It is therefore widely believed that the EU’s interest in the creation and widening of ‘ring of friends’ around its borders, especially since 1995 (by launching the Barcelona Process), is based on strengthening and extending its security around its periphery whereby North Africa region becomes “the EU’s southern buffer zone” within the notion of “EU borderlands” (Del Sarto, 2010). However, in the light of the changes in its security environment –such as the Arab Spring– the EU has become more sensitive to the threats surrounding it. Moreover, since the

region experienced a wave of revolutions, considerable instability has prevailed in the southern bank of the Mediterranean. As a result, defense-oriented policies gained much prominence in the EU's policy-making agenda. In this sense, the sub-case of the Arab Spring provides an ongoing laboratory in order to see if defensive neorealism tells much about anything on the case of EU-North Africa relations.

Looking through a defensive theoretical lens to the transatlantic relationship between the EU and the US, neither balance of power nor balance of threat by itself can explain the relations. A combination of two balancing theories may offer more. Wivel (2006:302) makes a general summary of European balancing behavior from a similar theoretical lens:

From the balance-of-power view, Europeans are stuck in dependence. Their best bet is to bandwagon with the United States. This allows them to continue to free-ride on American security provision and help to prolong the period of American unipolarity, which has so far been mostly beneficial to Europe. From the balance-of-threat view, Europeans should strengthen and refine their hedging strategy to reflect the dual nature of American power and intentions: the United States is willing to use its power to cooperate with the Europeans, but only to the extent that it serves its interests. This creates the need for a strong and independent Europe able to strike the delicate balance between maintaining a stable security alliance with the Americans and pursuing independent European interests when necessary.

By applying these frameworks to the case of EU-North Africa relations, one can argue that since North Africa region has been the central focus of both Europe and America for decades –where their interests mainly converge and rarely diverge– mixed patterns of competition and cooperation in transatlantic relations, from a theoretically based explanation of both European soft-balancing and bandwagoning on the US, may have a greater explanatory reach in understanding approaches of the Union in North Africa.

Moreover, the rise of other emerging powers in the world, coupled with the decline of US unipolarity, are currently reshaping the character of the international system, ultimately having a crucial impact on Europe's approach in North Africa. Although the US is likely to play a dominant role in global affairs for the foreseeable future, one might claim that today the conditions for the reawakening of a multipolar world are sufficiently evident. As Waltz (2000:37) prophesies “multipolarity is developing before our eyes”. Put differently, “the current international system is shaped by the interplay of unipolar and multipolar dynamics” (Roberts, 2002:17). Yet, there is an alternative to unipolarity, bipolarity and multipolarity called as *tripolarity* – where ‘nuclear-weapon states’ as the US, Russia and China compete for global power politics– also being discussed within the critics of polarity (Roberts,



2002; Akram, 2013). While the US and the EU have had predominant positions in North Africa for many years, Russia and China are also rapidly increasing their presence in the region, most particularly in the energy and trade domains. Indeed, a greater level of uncertainty within a changing international environment makes the role of Russia and China in North Africa a double-edged sword for Europe. From a theoretical point of view, this fast-developing systemic challenge of which Russia and China policy choices toward North Africa intimately impact upon EU policies has required the Union to reconsider its role and policies in the region. It could be argued that in the face of an increasingly threatening and unstable neighborhood, Europe has been ever more acting as a security maximizer and status-quo orientated actor, consistent with the neorealist conception of a “defensive positionalist” (Grieco *et al.*, 1993). Yet, within the context of a seemingly tectonic shift in the structure of the international system, any transformation in the distribution of power in North Africa will continue to have substantial ramifications for the Union as to how it realigns itself in the renewed regional order in its south.

Under these circumstances, the EU’s structure, dynamics and policies have been strongly affected and shaped by these systemic forces. It has been particularly felt intense in North Africa region, representing the greatest shift in the region since decolonization, coupled with the broader Arab Spring sparked in late 2010. With lessened US interest and engagement resulting in a gradual withdrawal from North Africa, the tendency towards the end of American hegemony in the region has been a critical factor that has left space for potential intervention in the region by other global players, primarily by Russia and China. Since new players have involved in North Africa, the region has become a multipolar arena. On this front, Europe has again come on the brink of missing its chance to be the most powerful actor in the region in spite of its favorable circumstances such as historical ties and geographic proximity to the region.

### **The Significance of North Africa for Europe from a Defensive Neorealist Point**

Critically, North Africa geopolitically belongs to the European area of influence as there are strong historical ties between the two shores of *Mare Nostrum* which rest upon mutual gains at multiple levels. One can trace the shape of current relations back to the colonial past of the western European states in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. France and Britain were the two main powers in colonial North Africa along with Spain and Italy. Basically, French military and political leader Napoleon Bonaparte’s expedition to Egypt, conquering the Ottoman province in 1798, was the key in the sparking of colonization of the Mediterranean Africa. France and Britain invaded the countries of the region and became the first dominating powers. This led to

other European powers join the “Scramble for North Africa”. In the end, France controlled Algeria, Tunisia and Morocco; Britain controlled Egypt; Italy controlled Libya, and Spain controlled northern part of Morocco.

The colonization of North Africa, which came to an end with the collapse of Europe-dominated imperial order after the Second World War, marked an important period of European history and relations with its southern Arab neighbors. Yet despite regained independence, former links have been deepened and European influence continued in the region up till today. Nevertheless, North Africa has not become a more integrated and prosperous region in the postcolonial era down to various reasons, in particular political conflicts, poor economy and authoritarianism. Intense regional tensions, security conflicts and stability concerns, such as the North African Campaign of World War II, the Egyptian–Israeli war, border conflicts and certainly the latest Arab Spring by its wider impact in EMEA (Europe, the Middle East and Africa) have been the main problems over the region.

From the era of decolonization in the aftermath of WWII, by hosting some unstable and fragile states, North Africa has been an area of insecurity for Europe, while at the same time remained a strategic geopolitical space to protect and advance postcolonial interests of major European powers. The launch of an integrated Europe in the early 1950s coincided with the independence movements of North African countries and the process of decolonization through the Cold War years, as shown in Table 1. Meanwhile, Europe was losing ground in the wider region at the time of signing the Treaty of Rome in 1957 (Khader, 2013:12).

**Table 1: Colonization and Independence in North Africa**

Country	Colonial power	Start of colonization	Independence year
Libya	Italy/ Britain/France	1911	1951
Egypt	Britain	1882	1922/1936/1953
Tunisia	France	1881	1956
Morocco	France/Spain	1907	1956
Algeria	France	1830	1962

The national uprisings of 2011 in quest of political independence in the Arab world have triggered new strategic relations between the EU and North Africa. As a revolutionary event on the EU's doorstep, new regimes have brought new dimensions to the EU's foreign and security policy aspects, as well as European member states'. Over the years, the legacy of colonialism has continued to shape the relations creating geographical, historical and economic peripheries in the immediate neighborhood of Europe based on postcolonial links (especially to France) (Dannreuther, 2004:23). Moreover, after the EU enlargement

southwards, security challenges in Mediterranean neighborhood –due to geographical proximity– have generated various threats and risks for the EU, which necessitated the formation of new strategies in response to these challenges. Defensive neorealists posit that structural modifiers, including geographic proximity may increase or reduce aggression (Taliaferro, 2000:137). Given the geographic proximity of North Africa region to Europe, it is very important for the Union to stabilize the region for security. One could argue that European states have been driven by defensive reasoning within the theory of balance of threat by focusing on “maintaining stability in its proximity, reducing migration flows, securing energy supplies and ensuring cooperation and an ongoing security dialogue, including combating terrorism and weapons proliferation”. In empirical reality, these security concerns of Europe are consistent with the EU’s survival motive and defensive stance. As explained by Dworkin (2016:9):

Waves of migrants are passing through the region to Europe, and terrorist groups are an increasingly severe threat in several North African countries. Under these circumstances, it is not surprising that the European Union’s stance towards North Africa is now overwhelmingly defensive.

On the other hand, Satloff (1997:7-8) draws attention to the fact that despite Europe’s important links and geographical proximity resulting in a set of initiatives and policies developed towards its North African neighbors, the EU, since the 1970s, has been in a “secondary status” in the region where the Union and the US have maintained “an informal division of labor”, with the US being the leader of the Western efforts and the EU having limited roles such as supporting and financing US initiatives, simply pursuing political and economic interests in the region. Although both have shared common threats in the region, the perceptions and the strategies on how to deal with these threats, have widely differed (i.e. American military instruments versus European civilian means). The US has intensively begun to involve in the region since the 1973 Arab-Israeli (October) War, with a particular interest for peacemaking and conducting other military interventions in the wider region (Miller, 2012:346). The EU, on the other hand, has taken a divergent path from the US, using multilateral means and institutions, reflecting a defensive foreign policy orientation, which involves maximization of security by protecting its status-quo in the management of regional balance of capabilities as a way of projecting its soft power.

### **Relations between Europe and North Africa**

From the second half of the twentieth century, the EU has put forward a status-quo oriented behavior in its south regarding the fact that major powers of the world have also begun to increase their interests in MENA (Middle East and North Africa), where also substantial changes have brought about new regional

set of threats located in or emanating from the region. Indeed, serious concerns such as the spread of terrorism and illegal migration moving northwards have severely affected the EU's interests and security situation across the wider neighborhood. As the regional landscape has evolved into a security-driven endeavor for Europe, the stability and the future of MENA have become a matter of increasing priority for the EU's collective foreign policy actions that are very much related to its defensive objectives built on strong colonial legacy, geographical proximity, linked tightly to strategic and economic concerns including energy dependence on oil and gas supplies. On such a basis, it could be argued that Europe has, over a period of time, evolved from an offensive neorealist position as the sole regional hegemon in North Africa towards a defensive neorealist stance under the European Community, aspiring to maximize regional security and maintain its status-quo by strengthening its position among other major powers in the region as well as furthering its ties with the regional states through the formation of alliances and relationships. This could be the reason for why the EU has developed various regional mechanisms involving its Southern Arab neighbors over the past decades.

There are mainly six successive –sometimes overlapping– phases in Euro-North African policies; the Global Mediterranean Policy (1972-1990), the Euro-Arab Dialogue (EAD, 1973-1989), the Renewed Mediterranean Policy (1990-1995), the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP –also known as the Barcelona Process of 1995-2008), the European Neighborhood Policy (launched in 2003 and reviewed in 2011 after the Arab Spring) and the Barcelona Process: the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM, launched in 2008 as a continuation of EMP of 1995, which is still valid today). All these initiatives and tools, along with several other cooperation forums between the specific countries of both shores of the region, such as the 5+5 initiative (1990) and the Mediterranean Forum (1992, a co-initiative by France and Egypt) have been “launched, tested, and re-launched by the European Commission, the Council, and the EU Member States, resulting in a tangle of policies” (Wouters and Duquet, 2013:231). In the long run, “the EU considerably refined these tools and repeatedly adjusted the shape and content of its Mediterranean policies” (Behr, 2012:76). Overall, it is considered that “the Mediterranean has been on and off the agenda” for the EU (Bicchi, 2003:1).

On a theoretical level, however, one might also discuss that whereas above shifts and strategic adjustments in the Mediterranean policies of the EU over time reflect some sort of incoherency and the lack of consistency, these revisions, whether successful or unsuccessful, were practically in line with the Union's changing priorities and the geopolitics of the region dictated by the systemic conditions of the international environment by the end of the Cold War, most especially following 9/11. While European integration deepened and

widened with time, a blend of soft and hard security considerations in the area of Middle East and North Africa became the new impetus for Europe's policy changes. This line of neorealist reasoning would be plausible concerning the transformation in the character of the regional threats derived no longer from the great military powers of the region, but from the transnational threats that operate in weak and fragile/failed states in certain regions like North Africa. As Francis Fukuyama wrote (2004:92), "since the end of the Cold War, weak and failing states have arguably become the single most important problem for international order". In this vein, it could be argued that Europe has eventually tended to view its southern periphery more as a security issue. Yet, increasing security vulnerabilities and tensions have largely occurred in fragile countries of the region. So, with all the difficulties, the linkage between the two shores of Mediterranean has developed between "threatened Europe and a threatening 'arch of crisis' in the southern Mediterranean" (Horst, Jünemann and Maggi Rothe, 2013:7). Under these circumstances, Europe has ultimately positioned itself in a defensive posture in which fundamental changes on the threat perceptions and security needs of the EU have determined the tools it has used in managing these regional threats, although most of these initiatives have reportedly generated dilemmas on the other shore of the Mediterranean, resulting in failure at the very end.

As Bauer (2015:34-35) argues, "the analysis of EU policy toward the Mediterranean should not neglect the findings on the logic of the EU system itself as a result of the EU's systemic structure", because balancing of national interests of the member states are represented by various forms of interaction through supranational EU institutions, such as the European Council, the Council of the European Union, the European Commission and the European Parliament. Yet, this complex actor structure comprises a highly diversified albeit interconnected European sub-system. In this light, taking into account the limits at the sub-systemic level of analysis in a defensive neorealist approach where the EU with its own dynamics may be considered as a sub-system and the unit-of analysis are its member states, the fact that France, being a major power in the European sub-regional system along with its past strong strategic linkages and the realpolitik interests in the Mediterranean basin –essentially regarded as a special zone of French influence for decades and even for centuries– has allowed it to create, lead and promote most of the initiatives for EU-Mediterranean regional cooperation from the 1970s to the present. In that sense, the Euro-Arab Dialogue, EMP and UfM are relevant examples that were initiated and led by the French at the EU level.

In an attempt to assess these aspects of Europe's policies on its south within the theoretical framework of defensive neorealism, Walt's balance of threat theory requires attention as the EU seemingly perceives the region more from a

security perspective rather than economic. Therefore, after the end of the Cold War and 9/11, regional threats have been the catalyst for the EU to launch and adopt new policies. As Walt (1987) puts forwards, ‘in anarchy, states form alliances to protect themselves’ and “their conduct is determined by the threats they perceive and the power of others is merely one element in their calculations”. In that, states estimate threats posed by other states by relative power, proximity, intentions, and the offence–defence balance. From this perspective, it could be argued that the EU has aimed to pursue an offshore balancing strategy towards its southern periphery, in which the regional balance of power is maintained by allied countries (in that case, North African states), providing the security of their own region and sharing the burden through bilateral and multilateral frameworks with Europe.

### **The Evolution and Impact of EU Policies since the Arab Spring**

On December 17, 2010, the tragic self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi, a young university-educated street vendor, triggered mass demonstrations and protests against the government of Zine El Abidine Ben Ali in Tunisia, which followed by protests in Libya and Egypt on a large scale, and in Algeria and Morocco on a smaller scale. Various regime transformations have irrevocably taken place across the countries of North Africa, which eventually led to the ouster of Tunisian President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali (after 23 years in power), the deposition and execution of colonel Muammar al-Qaddafi of Libya by rebel forces (after 42 years in power) and the overthrowing of Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak (after almost 30 years in power). Although Algeria and Morocco have as well been affected by the turmoil that spread in the region, the protests in these countries did not transform into serious and violent upheavals. Unlike neighboring country leaders, the long-standing authoritarian rulers of Morocco’s King Mohammed VI and Algerian President Abdelaziz Bouteflika, both who came to power in 1999, managed to stay in power after the Arab Spring, arguably by promising further reforms and pursuing proactive policies in the face of the wave of protests and afterwards, instead of becoming more stubborn and resistant to removal and the preservation of their existing power.

The Arab Spring not only surprised, but also posed a variety of major challenges to the EU. Most significantly, it has shown the limits of European power in North Africa. In that sense, it came “as a wake-up call for the EU, forcing it to reconsider past policies and to readjust its policies to the new reality emerging in the Mediterranean and the Arab World at large” (Khader, 2013:31). The Arab Spring has, on the systemic level, led to long-term political changes and a redistribution of power within the existing regional balance of power, hence given an important impetus to the regional security agenda of the EU in questioning its position and the strategies it has thus far used to balance

its interests by searching, questionably, for an appropriate policy response to the unexpected events after the first hesitation.

On the other hand, the Arab Spring has raised considerable controversy in terms of its indicators, both internal and external. Some scholars contend that the fundamental goal of the events was seemingly a political transition towards a more open and democratic system involving electoral and constitutional reforms, which eventually marked the beginning of a new era transforming the authoritarian regimes. Some others take a wider perspective discussing that while the Arab Spring substantially has a political dimension challenging the status quo ante, significant socio-economic hardship was in fact the major catalyst in fueling the protests (Dalacoura, 2012; Wouters and Duquet, 2013). In such a perspective, coupled with the rapid population increase in the Arab world doubled from 1980 to the time of the Arab Spring, considering 60% of that population were under 25 years old with high levels of unemployment (Foreign Affairs Committee, 2012), it could be said that important social factors for transition with economic implications had existed before the uprisings. It is therefore considered that deeply rooted socio-economic discontent, linked to the demands of people (mostly the young), harbored the widespread feeling of inertia, the loss of dignity (*karama*) and individual worth, along with a growing sense of injustice ultimately fueling the protests among populations (Janning, 2013:17; Dalacoura, 2012:67; Behr and Aaltola, 2011:6).

In Dalacoura's words (2012:66), "an explosive mix of socio-economic problems and widespread and deepening political grievances constituted a common causal thread behind all the uprisings". In the same vein, Dworkin (2016:10) highlights that "marginalization, lack of opportunity, and the absence of basic human dignity are powerful drivers of unrest". Even more broadly, mal-governance, repressive and violent nature of the Arab regimes (i.e. the dictatorial practices and extensive corruption), economic mismanagement resulted in high rates of (youth) unemployment, inflation, middle-class poverty in addition to corrupt judiciary system, lack of functioning institutions, militarization of public sphere, human rights abuses, gender and income inequality have been generally cited as the underlying structural factors of the public intolerance for autocrat regimes which led to the Arab Spring (Idris, 2016; Janning, 2013; Dalacoura, 2012). Overall, the root factors that slowly prepared the eruption of the Arab Spring merge into a set of deficits as Behr and Aaltola (2011:2) clearly puts together; "a combination of deteriorating living standards and growing inequality (an economic deficit), a lack of political freedoms and public accountability (a political deficit), and the alienation of the demographically dominant age cohorts from the political order (a dignity deficit)".

However, since the very beginning of a multifaceted relationship from the 1970s to the years leading up to the revolutionary Arab Spring, the most important factor under the EU's decades-long ineffective and dubious past Mediterranean policies lies its inability to craft and promote political reforms and democracy in the countries of the region other than merely support deep economic reforms that have been based mainly on Europe's own political agenda and interest-calculus within the aforesaid fast-changing geopolitical environment of the region. In this vein, it could be argued that while the EU desired to increase the political and economic cohesion of its south with the aim of avoiding the militarization of political disputes or preventing their recurrence through supporting the ruling autocrats as well as by the formation of bilateral and multilateral structures of economic cooperation, North African and Middle Eastern regimes who have undertaken these partial economic reforms through European resources did not see deep political change at all. As a result, the EU's "normative rhetoric" of democracy promotion and its results mainly "promoted the assumption that the European Union was an interest-driven actor, concerned primarily with securing energy supplies and migration control, taming political Islam and fighting against international terrorism by cooperation with authoritarian Arab partner countries" (Bauer, 2015:30).

As widely acknowledged, the EU's reaction to the Arab Spring was slow and weak at first, when it was caught by surprise to the events in its south (Koch 2011; Isaac 2012). Aliboni (2012:14) stresses that European response has come partly from the EU and partly from national governments. This implies that not a shared and unified but a divided response by the EU members, in accordance to their own foreign policy agendas, were reached in some cases of the events. One can argue that within the new regional/global world order, European policies in North Africa were pursued by member states' "fear of radicalism, migration, and terrorism, which is reflected throughout the regional and bilateral initiatives taken" (Wouters and Duquet 2013:239). It should be noted that Europe has also, since 2008, lurched into its own financial crisis as well as political tensions within the euro zone, in which a lack of enthusiasm among much of the EU member states has prevailed in supporting North African countries in transition. As such, the reasons for the reluctance and bystander policies of the member states should be considered manifold. In defensive neorealist account, member states in the EU sub-system are status-quo powers; simply put 'defensive positionalists' who aim at security maximization through preserving the existing balance of power. The decisions taken within the EU sub-system toward its external environment are hence shaped by a degree of power asymmetry –as the necessary feature of the anarchical system and self-help mechanism– which is consistent with the expectations of neorealism.



On the other hand, while the Arab Spring events gradually intensified, the nature of European policies and commitment towards its neighbors in southern Mediterranean has greatly changed. The EU then pressed the reset button in Euro-Mediterranean relations, with security being the key concern (Barrinha 2013). In concrete terms, this included the EU's critical and rapid reassessment of its foreign and regional policies towards the Southern Mediterranean first, and then, a revision in conceptualizing these with a set of key frameworks. The initial reactions of the EU to the Arab Spring events can be outlined in two policy documents: first, in March 2011 with the joint communication of the High Representative/Vice President (HR/VP) Catherine Ashton and European Commission (2011a) proposing "A Partnership for Democracy and Shared Prosperity with the Southern Mediterranean"; and second, in May 2011 entitled "A New Response to a Changing Neighborhood" (European Commission 2011b) within the framework of a fundamentally 'renewed European Neighborhood Policy', stating that "the EU needs to rise to the historical challenges in our neighborhood". The key novelty in these policies was Catherine Ashton's 'Three Ms' –money, market access and mobility– emerged out of ENP revision, following the principle of 'more for more' based on positive conditionality.

According to some scholars, all measures taken by the EU outline how ENP and other mechanisms it has established could be used to advance democracy in these countries while also they promise an increase in the resources for the region (Burke 2013:6). On the other hand, some other scholars discuss that there is a contrast "between the strong normative rhetoric and the poor outcomes of EU democracy promotion in the MENA countries" (Bauer 2015:30). This strengthens the idea that step by step, the EU's policies towards the region, including the post-Spring period, have been a dilemma so far, and yet there is still not a holistic mechanism to deal with all the security issues of the region.

## **Conclusion**

In 2010/11, the Arab Spring uprisings triggered a troubled transformation process in North Africa, where the consequences and aftermath of the events seriously threatened European security and other important interests in the region. By giving the primary causes and challenges of the 2010/11 Arab Spring, it is claimed in this paper that the events have transformed the regional political landscape of the region. Moreover, the rapidly expanding role of new rising powers, Russia and China in particular, has fostered a new multipolar regional context in North Africa where the US and the EU have already had a competition in redesigning the architecture of the region, notwithstanding the considerable interaction and cooperation between the two. All this has affected

the existing regional balance of power dramatically leading to a redistribution of power in the region as an impetus for the security agenda of the EU.

In this paper, it is highlighted that as the events took Europe by surprise, the EU was unprepared and hesitant at first, the reason of why a proactive and collective approach could not been facilitated for policymaking towards the region in the immediate aftermath of the events. It is stressed that with the new emerging threat perceptions facing Europe, the Union has begun to collectively position itself in a new defensive posture depending on the security needs. Theoretically, it is put forward that; growing regional security threats aggravated by the destabilizing effect of the Arab Spring have been the catalyst for the EU to launch and adopt arguably more coherent policies to obtain stability in the region by introducing new multilateral mechanisms and strategy-led new instruments with new governments.

As a consequence, the years after the start of the Arab Spring has strongly brought the survival issue to the fore of the Union ever more, evident in its foreign policy position to overcome these challenges. Taken more broadly, the EU, in search of balance, has persistently sought to preserve its status quo in its Mediterranean South, seeking to survive, at the same time hesitant about its hegemonic ideals over the region. And this uncertainty has prompted a variety of hedging balancing strategies towards the major actors in the region. Therefore, by conducting the application of a defensive neorealist perspective on the EU-North Africa relations as a case study, three propositions have been derived in this study to be able to further analyze European security seeking behavior in North Africa:

1. The EU constitutes a dual strategy towards the US in North Africa; both a *soft-balancing* act to offset US unilateralism in the region and a *bandwagoning* approach to keep the 'US pacifier' in a security alliance against threats that are endangering European security and regional stability.

2. The EU intends to build up its power and enhance its influence against emerging great powers in North Africa in order to preserve its status quo by *soft-balancing* Russia and China.

3. The EU seeks to maximize its security in North Africa against threats that are endangering European security and regional stability, by adopting an *offshore balancing strategy* and so shifting foreign policy burdens to its North African partners through regional tools.

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