The spirit of Helsinki in the Middle East and North Africa

Spencer Oliver

In September 2011 I stood with several other members of the OSCE election observation mission to Tunisia in Sidi Bouzid, ground zero of the Arab Spring barely ten months after the start of the revolution.

As we observed the vote in one polling place, a woman standing in the hot sun in traditional Muslim dress, who had clearly been waiting in line for some time to cast her ballot, was asked by a journalist just how long she had been waiting. ‘Forty-five minutes and 42 years,’ she replied.

Her story, and that of thousands of other Tunisians who waited with patient determination to take part in the democratic process, made Tunisia an inspiration to us all. The fact we were there observing, at the invitation of the Tunisian officials, is also a testament to how the OSCE is as applicable to the Mediterranean region today as it was in 1975, when the Helsinki Final Act proclaimed ‘the process of improving security should not be confined to Europe but should extend to other parts of the world, and in particular to the Mediterranean area.’

The welcoming attitude we felt from the Tunisian transition government officials was a positive sign of the country’s commitment to its partnership with the OSCE as it turned onto a new path toward democracy.

One forum, less duplication
To be a successful partner in the region, the OSCE should not only be a model for multilateral diplomacy, but also should build a forum for dialogue, and encourage a comprehensive approach to security that encapsulates the OSCE vision of human rights, economic, environmental and political military security.

The OSCE comprehensive model is inclusive, rather than exclusive, and available to all who wish to participate.

The OSCE is not a stranger in this region. Egypt, Israel, Morocco and Tunisia have all been associated with the Helsinki process since its inception in 1973.

Just as Europe found a new way toward comprehensive security, including in the eventual demolishing of the Berlin Wall, and just as South East Europe worked through a multilateral framework to establish peace and stability after years of conflict, today a similar approach could serve the Mediterranean region.

The OSCE should play to its strength as a unifying organization and take the lead in co-operating with other multilateral organizations to reduce redundancy in our

1 Spencer Oliver is the Secretary General of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly.
work. The OSCE Parliamentary Assembly can play an important role in this regard, but in order to do so, we need to co-ordinate with other inter-parliamentary bodies.

Our Assembly brings together parliamentarians annually from across the region for a Mediterranean Forum. The Inter-Parliamentary Union, the European Union, the NATO Assembly and the Council of Europe have similar mechanisms, meetings and approaches.

Considering limitations, primarily on time, there should be one setting to bring Europeans together with parliamentarians from across the Middle East and North Africa each year. Why have multiple meetings that unite only a select number of states when one meeting can be more effective, focused and cover all States? Organizations could adopt a rotation to determine hosting responsibilities. In votes at our annual sessions in Belgrade in 2011 and Oslo in 2010, our parliamentarians strongly supported this co-operative approach.

One model, the OSCE
As former OSCE Parliamentary Assembly President Petros Efthymiou has said, OSCE work in the southern Mediterranean should be based on international co-operation aimed at eliminating the social and economic causes of instability, reinforcing democratization, and restoring inter-cultural dialogue.

While the OSCE model, with its holistic approach to security and its basis in voluntary political commitments, cannot be imposed on the Mediterranean countries, their leaders would be well served by following its example.

This must be done in a true partnership, where the OSCE executive structures, including representatives of all participating States, along with the governments from the Mediterranean, show a steady willingness to engage. In our effort to be so careful to not impose the OSCE values on the region, we may have been too quiet.

The Assembly was pleased this year to see the OSCE enact parliamentary recommendations to establish exchanges where young diplomats from Partner States are placed within OSCE executive structures. The fact that Egypt and Jordan took part in this program is a good start. However, it is not enough to have one or two people visit Vienna and hope they take their OSCE knowledge back home to make a difference. There needs to be a regular, robust, formalized exchange program so a wide range of government officials from the Middle East and North Africa gain OSCE experiences and build relationships.

Part of achieving such a program depends on solidifying financial commitments from partners and participating States alike. The OSCE Partnership Fund was created in 2008 expressly for this sort of work. Unfortunately, in 2011, the very year when so much attention was focused on the Arab Spring, the OSCE Partnership Fund received less than €35,000, a 92 per cent drop in three years.

The Assembly has called for partners to play a leading role in developing the agenda of their OSCE interaction and meetings, but all countries connected with