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Hungary and the Arab Spring

Arab-Hungarian relations before, during and after the Arab Spring should be understood both in the context of Hungary's bilateral relationship to the Arab countries, and within the framework of Hungary's EU and NATO membership.

Arab-Hungarian bilateral relations

Political relations between Hungary and the Arab states were established relatively late: Although diplomatic relations with Egypt were established in 1928 and with Iraq in 1937, with other Arab states they were started after the Second World War, especially starting from the mid-50s.¹ These were institutionalised within the framework of the Arab relations of the socialist bloc as directed by the Soviet Union and were, consequently, mostly realized with the "friendly Arab socialist states".

Previously, Hungary's had been connected primarily to Turkey from among the countries of the Middle East, therefore, Hungary's experience of Islam was provided by Turkish relations. Although during the Cold War the selection of partners was based on political considerations, the economic and cultural dimension was significant, too. The Arab countries were an important market for Hungarian goods and know-how, where "hard currency" could be realized.² On the other hand, many among the leadership and the intelligentsia of the friendly Arab countries were trained in the socialist countries, thus in Hungary, which provided a special human capital.

After the regime change in 1989-1990, however, Arab-Hungarian relations suddenly fell back, most spectacularly the Palestinian and Libyan relations, since not only the political motivation disappeared, but, due to the economic liberalization most of the economic potential ceased to exist.

¹ See e.g. J. NAGY, *Magyarország és az arab térség*, pp. 23-26, 53-66.

² This possibility, however, was limited by the fact that these countries were also short of "hard currency", therefore, accounts were conducted in "clearing".

*Arab-Hungarian economic relations*³

	1982	1983	1984	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004
Algeria	96	137	144	8	9	23	16	7	11	15	25	22
Egypt	35	39	53	41	45	36	29	29	27	24	41	62
Emirates	3	8	10	14	17	12	13	10	33	132	461	590
Iraq	270	174	119	-	-	1	1	2	4	3	6	14
Jordan	15	12	12	5	5	8	5	4	6	12	19	46
Kuwait	36	31	25	27	7	5	12	21	18	9	26	40
Libya	81	101	84	2	12	11	6	5	5	3	5	3
Lebanon	38	42	53	21	26	22	15	18	15	18	19	47
Morocco	8	5	4	8	10	29	16	7	10	13	16	16
Saudi Arabia	20	38	47	34	29	23	23	28	40	84	99	109
Syria	57	24	39	26	20	39	15	17	19	20	24	21
Tunisia	10	9	37	10	9	16	10	15	9	14	25	23
Yemen	2	2	2	8	6	7	5	3	2	4	7	5
Other: Oman, Qatar, Bahrain	-	-	-	3	3	4	2	3	4	12	17	26
Total	671	622	629	207	198	236	168	169	203	363	790	1024

It should be noted, however, that in spite of the transition, the network of Hungarian embassies in the Arab world was maintained, in fact further embassies were opened, reflecting the fact that the relations have undergone a structural transformation and new interests have generated new contacts. Today, Hungary has diplomatic relations with all the Arab states in the Mediterranean, including Jordan. Further embassies are operating in the GCC countries (Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, the UAE and Qatar), and in Iraq and the Palestinian territories (Ramallah).

Arab-Hungarian relations in the period following the regime change were characterized by their low intensity. Foreign and domestic political attention was focused on Hungary's trans-Atlantic integration with attention to the Arab world shifting from government to government:⁴ from the expressed interest by the Antall and Orbán governments (although based on different factors), and the "Arab opening" of the first Orbán government⁵ to the remark by Ferenc Gyurcsány, which meant the lowest point.⁶ With the disappearance of socialist "mammoth" state-owned companies the economic elite that could be able and willing to pursue trade relations with farther

³ The analysis of Arab-Hungarian economic relations would far exceed the limits of this paper, but the table presented here fully supports the setback of relations around the regime change. The source of the figures is POMÁZI, *Magyarország és az arab országok közötti gazdasági kapcsolatok*, p. 77.

⁴ It should be noted that following the regime change Egypt was the only Arab state which was regularly present on the Hungarian foreign policy agenda.

⁵ Prime Minister József Antall visited Egypt in 1991. In June 2000, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán visited Morocco, then in 2001 Saudi Arabia.

⁶ Upon a "funny" remark by Prime Minister Ferenc Gyurcsány on a football match of the Hungarian national team with the Saudis, the Saudi ambassador was called back from Budapest, where he returned only after eight months.

away regions, disappeared temporarily. The transformation of the system of state scholarships was a significant factor in the decreasing number and changing character of Arab students arriving in Hungary. Although Arab relations have been continuously developing, their structure and scope have undergone a profound transformation.

Arab-Hungarian political relations

From the perspective of Hungarian foreign policy the Middle East is not among the priorities of the foreign policy agenda (“a focus outside the priorities”) in spite of the fact that a separate chapter deals with it in the strategic document entitled “Hungarian foreign policy after the EU presidency” which put forward the “global opening” published in December 2011. This could signal the beginning of a new phase in Arab-Hungarian relations, both symbolically and, in a way, to continue the “Arab opening” of the first Orbán government, further attested to by the visit of Prime Minister Viktor Orbán to Egypt in January 2011, and to Saudi Arabia in October.

It should be noted, however, that the different sub-regions of the Middle East carry different weights in Arab-Hungarian relations. From the Hungarian perspective it is the Mashreq that stands in the centre of historically and traditionally developed attention. The reason should be looked for in its geographical proximity and probably in the “classical” understanding of the region by Central Europe, in which the religious relevance of the Holy Land and the common history with the Ottoman Turkish Empire could play a role. Relations with the Persian/Arab Gulf are of a much more recent origin, primarily defined by Hungarian interest in energy resources. The Maghreb has traditionally belonged to the French-Spanish sphere of influence, and has much less relevance for Hungary than the other two regions, in spite of the fact that Hungarian diplomatic presence has traditions in this region as well. Algeria and Libya used to be priorities for Hungary, but although diplomatic relations were established with Morocco in 1959 and with Tunisia in 1965, they used to play a much less significant role in relevant terms. Nowadays, apart from tourism and transit trade the Maghreb has relevance for Hungary primarily in the EU context.

Hungary has mostly economic interests in the Middle East, which are realized primarily in a bilateral context. Hungary has a political influence only as a member state of the European Union, if at all. Hungarian political and security policy considerations and attention (or the lack thereof) is influenced by the fact that Hungary perceives no threat to itself from the region. Neither regional conflicts, nor terrorism emanating from the region is affecting Hungary, and so far mass migration has not been experienced either.⁷ Hungary’s economic situation and the small number of Muslims (approx. 20-25,000 people)⁸ are not attracting masses, therefore, Hungary is still more a transit country than a target.

⁷ N. RÓZSA, “Mediterranean Migration to New Central European Member States of the EU. Present and Future trends”.

⁸ On the Muslim minorities in Central Europe, see the article of N. RÓZSA in the present volume.

Hungary is not directly involved in the conflicts of the region (with the exception of the short mission in Iraq⁹), but the oldest conflict of the region, the Palestinian-Israeli conflict is on the agenda of the Hungarian foreign policy due to historical, political and social reasons. The Palestinian issue has become an “obligatory” task in the Cold War. The Palestinian embassy in Budapest was opened in March 1989, and the Hungarian diplomatic mission started to operate in Ramallah in 2000.¹⁰ However, since the re-establishment of the diplomatic relations with Israel (1989) the Hungarian foreign policy establishment has been aiming at a balance in maintaining good relations with both parties. Hungary is interested in the negotiated settlement of the conflict. The Jewish community living in Hungary and the Hungarian Jews living in Israel play a significant role in Hungary’s relations to Israel. Yet, Israeli investments in Hungary may become the targets of criticism from time to time.

Arab-Hungarian relations in higher education and cultural diplomacy

In the more than twenty years that have passed since the regime change, Hungary’s accession to the European Union and the profound transformation of the Hungarian education system (*e.g.* the new law on higher education, the new system of academic degrees, etc.) resulted in the establishment of a new type of international relations, one of the defining elements of which is the strengthening of Hungary’s image and position in the different regions, including the Arab world.

Besides the bilateral higher education, academic and cultural cooperation agreements between Hungary and the Arab countries – “managed” by the Ministry of Human Resources – there are so-called “scientific and technology”, as well as academic bilateral agreements, which may overlap with the higher education and academic agreements.

Non-governmental organizations are getting increasing attention as well, as they can undertake many tasks which a governmental institution or an academy of sciences cannot perform. Such NGOs have a special place in Arab-Hungarian civil society relations. The Hungarian-Egyptian Friendship Society and the Association of the Arabs living in Hungary have their counterparts and partners in the Arab countries. Their relations are often built on the activities of Arab students who have studied in Hungary and after returning to their home countries maintain and pursue the cultural relations between the two countries. There are several Arab states where they established associations, *e.g.* the “Association of Syrian Former-Students-in-Hungary” in Damascus, or the “Association of Jordanian Former-Students-in-Hungary” in Amman. But the almost 600 Egyptian academics and scientists, who received their degrees in Hungary, should also be mentioned. Many of them are working in high ranking positions and are intent on strengthening bilateral cultural and scientific relations.

⁹ Between July 2003 and December 2004, 300 Hungarian troops participated in the Iraqi reconstruction efforts.

¹⁰ See *e.g.* GAZDIK, *A palesztin ENSZ-csatlakozási szándék és kihatásai*, fn. 16, 46.

The Hungarian Cultural Institute in Cairo plays a special role. It is the only institution among the Hungarian cultural institutes which is located in an Arab country and it was the first such institute established outside Europe in 1974. Since 1977 it has been operating as the Office of the Cultural Attaché. The Hungarian archaeological mission is *de facto* connected to the Office, and employs 6-8 archaeologists for a three-month-period every year. The Hungarian Cultural Institute/Office of the Cultural Attaché in Cairo represents the long-standing traditions of cultural, higher education, academic and scientific cooperation, including such outstanding scholars as Maximilian Herz, who lived and worked in Egypt for more than 35 years.¹¹

The Hungarian Cultural Institute/Office of the Cultural Attaché is well-known in Cairo and in the country towns as an information office and as the authority organizing the implementation of the cultural, higher education, academic and scientific cooperation agreements. The Director of the Institute is at the same time the Cultural Attaché of the Hungarian Embassy. Among others it is his task to prepare the program of university, academic or governmental delegations visiting the region, to organize cultural programs, conducting and managing diplomatic relations with the relevant cultural and higher education authorities, to support the Hungarian excavating missions, etc.

The Hungarian Cultural Institute/Office of the Cultural Attaché actively participates in the maintenance of art relations as well: Hungarian artists, groups and films are regular participants in the annual Cairo International Film Festival as well as the Alexandria International Dance Festival, and the Cairo Opera House regularly hosts Hungarian singers, dancers and musicians as well. The Hungarian Cultural Institute has organized several joint literary events and seminars with the artists and academics of the host country as well.

The other location in the Arab world, where Hungary has a “cultural presence” is Abu Dhabi in the United Arab Emirates, where in 2009 a cultural diplomatic post was established, with a regional scope of authority.¹² The creation of this position clearly shows the Hungarian interests towards the GCC states, which have a strategic position in international economy and security. In the selection of the site (Abu Dhabi) the fact that the UAE due to its oil wealth, capital and economic investments is a significant world economy factor played a role. On the other hand, the UAE is also a state which wants to become a dominant cultural, academic and scientific centre in the region, therefore it provides significant resources to present foreign cultural values. Hungary’s cultural presence before the appointment of the cultural diplomat had been rather limited in the region, and was far from the positive image of Hungary among the influential Emirates circles and the foreign experts in leading business positions there.

¹¹ Max Herz was an architect and museum director, who directed the renovation of Arab-Islamic and Coptic monuments as the Director of the Islamic Museum in Cairo. For his life and works, see ORMOS, *Max Herz Pasha, 1856-1919: his life and career*.

¹² Interview of the authors with Zsigmond Dvorzsánszky; and DARIDA and LADÁNYI, *Előterjesztés a Kormány részére a Madridban és Abu Dhabiban létesítendő oktatási-kulturális szakdiplomata álláshelyekről*.

Mutual cultural values cannot be cultivated without the teaching of each other's language. In Hungary Arabic is taught at the Department of Semitic Philology and Arabic Studies of Eötvös Loránd University (ELTE), as well as at the department of Arabic Studies of Pázmány Péter Catholic University. Among the Arab states it is in Egypt only that Hungarian is taught on a university level. Hungarian language teaching has been established within the Department of Slavic Studies at the Ein Shams University of Cairo. Besides, the Hungarian Cultural Institute/Office of the Cultural Attaché in Cairo regularly organizes Hungarian courses.

Arab-Hungarian relations in the EU context

Hungary's space for manoeuvre within the EU framework is determined by the institutional cooperation and dialogue the European Union has established with the Arab countries (the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership, the European Neighbourhood Policy, Union for the Mediterranean, the EU-GCC dialogue), as well as the developments and tasks within the Union.

Institutions of cooperation

For the European Union it is the Mediterranean Arab states, including Mauritania¹³ and Jordan that are of primary importance. The European Union is a partner in the Quartet¹⁴ and is the biggest donor in the Palestinian territories, while it has special relations with Israel as well. The role it plays in the conflict and the perception thereof further strengthens the general view that the Union is an "economic giant and a political dwarf", and as such it is rather a complementary supporter to US Middle East policy. While the Arab countries would like to see a much more substantial European political participation, to counterbalance the US support – biased in their perception – to Israel, Israel does not welcome such initiatives.

In spite of the fact that the European Union conducts an institutional dialogue with the member states of the Gulf Cooperation Council, the geographic proximity of the southern-eastern shore of the Mediterranean is the basis of such historical, traditional and cultural relations, and poses such threats and challenges that make the distinction among Arab countries unavoidable for the EU. Among them, migration from the southern shore of the Mediterranean towards Europe stands in the first place. In the past decades migration has become one of the biggest security threats for Europe and the main source of supply for the rapidly increasing Muslim minorities in Europe.¹⁵ The political and economic crises, and armed conflicts, in the Arab countries, as well as

¹³ Mauritania is a member of the Arab Maghreb Union established in 1980.

¹⁴ The members of the Quartet are the UN, the USA, the European Union and Russia, its Special Envoy is former British Prime Minister Tony Blair.

¹⁵ Besides the Arabs, there are other Muslim communities living in the European Union in big numbers originating from e.g. Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, Turkey, etc., see the study "Euro(pean) Islam or Islam in Europe" by Zs. ROSTOVÁNYI in the present volume.

terrorism or environmental challenges (e. g. desertification) should be analyzed in this context, as these – one by one or combined – may generate mass migration towards Europe.

The political and economic integration of the Mediterranean littoral territories was first accomplished in the Roman Empire.¹⁶ The cooperation between the northern and the southern shores re-appeared in the Helsinki process of the 1970s, in the context of the détente between the two superpowers, still it fell sacrifice to Cold War realities. The concept of the Mediterranean as one unit could emerge seriously only after the end of the Cold War in the 1990s,¹⁷ and was institutionalized in the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP) launched in 1995, which included the (then) 15 members of the European Union and 12 states of the southern and eastern shores of the Mediterranean.¹⁸ The cooperation is frequently called the Barcelona Process after the place of the conference where it was launched on November 27th -28th, 1995. Hungary, as the associate member of the EU at the time, participated as an observer only, and it became a member in the process when it joined the EU in 2004. In the course of the negotiations to enlarge the EU in 2004 by ten states (the “big bang”) it became increasingly clear that the neighbourhood of the European Union would change drastically. This was the reason why the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) was elaborated. While the EMP is operated as a bilateral and a multilateral system of relations, where issues are managed in three “baskets” (political-security, economic-financial and social-cultural issues), the ENP was established as a set of bilateral relations between the EU and the individual states of the southern neighbourhood participating in the EMP¹⁹ on the one hand, and the EU and the eastern neighbourhood – by now developed into the Eastern Partnership²⁰ – on the other. While the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership was based on the understanding that within the Mediterranean basin there are issues connecting the region into one big unit, therefore, their management should be a joint effort, the aim of the European neighbourhood Policy was to share the achievements of the EU with its direct neighbourhood and thus contribute to its stability.

Out of the two geographical directions of the Neighbourhood Policy it is the Eastern Partnership which, on the basis of historical, traditional and cultural relations, is of more importance for Hungary – in spite of the fact that the southern dimension, due to Hungary’s commitments within the EU membership context, does play a role. In 2008 the southern cooperation was complemented with a further dimension and was re-named “Union for the Mediterranean – the Barcelona Process”. The initiative, upon the personal request by French President Nicolas Sarkozy, was supported by Hungarian Prime Minister Ferenc Gyurcsány who participated in the launching event.

¹⁶ In the Roman Empire the total shore of the Mediterranean belonged to the Empire, thus the Mediterranean was an “inner sea”.

¹⁷ The idea was put forward by Italian Foreign Minister Gianni de Michelis.

¹⁸ Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Egypt, Israel, the Palestinian National Authority, Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, Turkey, Cyprus and Malta.

¹⁹ With the exception of Turkey which does not participate in the ENP.

²⁰ Ukraine, Moldova, Belarus (ENP suspended), Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan.

Hungary participates in all the forums and programs that follow from its EU membership. Thus, it has a representative in the Euro-Mediterranean Parliament. In the Foreign Ministry the post of the “Senior Official” and that of the “National Coordinator” were established, who participate in the regular monthly coordination. At present there is an ambassador for the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership and another for the Eastern Partnership working in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The Hungarian Institute of International Affairs joined EuroMeSCo, the network of the foreign policy institutes of the Euro-Med states after Hungary’s accession to the EU.

At this point Hungary’s other trans-Atlantic commitment, in the framework of NATO should be mentioned as well. NATO plays a special role in the defence dimension of Hungarian-Arabic relations. The Arab states of the southern shore of the Mediterranean are so-called “out of area”, *i.e.* out of the NATO territory proper, which, however, still needs special attention because of its geographical proximity. This is formulated in NATO’s Mediterranean dialogue – with Algeria, Israel, Morocco, Mauritania, Tunisia, Jordan, Egypt and the Palestinian National Authority -, in the framework of which officers regularly participate in training in Hungary.²¹

Still NATO used to play no role in the conflicts of the region – either the Palestinian-Israeli conflict or the wars in Iraq – before the Arab Spring, in spite of the fact that it did express readiness to do so. It should be mentioned, that before the 2003 Iraq war NATO did not invoke Article 5 in spite of a request from Turkey. To counterbalance that, several countries sent aid to Turkey, including Hungary, which sent 2,000 chemical protective uniforms.

Changes within the Union

The Lisbon Treaty, signed in December 2007, entered into force in December 2009. One of its most significant achievements was the elaboration of the structure of external relations, and brought into existence the European External Action Service. Lady Catherine Ashton is not only the head of the EEAS, but also works as the Foreign Minister of the European Union. This development has generally been perceived a step forward towards the realization of the EU’s Common Security and Foreign Policy, and as such, has an impact on Hungarian foreign policy as well.

Besides, 2011 was the year of Central European EU presidencies, since in the first half of the year Hungary, in the second half Poland was giving the presidency. Although it had happened before that a new EU member state (the Czech Republic, Slovenia) was in the presidency, the fact that those presidencies were either problematic or practically invisible, as well as the coming into force of the Lisbon Treaty, lent special significance to the 2011 presidencies. On the one hand the distribution of labour and the cooperation of the national diplomacies, on the other, the presidency itself meant a new experience and symbolically completed the accession process of the new members into the Union.

²¹ For example at the Zrínyi Miklós National Defence University which from January 1, 2012 has been operating as the Faculty of Military Sciences and Officer Training of the National University of Public Service.

Hungary and the Arab Spring

Hungary, just as the Arab states and the international community at large, was taken by surprise by the Arab Spring, which came at a most inappropriate moment for Hungary: Most of the events of the Arab Spring were taking place during the Hungarian presidency, which was a challenge in itself. But the division of labour taking shape following the entry into force of the Lisbon Treaty between the External Action Service and the Presidency resulted in a unique situation. The Hungarian government had to perform the presidency tasks in the understanding that some tasks resulting from the events of the Arab Spring, *e.g.* humanitarian assistance in the first place, belonged to its own competence, but the EU's foreign policy was directed by Lady Ashton, therefore, Arab Spring related foreign tasks belonged to her and the EEAS's competence. The duty of the Hungarian government was the support of Lady Ashton and the External Action Service and they had to stay away from foreign policy making, even if they were questioned and also criticized over that by the public and the media. The situation was made even more complicated by the fact that upon request from Lady Ashton the Hungarian foreign policy leaders had to substitute Lady Ashton in different forums. At the same time Hungarian embassies were representing the EU in places, where the EU had no representation of its own, like in Tripoli, Libya.²² Nevertheless, the Hungarian government and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs were consistent in their position that the presidency – after Lisbon – does not give authorization to practice or initiate EU foreign policy.²³

On the other hand, the Arab Spring started at the moment when the Orbán government had started to strengthen its relations with the Arab countries – in the framework of its “global opening” policy – exactly in Libya and Egypt.²⁴ (In 2005-2006 Hungarian export to North Africa was almost 400 million USD, then in 2011, after a minor setback, it was back to 385 million USD again. In this amount Libya represented the smallest share with only 3.2 million USD.)²⁵

From the point of view of the EU presidency and Hungary's Euro-Atlantic commitments the Libyan developments posed the biggest challenge, and this was the only location of the Arab Spring, where Hungary was directly involved. 2011 was not the first occasion when Hungary had to express an opinion on Libya in an international position when the international community was taking action on Libya. Hungary was a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council in 1992-1993, when the Security Council passed resolutions 731 (1992), 748 (1992) and 883 (1993) against Libya over

²² In Tehran, Iran and Havana, Cuba.

²³ N. RÓZSA, *Libya and the Hungarian EU Presidency*.

²⁴ In November 2010, President Pál Schmitt participated in Tripoli at the EU-Africa summit and met Libyan leader Muammar Kadhafi. In January 2011, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán met Mohamed Hosni Mubarak (this was the last meeting of Mubarak with a foreign leader) and opened two Hungarian factories, then left Egypt on the very day the revolution started.

²⁵ On the basis of the lecture by Pál TOMA entitled “Magyar érdekek nyomában: Észak-Afrika” [On the track of Hungarian interests in North Africa].

the Lockerbie case. And in 2011 Hungary was again lobbying for the non-permanent member status. Thus, the Hungarian position was further shaped by past and present national interests and international commitments.

There have been trade relations between Hungary and Libya since 1958, but diplomatic relations were established in 1967, when Hungary's ambassador to Egypt became accredited to Libya as well. The Hungarian embassy in Tripoli was opened in 1971, while the Libyan People's Office started operating in Budapest in 1976.²⁶ In 1974-1978 Hungarian export to Libya was 18-20 billion HUF annually, which fell back after the regime change in Hungary to 4-5 billion HUF per year.²⁷

For the Hungarian foreign policy the Libyan crisis appeared mostly in EU tasks. While the government abided by all international and EU regulations and resolutions with regard to Libya, it supported the establishment of the no-fly zone and the protection of the civilian population, let Hungary's air space and the air base at Pápa at the disposal of the NATO member states, but did not participate in the NATO military operations.²⁸ Foreign Minister János Martonyi emphasized that "we do not want to change Libya's political system ... the military operation can only serve the defence of the civilian population."²⁹ Both Prime Minister Orbán and the Foreign Minister announced that Hungary would not participate in the military operation,³⁰ but is ready to offer medical services.³¹ They argued that Hungary's military capabilities were not sufficient, but some analysts opined that the decision coincided with the fact that the Central European NATO member states which participated in NATO's mission and/or reconstruction efforts in Iraq or Afghanistan, were generally reluctant to participate in the Libyan operation.³² These states were of the opinion that "nothing can convince Europe to make war with the Arab countries", and that "military operations, which may cause the loss of confidence of the Arab states, must be avoided."³³

The Hungarian media, which gave detailed reports of the Libyan developments, especially of the evacuation of Hungarians and foreigners, and of Hungary's not taking part in the NATO operation, were generally supportive of the government's decision. Although there were questions with regard to the costs of the rescue operations, which were never made public, the necessity thereof was never questioned. Estimates of the costs are around 8-10 million HUF, but since the rescue operation was performed in the framework of the EU's civilian defence mechanism, the costs were shared by Hungary and the EU.³⁴ Similarly, although there were guesses why the

²⁶ http://www.mfa.gov.hu/kum/hu/bal/Kulpolitikank/___volt_ketoldal_u_kapcsolatok/Afrika/libia/ (in Hungarian)

²⁷ "Bizonytalan a magyar beruházások sorsa".

²⁸ Indirectly there were some Hungarians participating in the NATO mission in NATO colours: one person in the AWACS team, and two from the NATO Headquarters in Naples.

²⁹ <http://www.eu2011.hu/news/martonyi-no-aim-change-libya%E2%80%99s-political-system>

³⁰ http://kitekinto.hu/europa/2011/04/06/tovabbra_sem_kuldunk_katonakat_libiaba/

³¹ http://hvg.hu/itthon/20110325_orban_libia_katonaorvosok

³² http://hvg.hu/vilag/20110512_libia_nato_beavatkozas

³³ <http://www.eu2011.hu/news/orban-europe-must-not-drift-war-arabs>

³⁴ See WAGNER, "Magyar evakuáció Líbiában az EU polgári védelmi mechanizmusának részeként".

Hungarian government decided to stay away from the “Unified Protector” mission, especially that the Hungarian Gripens were technically capable of such operations and from Hungary they could have reached Libyan airspace in one and a half hours, and the Hungarian pilots were trained in the Soviet-made air defence systems the al-Qadhafi regime was equipped with, the decision was never questioned.³⁵ According to a public opinion poll conducted in the beginning of April 2011 in 23 countries, 50% of the Hungarian population supported NATO’s military operation in Libya.³⁶ It should be noted, however, that in spite of the many discussions over the war in Libya, the public did not become emotionally involved, which was partly due to the negative image of Muammar al-Qadhafi among the public, partly to the fact that the Libyan National Council was and has remained absolutely unknown in Hungary. Neither had the threats by al-Qadhafi that he would open the way to Europe in front of terrorism and migration any impact, in spite of the fact that the media presented these threats. It was the humanitarian crisis and the future of the oil wealth that were in the centre of public attention, but while there were many conspiracy theories with regard to oil, the efforts of the Hungarian embassy in Tripoli and of the humanitarian organizations received general acknowledgment and moral support.

In the Hungarian perception it was humanitarian assistance in the Libyan crisis that belonged to the authority of the presidency and it was performed in three fields: the evacuation of Hungarians and foreigners from Libya, participation in the activities of the refugee centre in Malta, and support and aid to hospitals and refugee camps.

On February 23, 2011 upon request from EU member states Hungary activated the EU’s civilian defence mechanism³⁷ and on February 28 in the framework of an operation co-financed by the European Commission a Hungarian plane evacuated 96 Hungarian and other citizens from Libya, with the help of the Hungarian embassy and the Counter Terrorism Centre. On April 4, a Ukrainian ship evacuated 193 foreigners, out of whom 52 were EU citizens, also with the help of the Hungarian embassy. On April 20, 174 Chadian citizens, who fled from Libya to Tunisia, were re-patriated to Chad with Hungarian and EU Commission support.³⁸

The Hungarian Embassy was operating all through the Libyan civil war, representing the EU and the USA, but also some other countries. On May 18, they helped to free four journalists (two Americans, a British and a Spanish) who had been imprisoned by the Libyan authorities. On May 23 the Orthodox bishop of Tripoli could leave Libya also with Hungarian assistance.

In the beginning of March 2011 there were three Hungarian civilian protection officers working in the British embassy in Malta in the framework of the multinational

³⁵ http://nol.hu/kulfold/masfel_orara_vagyunk_bengazitol

³⁶ <http://www.mitortent.hu/sztori/5d3aun3/libia-23-oszagban-tamogatjak-a-nato-bea>
<http://vilag.transindex.ro/?hir=15092>, [http://hvg.hu/vilag/2011051_2_](http://hvg.hu/vilag/2011051_2_libia_nato_beavatkozas)
[libia_nato_beavatkozas](http://vilag.transindex.ro/?hir=15092)

³⁷ <http://www.eu2011.hu/news/libia-hungarian-presidency-helps-evacuate-eu-citizens>

³⁸ See WAGNER, “Magyar evakuáció Líbiában az EU polgári védelmi mechanizmusának részeként”.

operation coordination centre, which helped in the organization and control of the air and sea rescue of foreigners in Libya.

In March 2011 the Hungarian Ecumenical Aid supplied medicine and medical tools worth 7 million HUF to the hospitals in Eastern Libya (Jala, Ajdabiyya, Jumhuriyya, October 7), while the Hungarian Baptist Aid provided mobile medical aid in the refugee camps on the Tunisian-Libyan borders (Ras Ajdir) and supplied medical instruments to the hospitals in the neighbourhood.³⁹

From a political point of view the fact that when the period of the Hungarian presidency finished, Lady Ashton asked the diplomats working at the Hungarian embassy in Tripoli to continue representing the EU till the end of the year, was significant. Still, during the Hungarian presidency, Foreign Minister János Martonyi visited Egypt twice, on the one hand to negotiate with the new Egyptian government on the questions of the transition, and on the other, to examine the humanitarian situation in the refugee camps on the Egyptian-Libyan border. Enikó Győri, the State Secretary for EU affairs paid a similar visit to Tunisia.

As a special complement to the Arab Spring, a kind of “democratic transition conference tourism” started both in the countries of the Arab transition and in Central Europe: Several political and academic workshops and conferences were organized around the transfer of the experiences of the regime change in Central Europe and the democratic transition.⁴⁰

Although it was generally agreed that the circumstances and conditions in the two regions were very different, therefore experiences could not be directly transferred and taken over, “technical elements” thereof could still provide lessons for the Arab countries (*e.g.* calling the former leaders responsible, the process of constitution-making, the organization of elections, etc.).

Conclusion

The Arab Spring coincided with the Hungarian Presidency and the “global opening” of the Hungarian foreign policy, which included raised awareness and re-opening towards

³⁹ Upon information from the Arab-Africa Division of the MFA.

⁴⁰ *E.g.* in April 2011, Foreign Minister János Martonyi participated in Tunisia in a conference entitled “The Tunisian revolution, the challenges of democratic transition and the role of the civil society”. In November 2011, Ambassador István Gyarmati, Director of the International Centre for Democratic Transition negotiated in Tunisia on projects promoting democratic transition and the transformation of the civil society. Finally, the author of this article also participated in similar conference in Morocco (“Morocco and the Visegrad cooperation”), Tunisia (“Quels changements en Tunisie et quel impact sur la région de la Méditerranée” – “Les expériences de transition démocratique en Europe; leçons pour la Tunisie”), Spain (“A new Mediterranean political landscape? The Arab spring and Euro-Mediterranean relations”) and Malta (“Euro-Maghreb Forum”).

the Arab states. Although due to the regime change of 1989-1990 Hungarian-Arab relations underwent a great setback, in the twenty years that passed, the Arab-Hungarian relations have undergone a profound transformation which fits perfectly into the context of Hungary's EU membership. Consequently, now Hungary pursues its relations to the Arab countries both in the format of its transformed and diversified bilateral relations, and in the framework of the European Union and its relevant policies. While the dominant Hungarian interests are economic, the traditional higher education and cultural cooperation have established a "human basis" which support and promote the realization of Hungarian interests in the Arab world.

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