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## SLOVAKIA AND ARAB COUNTRIES: YESTERDAY AND TODAY

Mária Holubová – Mária Rošteková\*

### ABSTRACT

The second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century was characterised by the spirit of a strong foreign policy orientation of the Czechoslovakia towards the Arab countries. In the era of the Slovak independence, such orientation of the foreign policy is completely absent. However, we can consider the events of the Arab Spring, which opened up the possibility of greater participation in the events in this part of the world, to be a turning point. In our article we would like to analyse the development of modern Slovak-Arab relations, but in a broader historical context.

**Key words:** Arab world, European Neighbourhood Policy, Euro-Mediterranean Partnership, Oriental Partnership, Arab Spring

### Introduction

Arab world, as the Arab countries use to be called, represents a special place on the world stage - a geographic area of 8,000 km width (from the westernmost parts of Morocco to the coast of the Gulf of Oman in the east), which always attracted the attention of world powers. For a long time, the important geopolitical phenomena related to Arab countries had taken place mainly in the Mediterranean region - six states situated on the Mediterranean coast covers up to 60% of the Arab population. The Mediterranean Sea is a “*perfect example*” of the accumulation of multiple geopolitical factors ranging from historical heritage, such as colonisation and decolonisation process associated with the emergence of nation-states and post-colonial question, through a diverse range of local conflicts to conflicts of world-wide dimensions,

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such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict or conflicts related to oil. Even for distant Arab countries, particularly the Gulf States, was its mouth on the Mediterranean ports for a long time the subject of strategic interest, but in recent decades in these countries we can observe tendencies of “independence” associated with the oil industry, which makes the focus of the Arab world transferred from the Mediterranean toward the Gulf.

Since the discovery of the first oil field in 1908, Masjed Soleyman, resources of the oil and the gas in the Middle East significantly contributed to the clash of interests of individual industrial powers in the region. With nearly 50% of world oil exports and 60% of the world reserves this region will have yet more long-term global strategic importance. This whole area is, however, increasingly turning towards Asia – from the economic point of view, almost three quarters of exports of crude oil, while in the near future it is also expected to involve the export of gas, is heading to Asian countries such as Japan, China, India and so on.

This asiatisation of eastern Arab world is increasingly reflected in demographic terms, since the labour force coming from Asian countries such as Pakistan, India, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Philippines and so on represents up to half of the total number of immigrants. Specialised literature sees this phenomenon as some sort of bipolarisation of the Arab world, where the Mediterranean remains a fragile political centre of the Arab world, and area of the Gulf close to Asia, is in turn increasingly emerging as the major economic centre.

Although the Arab world is in the centre of world affairs since the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century, the developments of the last decade brought much more dynamism into this part of the world. While many experts on world politics and economy of the late 1990s claimed that 21<sup>st</sup> Century will be the century of Asia, its first decade, which began following the attacks of September 11, continued with the war in Iraq and ended up with the Arab Spring, seems to be the century of the Middle East and the Mediterranean. However great is the historical value of the Arab Spring, the events that began in Tunisia in December 2010, and which has further spread into the rest of the Arab world, could be according to many experts undoubtedly identified as the most significant phenomenon since the fall of the Berlin Wall (Bassols, 2013). Thereby, the Arab revolution opened the door to a new geopolitics of the Arab world.

Thus, as the Arab world has internally transformed, the interests of the particular states in the region have changed. Today, the Slovak Republic certainly does not belong to those states which, considering the historical and

the geographic distance, have their own specific strategic interests in the region, whether political, security, economic or energy related. While the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century was characterised by the spirit of a strong foreign policy orientation of the Czechoslovakia towards the Arab countries, in the era of the Slovak independence such orientation of the foreign policy is completely absent. However, we can consider the events of the Arab Spring, which opened up the possibility of greater participation in the events in this part of the world, to be a turning point. In our article we would like to analyse the development of modern Slovak-Arab relations, but in a broader historical context.

## **1 History of the Slovak-Arab relations**

Although the overall policy of Czechoslovakia towards particular countries of the region should be understood primarily “*ideologically*”, it is important to emphasize the degree of identification with the global interests of the Soviet Union, which was significantly greater than in other Soviet satellites. Within the broad absorption of socialist ideology and the attitude towards Moscow, Czechoslovak foreign policy has differentiated itself from extremely strong opinions against Israel, through the support of Arab nationalist regimes, to the ambivalent relationship with clearly pro-Western states as Morocco or Jordan under the rule of King Hussein. Imperialistic or capitalistic orientation of these countries receded into the background in order to meet the pragmatic economic policy (Křihová, 2009).

The Czechoslovakia in the post-war period played a unique role in strengthening Soviet influence in the Arab world, particularly regarding the arms sales. However, the export was not purely directed by foreign policy aspects, i.e. orientation to the Soviet Union. The arms export was affected by the internal political aspects; in particular, there has been an internal need to obtain foreign exchange resources, with regard to the fact that the export of other commodities has not been very profitable and Czechoslovakia was dependent on the import of certain goods and materials from the capitalist countries.

Signing of the firearms agreement with Egypt in 1955 is considered to be the greatest interference of the Czechoslovakia into the region during the Cold War, because it disrupted the existing balance of forces (Štefanský, 2008). Due to the confidentiality of its direct aid to individual developing states, the USSR exported their arms indirectly, mainly through Czechoslovakia.

While the Czechoslovakia’s role of the Soviet faithful “*sidekick*” in the

Third World was, according to **Peter Zidek** and **Karel Sieber**, (2009) fully challenged at the time of the Prague Spring, when the attention of the Czechoslovak leaders for some time focused only on internal political situation, in the early 1970s, the “*normalised*” Czechoslovakia embraced again its role of the exporter of large quantities of weapons to the Arab states.

Even in the economic sphere the strong orientation of the domestic economic interests of Czechoslovakia towards the Moscow leadership was obvious. But what often happened was the Czechoslovakian government tried a little more of an independent economic policy, at least within certain boundaries. Territorial structure of Czechoslovak import consisted primarily of socialist countries, covering 69.8% of total imports into Czechoslovakia, further from developed capitalist countries - 24.6% and developing countries - 5.6%.

Similarly, through the prism of history, we must also evaluate the attitudes of Czechoslovakia to the Middle East conflict, which in almost identical terms copied the position of the USSR, which since the October 1917 expressed the support to the national-liberation fight of the Arab peoples against imperialism. During Second World War, however, the opinion of the USSR changed. In the UN, the Soviet representatives expressed the apparent support to the plan of dividing the territory of Palestine into a Jewish and the Arab state. Without exaggeration one can say that during the first Arab-Israeli war the Czechoslovak weapons saved the state of Israel. The airlift that transported weapons from Czechoslovakia into Israeli territory was created. This support would obviously not have been possible without the consent of Moscow.

In 1967, following the example of the USSR, Czechoslovakia, like other countries of the Soviet bloc, decided to discontinue diplomatic relations with Israel, which in turn remained disrupted, hostile and very limited until 1989. Prague has maintained contacts only with a small part of Israeli Communists, who condemned the August 1968 occupation of Czechoslovakia by the Soviet Army. In spite of sympathy of Czechoslovak intellectuals towards the Israel during the Prague Spring, the official policy during this short period had not changed at all.

Considering the importance of the course of post-war world events in the form of the Cold War, which significantly affected the Arab region, we decided to devote a separate chapter to this part of history. The next section will elaborate on the Slovak-Arab relations in the era of independence of Slovakia.

## **2 The formation and nature of relations of Czechoslovakia to Arab countries in the years 1945-1963**

The nature of international relations after the Second World War was determined mainly by two fundamental contradictions of opposing systems in a global context. Only two superpowers, i.e. the USA and the USSR, maintained decisive role in international relations. The international significance of the other great powers considerably decreased. The balance of power in the world was conditioned not only by economic, political and military power of both systems, but also by national-liberation movement and the emergence of new nation states in Asia and Africa. The developments in the colonial and dependent countries, especially in Asia, led the USA to the formulation of “*fourth point of the Truman program*”<sup>1</sup> from the January, 7, 1949 about the broad economic aid for underdeveloped countries, and to develop policy guidelines for neo-colonialism. In this spirit, the American system of military blocs was filled in by the Far East Covenant on the Southeast Asia SEATO, which was formed in 1954, and by the Middle East Baghdad Pact<sup>2</sup>, established in 1955 with the participation of Turkey, Iraq, Iran, Pakistan and the Great Britain.

The political map of Asia and Africa has fundamentally changed after Second World War. In the first post-war period, only three independent countries – Egypt, Ethiopia and Liberia – participated in the pan-African conference in London in 1945, but in 1963 in Addis Ababa there were 31 countries participating in the pan-African conference. The countries of North Africa, which have been historically and geographically separated from black Africa, created formation of the Arab League, which has not materialised due to differences in economic and political stages of the Arabic countries’ development and of course also because of contradictory political power and personal interests of Arab leaders. Just after Second World War, several changes occurred and efforts were renewed by Egypt, Morocco and Algiers on convergence and cooperation with Black Africa. There also emerged attempts for creation of wider government departments such as the African Union of Ghana, Guinea and Mali and the pursuit for Arab Maghreb.

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<sup>1</sup> Truman’s program-doctrine, published in 1947. American President H. Truman declared that U.S. policy is to help defend the pro-US governments. Under this doctrine, the U.S. government released 400 million dollars.

<sup>2</sup> Baghdad Pact – was established in 1955 as a defensive pact, whose members were Iraq, Iran, Pakistan, Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey and the United Kingdom.

Crisis of the colonial system manifested itself in the sharpest form in Asia. This fact was accelerated by the Japanese aggression during the Second World War. Sovereign and internationally recognised states like Syria and Lebanon emerged in 1941, Transjordan in 1946 and the Arab League, which was originally established in accordance with British politics in the Middle East, was established on March 22, 1945. Later, it became a tool in the Arab countries' fight against the Israel. On their part they acted officially, but also unofficial states of the Eastern bloc like Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia, MRLs and Polish People's Republic took part. The governments of Arab countries were also among the initiators and participants in international conferences in Bandung in 1955<sup>3</sup> and in Belgrade in 1961<sup>4</sup>.

Already in interwar period, the Middle East has become an important trading partner for CSR, and at the same time gained importance also in terms of diplomatic and consular relations. During the Second World War the only contacts maintained were with Egypt and Syria. The resumption of contacts occurred after orientation of Arab regimes towards Moscow, during the years 1948 to 1963. After 1948, CSR began to actively contact and orientate its foreign policy on Nasser's Egypt, Baathist Syria and Iraq and on Ben Belly's Algiers. Gradually, it began to re-establish contacts with Iran and Morocco.

Historical development of economic, political and military relations of CSR and Arab countries may be periodised into the following blocs: 1) 1945-1950 – Czechoslovak diplomacy after the Second World War was renewing, or was trying to maintain its position in Middle East countries; 2) 1951-1955 – transitional period, which was influenced by the turn in Soviet's politics towards Israel. In fact, the status of a diplomatic relations equalled to zero and Czechoslovak government had no interest in market penetration with weaponry

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<sup>3</sup> The Bandung Conference – conference of the leading representatives of the 29 countries of Africa and Asia held in the Indonesian city of Bandung in 1955, where the issues of peace and neutrality were discussed. Declaration was issues, including five points on peaceful coexistence. The conference made no secret of its affiliation to the USSR. This fact was also underlined by Nehru's visit USSR and visits of N. Khrushchev and N. Bulganin to India, Burma and Afghanistan.

<sup>4</sup> Belgrade conference was held in 1961. It has been convened by Yugoslavia, which thus started to actively participate in international relations. The aim was meeting states that refused to participate in the military-political groupings. They also included Unified Arab Republic.

and exports; 3) 1956-1963 – period, which became significant due to the Czechoslovak-Egyptian treaty about weapon supplies. In addition to weapon supplies, CSR also provided training and education of foreign officers directly in schools in CSR, or by sending the Czechoslovak experts and military instructors to Egypt. The same model was later repeated in Syria, Algeria and in Iraq. We would like to point out that the interest of Arab students, for example from Kuwait, was to study the medicine at Charles University in Prague and participation of Czechoslovakian graduates, who pean military presence within the military services were sent to Libya as interpreters in Libyan army. Therefore, we will deal in more detail with the specific relationship of Czechoslovak government to the situation in Algiers, with military and cultural relations of Czechoslovakia and Egypt and with forming relations of Czechoslovakia and Syria in 1948-1963. Czechoslovak attitude to Algiers in the key period of 1954-1962 can be characterised as follows: Czechoslovakia 1) kept a distance from the National Liberation Front FNO on the political and diplomatic level, and 2) had an intense relationship with KSA and since 1957 even provided material assistance in civil and military fields.

The framework of the Czechoslovak support to the Algerian fight was the opinion of the Soviet Union. Czechoslovakia followed the Soviet foreign policy attitudes profiled in the time of war (1954 - 1962) in several stages: from the initial reluctance to embrace the National Liberation Front, through the criticism of French policy in the UN, to the gradual recognition of the Interim Government of the Algerian Republic and its support (Štefanský, 2008). Despite certain complications with respect to the forces of the Algerian uprising, Czechoslovakia among the other socialist countries belonged to the biggest supporter of the national-liberation war in Algeria. Initially, Czechoslovakia participated in arms supplies only indirectly (1955-1956). A major sales contract in 1957 was mediated e.g. by the Moroccan businessman as a sales to the Egyptian company.

Further deliveries of weapons addressed to the FNO were seized by the French Navy in January 1958 when checking Yugoslav ship “*Slovenija*”<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> The weapons were transported in 14 wagons from Bratislava’s residential area of Petržalka to the Yugoslav port of Bakar (Zídek, Sieber, 2009). The French military authorities got the information about the transport of the Czechoslovak weapons to Algeria from the North African countries. The Czechoslovak propaganda portrayed the detention of “Lidice” shiploads and its escorting as the “act of piracy”. Czechoslovakia

However, a broader awareness on a global scale has been raised when Czechoslovak commercial ship "Lidice", which sailed off from the Polish port of Gdynia, has been detained on April 1959 by the French Navy and later on escorted to the Algerian port of Mers-el-Kebir. Inspection showed that the ship carried the weapons officially intended to the Government of Morocco. The scandal which subsequently broke out aggravated Czechoslovak-French relations for several years. At the time the Czechoslovak government adopted the principle to avoid the transport of weapons on the Czechoslovak ships. The case of the detention of the ship and the confiscation of weapon load was concluded by the agreement between France and Czechoslovakia party already in 1963, whereas partial compensation has been provided for the detention, but not for shiploads.

The only official political support was provided by Czechoslovakia to Algeria in 1957, when the government has given approval to conduct meetings for Maghrebian Communist parties in Czechoslovakia.

In 1963, the political and economic relations between Czechoslovakia and the Independent Algeria began to stagnate. The only interstate document was the contract for scientific and technical cooperation signed at the end of the year, but even in this case Algeria reproached Czechoslovakia for its commercial character and criticised the amount of payments for individual experts. The development of mutual relations symbolised the accreditation of the first Algerian ambassador in Prague, **Muhammad Kelly**. The political rapprochement, however, has only poorly reflected in the economic field. Czechoslovak exports to Algeria in 1964 reached a value of 21 million Czechoslovak crowns and imports from Algeria 11.8 million crowns. The turnover in mutual trade was lower than that of the trade with Tunisia. Slightly more favourable was the scientific and technical cooperation. For a limited period, 51 Czechoslovak experts worked in Algeria, 88 Algerian trainees were trained in Czechoslovakia and 14 students studied at the Department of Aeronautical Engineering at the Military College.

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sent to France five diplomatic notes (Zidek, 2003). They argued that it was a legitimate trade and the French navy violated international agreements on the high seas. The French party responded that there has been a discrepancy between the shiploads and the ship's documents. The investigation of the matter finally showed that the staff involved, including the ship's captain, committed larger and smaller errors in connection with the documentation and the cargo transport (Zidek, Sieber, 2009).

In relations of Czechoslovakia to Morocco the pre-war tradition played a significant role. Previously, Morocco has been an important export destination for Czechoslovak engineering products, consumer goods, and sugar. We have imported phosphate ore (iron, manganese, lead) and citrus. The continuity of relations before and after the Second World War of Czechoslovakia and Morocco also had personal form. The first Czechoslovak trade delegation into independent Morocco led in 1956 traveller and specialist for African studies, **Ján Kořínek**, who brokered bilateral trade relations in Casablanca in the years 1930-1938.

Czechoslovakia recognised Moroccan independence together with the independence of the Tunisian government on June 20, 1956. The logic of economic penetration corresponded with the very strong presence of Czechoslovak foreign trade companies at the fair in Casablanca in 1957. Czechoslovakia tried to take advantage of favourable conjuncture to strengthen their economic positions.

From the Soviet point of view, “progressive” Moroccan policy<sup>6</sup> has not been of long duration. When in the autumn of 1963 there was a border conflict between Morocco and Algeria, Moscow firmly supported the Algerian side. Czechoslovakia, of course, had to at the official and verbal level identify with the Soviet viewpoint. In practical terms, however, its reaction was full of different nuances; it was mainly about the consideration of economic interests. Although Czechoslovakia at the beginning of the crisis refused to sell weapons to Morocco, and even highlighted its concern and interests to the Algerian President Ben Bella, it continued to be cautious in relation to Algeria. While the economic relations with Algeria were quite frozen, Morocco looked for Czechoslovakia in that period, after Egypt, like the second largest trading partner in the Arab world. Since the mid-1960s, Czechoslovak-Moroccan relations encountered to the problem of unbalanced trade in favour of Morocco.

The position of Morocco, which hovered on the whole Mauritanian territory claim supported by historical arguments, determined the politics of the

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<sup>6</sup> Soviet skepticism was touching the affair around knowing person Ben Bark, who worked for several counterintelligences, among them Czechoslovak counterintelligence and Soviet KGB. Cooperation with him began in 1960 and ended in 1965 when Ben Bark was kidnapped in Paris and nobody has seen him alive ever since. Senior government dignitaries and the French secret services were involved in his abduction and murder. Ben Bark's violent death became one of the biggest French political scandals in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century and was reflected in the literature and in cinematography.

Soviet bloc to Mauritania in the early years of its existence. The USSR initially supported the Moroccan position without reservations. They had three reasons for that: 1) they tried to gain influence and stronger positions in Morocco, was strategically the most important Maghrebian territory, 2) the USSR considered also the fact that Mauritania was established as a state with strong ties to France, and 3) Soviets took into account the Communist Party of Morocco.

Successive negative position of the Soviet bloc to Mauritania was caused by an international situation. The diplomatic relations between Czechoslovakia and Mauritania were established in 1964.

Relations of Czechoslovakia with Oman also exhibited specific traits. Oman's government officials contacted Czechoslovakia several times with various requests, but they met with indifference and rejection. In early 1962, Omani exile government asked for recognition, but our government has taken a negative attitude. A year later, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Czechoslovakia refused Omani request for a study of two and later of ten participants of resistance at Czechoslovak military schools, which has been filed on behalf of the Sultanate of Oman **Soliman EI-Nabhani**. Czechoslovak government took an unfavourable stance even on Omani efforts for cultural rapprochement.

Anti-colonial movement in Tunisia culminated in similar way as in Morocco in the first half of the 1950s, so in the period before the Soviet turn to the third world. Czechoslovakia began with the option of establishment of diplomatic relations by probing through its representative officers in Paris and in Cairo. The first Czechoslovak delegation at a higher level arrived to Tunisia at the celebration of the first anniversary of independence in March 1957.

Czechoslovak penetration into Tunisia was slowed down by very strong military and economic position of France. Tunisia remained pro-Western country and the card of the Soviet bloc was used only as a tool of exerting pressure on the West<sup>7</sup>. Turnover on the issue of the establishment of diplomatic relations occurred in 1959. In mid-1961, there was a Bizerte crisis<sup>8</sup>. In terms of

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<sup>7</sup> Coercion tactics used in the survey about the arms supplies, which was started by Tunisians in 1957-1958. President Bourguiba publicly threatened that the hesitant approach of Western policy in terms of arms imports would cause ordering weapons from Czechoslovakia and from Yugoslavia.

<sup>8</sup> Tunisia had unsuccessfully tried to force France to leave their sea and air base. Tunisian-French crisis meant diversion of Tunisian foreign policy from the West. The first manifestation of the diversion was the orientation on Unified Arab Republic and the participation of Tunisia at a conference in Belgrade in 1961. In the same year, Tunisia

Czechoslovak-Tunisian relations, the Bizerte crisis meant a real problem: their shared relations in fields of trade, cultural and scientific-technical cooperation has been developing since 1961 at a very fast pace. This cooperation is even more interesting, as Tunisia did not belong to the countries of "initial interest" for the Soviet bloc and it also did not draw any hopes that it will go by non-capitalist path of development. The good quality cooperation was not affected even by the fact that the Communist party of Tunisia was officially banned. In 1963, it was clear that Czechoslovak experts managed to fill the vacuum left by the departure of French experts, such as in healthcare, vocational education and geology. Unlike other countries, Tunisia was repaying their obligations for experts without any problems. The trade relations were dynamically developing as well. In 1958, the Czechoslovak exports to Tunisia totalled 4.7 million and imports were in the amount of 3.7 million crowns. In the 1964, it reached 20.6 million and 15.5 million crowns, respectively. In the second half of the 1960s, the volume of mutual trade began to decline. In the Czechoslovak exports consumer goods such as glass and ceramic products dominated the export, and imports were represented mainly by phosphates, iron ore and olive oil.

The Czechoslovak foreign policy towards Egypt was significantly active, specifically in three key historical factors. The first case was a real negotiation for the supply of large quantity of Czechoslovak weapons to Egypt, which began after the Israeli attack on Gaza in 1955. Secretary of War **Ragab** presented to Czechoslovak governmental delegation a list of demands for the tanks, planes and guns and in this sense he also turned to the Soviet military attaché in Cairo. Further discussions then continued with the participation of Czechoslovak and Soviet representatives. They were conducted in conditions of complete and extraordinary secrecy, negotiations were hidden from foreign governments and therefore it is impossible to historically reconstruct them on a full scale. On September 12, Czechoslovakia and Egypt signed an agreement. On September 16 an agreement between Czechoslovakia and Soviet Union was signed. This arrangement allowed Egypt "formally speaking", to not enter, in this case, into the contractual relations with the USSR.

The volume of the entire contract was large. The price of delivered weaponry was worth 921 million Czechoslovak crowns. The arms supplies and

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sent the foreign mission led by Foreign Minister Sadok Mokaddem to the USSR, Poland and Czechoslovakia.

the Czechoslovak military aid to Egypt played an important role in the redistribution of forces in the South and East Mediterranean. They significantly managed to undermine the monopoly of Great Britain in the area. In the context of the Cold War, a new front was created and the Great Britain could only watch as it has been gradually losing its influence in controlling the states of the Middle East. Not even the Arab League, established at the initiative of Great Britain, could prevent the increasing influence of other countries in this area. The convergence of the USSR with Egypt, either directly or through other Soviet bloc countries was accomplished under the guise of the support of the anti-imperialist, national liberation movements and the common fight against the Baghdad Pact.

These arms supplies were not in accordance with the joint British-French-American Declaration, signed in May 1950. The declaration included the principle that all arms supplies to Israel and to the Arab States (Egypt) must be regulated in order to not disturb the balance, as neither party should achieve the superiority of supplies<sup>9</sup>.

In the case of military cooperation, the delegation of the Czechoslovak military experts was also envisaged. The training and study began at the Military Academy of A. Zapotnecký in Brno, in a form of five-week courses in the use of tanks, artillery and fasteners material. It also ran well in special course of radiolocation, which lasted for 25 weeks.

In the second case, it involved cultural and scientific cooperation for the formation of the Czechoslovak-Egyptian Institute. Even in the early 1950s it seemed that Czechoslovak Egyptology without practical application and research would extinguish. The breakthrough was brought about by the visit of Czechoslovak cultural delegation to Egypt in 1956. Initially, it was proposed to set up a Scientific Institute for the research of Egyptian history, which should reverse the stagnation in the Czechoslovak-Egyptian cultural relations. In 1959, Cairo workplace of the new Institute was inaugurated. The opportunities to work

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<sup>9</sup> The declaration further simultaneously determined that Egypt should recognise the state of Israel and that it should maintain good mutual relations without military conflicts. The arms supplies to Egypt from Czechoslovakia and the Soviet Union violated this principle. Egyptian president Nasser justified this purchase by the statement that United States, referring to the Declaration of 1950, refused to sell weapons to Egypt. Moreover, according to him, Israel violated the Declaration when it started to purchase tanks and modern fighter jets based on the secret agreement with France in July 1954. (Štefanský, 2008).

on specific excavations (Abusir, Sakkara, and Giza) were more enabled to Polish Egyptologists led by Professor **Zenon Kosidowski**, who were very successful.

In the third case, it was about the successful operation of the Czechoslovak military pedagogues in Egypt, headed by Professor **Alois Farlik**. The Egyptian government has decided to extend their requirements in the field of military education. In 1958, Czechoslovak government approved the plan to build a Military Technical College in Cairo from purely political reasons. Three years later, at the request of the Egyptian Marshal **Amir**, the study has been extended for new specialisations, including missile technology, which was conducted by the Military Academy in Brno.

The year 1963 belonged to one of the most fruitful for the cooperation between Czechoslovakia and Egypt in the matter of foreign trade, and on Czechoslovak side also in the matter of aid to Egyptian healthcare system. Problematic issues were dealt with by Czechoslovak Foreign Minister **František Hamouz** and Czechoslovak Health Minister **Jozef Plojhar** during their visit in Egypt.

Arms supplies and the military aid to Egypt disrupted the previous monopoly of the Great Britain in this area. A new front of the Cold War was created. Great Britain was losing influence and was unable to find a mechanism to control the states in the Middle East. The Arab League, established in 1945 at the discretion of the Great Britain, should avoid the influence of other countries in this area. However, this objective has not been achieved and since 1954 the Soviet Union started to gain the influence in the Middle East. The rapprochement or convergence with Egypt was held under the guise of support of anti-imperialist, national liberation movements and the common fight against the Baghdad Pact.

For the Great Britain, Egypt had a vital importance as the strategic shipping route. Through the Suez Canal, the Great Britain transported oil and other raw materials from Iraq, Iran, India, Saudi Arabia and other states. In fear of losing control of the Suez, the Great Britain followed the policy of G.A. Nasser in Egypt, who by making contacts with the Soviet Union, in fact, sought a waiver of the British rule (Štefanský, 2008).

Contacts between Czechoslovakia and Syria began already in the interwar period, when Syria had a status of Mandated Territory of the League of Nations, which was administered by France. Czechoslovakia exported goods and capital equipment, for example Škoda built a sugar factory and food

complex in Homs. Between 1926 and 1951 Czechoslovak Honorary Consulate operated in Aleppo. After the end of the Second World War, there was certain activity in the economic sphere. In 1948, another sugar factory was put into operation in Homs and in 1952 trade agreement was concluded with payment based on free exchange.

In 1954, the military regime of pro-Western **Adib ash-Shishakky** in Syria was overthrown. Syria's domestic and foreign politics has shifted to the left. In foreign politics, they began to follow Egyptian course, which led to cooperation with Soviet Union and its satellites. Czechoslovakia became a privileged Syrian partner in the economic field due to its large arms supplies. Political relations had certain fluctuations dependant on the momentary orientation of the Syrian government.

The first contract for the arms supplies was approved by the Czechoslovak government on June 20, 1955. This act became the basis for the cooperation between Czechoslovakia and Syria in military technology for the next 30 years<sup>10</sup>.

Relations of Czechoslovakia and Syria were significantly influenced by the famous contract of the arms supplies for Egypt, which was concluded in 1955. Syria, following the pattern of Egypt, got the courage to make large orders of weapons from Czechoslovakia. From 1956 to 1958, Czechoslovakia and Syria concluded six further contracts for the supply of special military material with the total value of 410 606 421 Czechoslovakian crowns. The supply of military equipment opened the door to Czechoslovakia also for the civilian trade exchange. In 1957, Czechoslovakia got an order to build an oil refinery in Homs in the value of 110 million Czechoslovakian crowns. At the time this was the

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<sup>10</sup> Arms sales contract initiated the other political contracts, which did not start exactly in happy ways. The reason was a new government formed after 1948 that could not handle the preparation of the official visit of Syria. It was a delegation of Syrian MPs led by Khalid Bagdas and consisted mainly of Syrian landowners and wealthy people of Syrian society, who were curious mainly about the development of Czechoslovak automobile industry and the first Tatraplans already known worldwide. Instead of that they were „advised” to watch films with the theme of Czechoslovakian spartakiades and animated version of Soldier Schweik. The guests did not understand at all. For the visit of Carlsbad, Syrian deputies stayed two in each room with double beds, without a bathroom. Of course, they refused to accommodate. However, the biggest „faux pas” on this occasion was decorated lobby at the Alcron hotel, where the Israeli national emblem was installed instead of the Syrian one.

largest industrial unit gained by Czechoslovakia after 1948 in “the capitalist” country. Apart from refinery, two sugar and one shoe factories were built in Syria during 1955-1960.

In February 1958, Egypt and Syria united and formed one United Arab Republic. Czechoslovakian diplomacy evaluated this political act as a step to the right. Syrian right turn meant the end of the tolerance of the Communist Party. Its first secretary **Khalid Bagdy** lived in exile in Prague since 1958. After the establishment of the United Arab Republic the difficulties arose with the Syrian advanced students in Czechoslovakia. In the period of March 24-31, 1959, the UAR government asked 16 Syrian students to return to their homeland in order to enter basic military service. Due to similar cases in other countries of the Soviet bloc, Czechoslovak government knew it was a trap and that students would be arrested straight after their arrival. The Czechoslovak government has decided to extend the stay for students who would request so or in the worst case, to grant them asylum. The coup and the secession of Syria from the UAR in 1961 have been evaluated by Czechoslovak diplomacy as a return to democratic establishment. In spite of that, contacts between the two countries were conducted strictly in military terms. First negotiations began with the arms supplies, military equipment and spare parts for military equipment. They culminated in signing of the 1962 Protocol relating to the supply of spare parts of military equipment and agreements about the supply of military equipment worth 44.3 million Czechoslovak crowns.

A further military coup took place in Syria on March 8, 1963, the next day after the arrival of Czechoslovak military delegation led by Chief of Defence, General **Otakar Rytíř**. Czechoslovak diplomacy saw a milder equivalent of Ba’athist regime in Iraq in the new Syrian regime, but in spite of that they still decided to reduce their political ties with Syria<sup>11</sup>. Despite all of their restraints, trades of arms and transactions continued. On November 1, 1963 parties concluded new agreement related to the provision of spare parts and arms supplies<sup>12</sup> worth 120 million Czechoslovak crowns. At the same time, they signed an amendment to the investment agreement from July 21, 1962, worth 34.3 million Czechoslovak crowns.

Kuwait was the only Arab monarchy in the Gulf region, with which

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<sup>11</sup> Czechoslovak government refused, in May 1963, to visit the Syrian Minister of Culture and in September, it did not accept the Syrian government delegation.

<sup>12</sup> Syria also requested 30 military aircraft of L-29 type.

Czechoslovakia maintained a relatively developed relations. The main cause was the Kuwaiti openness towards the countries of the Soviet bloc. At the beginning of 1960s, mutual relations were limited for Czechoslovak sale of goods through a third country, especially in Lebanon. After the declaration of Kuwaiti full independence in June 1961, Czechoslovakia decided, according to the Soviet model, not to respond due to allegations on the Kuwaiti territory made by Iraq. Kuwaiti independence was recognised by the USSR and Czechoslovakia in the 1963. Soon after that, diplomatic relations were made on the level of embassy.

Regarding Lebanon, Czechoslovak consulate in Beirut existed since 1926. Due to Lebanon's traditional role as a centre of Middle East trade, it can be assumed that business contacts between these two countries existed as well. Czechoslovak consulate in Beirut was operational even during the war. In 1944, parties negotiated the establishment of diplomatic relations. These negotiations were complicated by the Lebanese requirement that Czechoslovakia should recognise the sovereignty of Lebanon. Diplomatic relations were finally established on April 21, 1946. After the Communist coup, political and business connections were reduced to minimum. In 1952, parties signed the framework trade agreement, which served for the activation of bilateral relations, especially trade dimension, which began to shape until the late 1950s.

The important role in the Czechoslovak interest to penetrate into Lebanon played a fact that through Lebanon goods could have been imported to Arab countries, which were otherwise difficult to access for the merchants of the Soviet bloc<sup>13</sup>. The visit of Lebanese industrial delegation in Prague 1955 led by Minister of Economy and Welfare Rashid Karamé, who later became Prime Minister of Lebanon helped the development of mutual trade. During his stay, Czechoslovak foreign trade enterprises concluded several contracts. The PZO Technoexport signed protocol with the Association of Industrialists, according to which there should be established a technical office in Lebanon. It was supposed to work as a general representation of Technoexport for Lebanon, Iraq, Saudi Arabia and Jordan.

Emerging business relations have been adjusted at the beginning of 1957 by concluding a long-term contract on the exchange of goods and payments. Czechoslovak exports covered a wide range of traditional consumer

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<sup>13</sup> It was about Iraq, Saudi Arabia and Jordan.

goods like porcelain, tile, glass, and hunting weapons. We were importing citrus and phosphates, which were originally from Jordan. In 1957, Lebanon has established effective diplomatic representation in Prague. In 1961, parties signed an Aviation agreement, which guaranteed the CSA commercial rights in Beirut.

In 1958, republican regime originated in Iraq within which various military fractions competed for power with political representatives of the Kurds, the Ba'ath Party and the Communist. In foreign politics, Iraq abandoned a narrow focus on the Great Britain and the USA and signed up to a policy of "non-alignment". At the same time, it developed contacts with the Soviet Union and some of its satellites, particularly with Czechoslovakia.

Czechoslovak-Iraqi relations in the first period of **Qasim** government gained considerable momentum. On the December 2, 1958, a trade agreement and a protocol on scientific and technical cooperation were signed. Iraq agreed to send students to Czechoslovakia and in the academic year of 1959/1960, 120 students started to study; 105 of them with the support of Iraqi scholarship. Czechoslovakia strengthened its position in Iraq by its activity. Already in 1959 Iraq opened its embassy in Prague, the only one in the Soviet bloc apart from Moscow. In 1959, Iraqi Airlines launched regular flights Baghdad-Prague-London; Czechoslovak Airlines commenced flights to Baghdad in June, 1960. Czechoslovakia was the first country which has received authorisation to open cultural centre in Iraq.

The development of business contracts and scientific-technical cooperation was on a high level. During 1959-1960, engineering equipment for the footwear industry in Kufe has been delivered. Trade exchange was positively affected by the fact that Iraq was due to high oil revenues relatively rich country, and therefore it paid for goods and capital equipment in cash.

The change in positively emerging relations has been brought up by the coup conducted by the Baath Party with the aid of military fractions around Colonel **Arif** in 1963. The politics of radical anti-communist Ba'athist regime led the Czechoslovak government to focus on relations and support for Communists and Kurds and traditional Iraqi opposition.

We consider the period from 1948 to 1963 to be the most crucial and intense in the process of development of interaction of Czechoslovak and Arab relations.

### **3 “Arabian Slovakia” today**

The end of the Cold War brought about a fundamental change in the relations of particular Soviet bloc countries to the third countries. In case of Czechoslovakia and later its two successor states, and the demise of Soviet-oriented foreign policy, meant the marginalisation of the Arab world in political and economic areas, because all interest shifted towards Western countries and to the entry into the Euro-Atlantic structures. Although the EU and the NATO have already defined its priorities in this region through special instruments such as the Mediterranean Initiative (NATO), the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EU) and Mediterranean Dialogue (WEU); Slovak Republic, similarly to most newly admitted or EU candidate countries from the Central and Eastern Europe since 1993 has not developed any comprehensive strategy towards the Arab countries or Mediterranean region. The relations remained on a purely bilateral basis.

As part of a global policy towards this region, the Central European countries did not approach them actively. They focused more on monitoring the Euro-Mediterranean cooperation or ad hoc responses to significant events, while private initiatives in this area were unique (Bureš, 2004). We would therefore like to analyse the question of developing Slovak-Arab relations since gaining independence in 1993, in particular within the context of European Union policies.

Political changes that have emerged after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 did not mean a rupture only for Central and Eastern Europe, which have been working on their return to the “European map”, but to a large extent they affected the development of Euro-Mediterranean relations. Dissolution of the Eastern bloc opened the space for greater liberalisation of international trade on the principle of the market economy. It also allowed the USA to increase their influence on the international scene, and in the Mediterranean region. This affected the development of previously traditional historical relations between the two shores of the Mediterranean, which has played an important role in European Mediterranean countries, such as France, Italy and Spain. During 1993-1994, they decided to make the Mediterranean region a priority, whereupon Europe has decided to define a new geopolitical project. This project was formalised in November 1995 at the conference in Barcelona, which laid the foundations of the global Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EuroMed) between the European Union (EU) and the countries of the southern and

eastern Mediterranean. The partnership in the political, economic and social spheres is based on the principles of reciprocity, solidarity and common development. The agreements establishing an association in such context were approved by the EU, its Member States and the Mediterranean partner countries. These bilateral agreements of the new generation replaced the agreement of the first generation, i.e. cooperation agreements concluded during the 1970s. Essential element of the association agreements is respect for democratic principles and fundamental rights. Apart from their bilateral nature and singularities of each partner state, the association agreements are corresponding to similar scheme of their predecessors. Their aim is to promote: regular dialogue in the field of security policy in order to maintain mutual understanding, cooperation and joint initiatives, cooperation in the economic, commercial and financial area in order to gradually achieve trade liberalisation, sustainable development of the region and investments; cooperation in the social and cultural fields and in education, particularly through intercultural dialogue, migration control, development of qualifications and the support of compliance with labour law and equality regulations between women and men. Agreements further promote intra-regional cooperation between Mediterranean countries as a factor helping to secure peace, stability and economic and social development.

This conference should emphasize that the Southern Mediterranean remains a priority for Europe. It was held in hopes of a nascent peace process, which has resulted in the Oslo agreement. The Barcelona Process can be understood as "*Southern*" equivalent of the conference in Helsinki in order to open up politics, previously predominantly authoritarian, of the southern and eastern Mediterranean countries and to create a framework for cooperation with Arab countries along with the full participation of Israel. Since 1995, under the policy of the EuroMed, it was managed to create a network of bilateral agreements with all countries except Syria and Libya, which both had the observer status. What makes, however, the Barcelona Process not as successful is the aborted development of multilateral cooperation due to the deadlock of the peace process in the Middle East.

The entry of Slovakia into the EU and the NATO in 2004 meant the convergence of views and opinions with our partners in both organisations. This process caused significant changes in its foreign policy, particularly the increasing accent on importance of multilateral policy and multilateral relations. Slovakia should focus on countries and areas of the world that have not been

previously the subject of vivid interest of its foreign policy. Thus, Slovakia should create particularly strong attitude on some important, yet problematic areas. An example could be the Middle East conflict, despite the fact that during the meetings in Brussels, Slovakia has never actively opened this topic.

While the position on this issue has changed significantly after the Velvet Revolution (in April 1990 **Václav Havel** became the first politician of the former Soviet satellites who visited Israel), in the era of Slovak independence the orientation of foreign policy has evolved into a cautious attitude, compared to the neighbouring Czech Republic: Prague Embassy of Israel was opened in 1990, while in Slovakia it happened only in 2006, i.e. two years after the country joined the NATO and the EU. However, the Embassy of the State of Palestine was opened in Bratislava at the same time.<sup>14</sup> During the twenty years of independence, the national interests of Slovakia also affected the engagement of Slovak diplomats and their voting preferences related to the Middle East conflict in international forums. Israel is an important Slovakia's partner particularly in the pharmaceutical industry, innovative technology, agriculture and defence. Economic cooperation between countries is now well established and it is still progressively improving, as evidenced by the trade statistics. Therefore, according to **Daniela Richterová** (2012) it is not surprising that in 2009, Bratislava together with Israel voted against famous Goldstone report, and vice versa in 2010 abstained from voting, when the UN condemned Israel's interference against the Fleet of freedom directed to the coast of the Gaza strip.

The entry of countries of Central and Eastern Europe into the EU structures also meant a fundamental change in the Barcelona process, which has been called into question by a new European initiative - the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP). Its aim was to offer neighbouring countries to share prosperity resulting from the EU enlargement in 2004 in order to strengthen stability and security of all countries concerned, making the EU wanted to avoid the appearance of a new cleavage between the enlarged Europe and its neighbours (European Commission, 2004). ENP is based on several important principles, such as cooperation, differentiation, conditionality and gradations that are applied in order to define priorities, which are negotiated and discussed with the partner countries. These priority actions are defined depending on the abilities and needs of each partner country. ENP is trying to

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<sup>14</sup> Slovakia and the Czech Republic inherited given title from the times when Czechoslovakia recognised de facto Palestinian autonomy. Both states are still using it.

go beyond the classic traditional instruments of cooperation and assistance by offering neighbouring countries the participation in the activities of the EU, in its internal market, in various community programs, as well as the participation in some of the policies of the second and third pillars, which bundles together the internal and the external dimension of the EU. Thereby the Union reflects such model in its neighbourhood, its own norms and values. To achieve this objective, it uses the similar methods as those that were used during the 1990s, pending the enlargement process, and whose control is provided by the already existing bodies of cooperation.

Originally, the ENP was designed only for future EU's eastern neighbours<sup>15</sup>, but the proposal was, however, replaced by the Swedish model including the 10 Mediterranean countries<sup>16</sup>. The advantage of this extension of the geographical coverage was that the EU has shown to its southern partners that they have not been forgotten and that the EU did not think only of countries of Eastern Europe.

The disadvantage was that the neighbourhood policy covered a group of heterogeneous partners, which prevented it from being perceived as a coherent policy. In addition, the ENP was confronted with another paradox: although institutional relations with the Mediterranean countries have achieved significant progress especially in terms of free trade agreements, relations with the countries of Eastern Europe, although they were one of the shorter data, benefited from the "*European perspective*". The possibility of joining the EU was, in contrast to eastern neighbours, absolutely out of question for the countries of the southern Mediterranean, which of course reflected on the "credibility" of this policy among the Mediterranean partners. Strengthening the European Neighbourhood Policy in 2007, among other things, brought the promotion of greater regional cooperation, e.g. in the form of the Black Sea initiative. The EC strategy essentially expressed the main goals of an ambitious German concept, the ENP plus, which was drawn up by the German government in the summer of 2006 in the context of the forthcoming German Presidency in the first half of the 2007. The plan of the new "*Ostpolitik*" was based on three pillars: 1) the ENP plus, 2) the revision of the cooperation and partnership between Russia and the EU, the validity of which was close to the

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<sup>15</sup> Specifically for Ukraine, Moldova, Belarus and Russia.

<sup>16</sup> Algeria, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Palestinian Authority, Syria, Tunisia.

end in November 2007 and 3) the strategy in Central Asia. Germany's efforts to strengthen the eastern dimension of the ENP has led to support the Mediterranean dimension on the side of southern European countries, especially France that used its EU presidency in the second half of the 2008 for this purpose. It led to the creation of the Union for the Mediterranean, whose approach in contrast to the ENP does not offer any reform programs under the intergovernmental cooperation (Kosír, 2007).

The balance of the European initiatives towards two neighbouring entities has been disturbed again in May 2009 when the European Union implemented the Eastern Partnership initiative. It was submitted by one of the new EU Member States - Poland (along with Sweden); the program itself was launched during the EU presidency of another new member - the Czech Republic. This was the creation of organisational framework for the EU's strategic partnership with the mentioned countries in political and trade-economic cooperation, while issues of democracy, the rule of law and human rights, market economy, good governance and sustainable development have been declared to be essential for overall program implementation. Its objective became the creation of conditions for the signing of the association agreement between these countries and the European Union.

The topic of Eastern Partnership has become an important issue within the Visegrad cooperation (V4). In June 2011, the Prime Ministers of the four countries on their summit in Bratislava adopted a joint declaration on enhanced cooperation within the Eastern Partnership and endorsed the creation of the "*Visegrad 4 Eastern Partnership*" (V4EaP). There was an increase in the budget of the International Visegrad Fund about 250,000 EUR per country, and since 2012, approximately 2 million EUR are available within this program. V4EaP's aim is to promote joint projects of Visegrad countries of the Eastern Partnership, which aim to deepen democracy, political cooperation and the economic integration with the EU. Furthermore, these projects also focus on deepening the sectorial cooperation, as well as the processes leading to the liberalisation of visa regimes. Slovak Republic is significantly supporting the Eastern Partnership, which it deems an important evolutionary step in the development of the EU neighbourhood policy. According to **Grigorij Mesežnikov** (2013) "*despite the primal scepticism pronounced in both the EU and the Eastern Partnership countries alone (especially in Ukraine) regarding the importance of the initiative, it was shown that it is not a kind of symbolic compensation for the former mechanism to access new members to the Union, but functional*

*program for closer cooperation, which has a practical dimension*". By the Europeanisation of the Sarkozy's original thoughts, Mediterranean became also sort of "Slovak" sea and thus Slovakia could for the first time become a direct participant in the events on the southern European border. In spite of it, Slovak decision makers, professionals and citizens felt to be little affected by Mediterranean issues, because they simply had other priorities. The eyes of Slovaks are focused on the eastern border and its largest neighbour - Ukraine, with which the Slovak Republic maintains relations based on deep historical and cultural ties. Slovakian interest to develop mutual political, economic and social contacts with Ukraine stems from the broader context - Ukraine is the only neighbouring country of the Slovak Republic, which is located outside the integrated area of common rules and standards of the European Union, NATO and also, until recently, the WTO. In addition, Ukraine is considered to be an important Slovakia's economic partner. It is primarily regarding the cooperation in energy transit, but nevertheless, the important dimension of the cooperation represents the commodity supplies from the area of the resource base, which is required for different sectors of the Slovak economy. Ukraine is also considered to be an important and prospective market for Slovak producers and exporters of goods and services.

Only with the advent of such significant events as the Arab spring the interest of Slovakia for the first time actually turned to the Arab world and that with the support of a new type of cooperation with the new actors, namely the non-governmental organisations (NGOs). Previous experiences with the transformation processes and with building of an active civil society, that the new regimes in the Arab countries had to face as well has become an extremely valuable tool for Slovak foreign policy towards these countries. Slovakia also benefits from its grounding in the structures of the European Union, whose foreign policy relies on tools of the so-called soft power, i.e. economic and diplomatic actions, but nevertheless the ability to spread and to promote the values of democracy, civic activism and "good governance".

Immediately after the outbreak of the Arab Spring, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Slovak Republic **Mikuláš Dzurinda** officially took over patronage (task force) over Tunisia. As part of such mentoring, two countries cooperate with each other - one old and one new democracy. In this case Slovakia worked together for two years with the Netherlands. The aim was to help Tunisia with the transitional period and to contribute to the formation of a new Arab state, through the Centre for the transmission of experience in integration and reform

(CETIR), which has been established by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Slovak Republic. These issues were pursued by three projects submitted to the Ministry on the official call.

In the modern history the Arab Spring has become an opportunity for the Slovak Republic to positively influence the course of events and to use its historical experience in order to help consolidate new, but yet still uncertain democracies. Slovakia should, according to **Michal Fiabáne** (2013) act proactively in the area of institutional reforms, development of civil society, civil liberties and human rights. In order to bridge over the cultural differences in the future, Slovak Republic, as well as the other states of the EU should also invest resources into programs of cultural exchanges. Firstly, the contact between the generations of young people who were the bearers of revolutionary changes in the Arab Spring with their Slovak (European) peers born after 1989 has the long-term potential to enrich positively both sides. It is also the aim of Slovak universities, such as of the Faculty of Political Sciences and International Relations of Matej Bel University, to involve the partners from Arab countries in their research (e.g. the international conference entitled Exchange, cooperation and policy: EUROMED knowledge in October 2013) and to involve them in the educational activities, such as the new joint study programs planned to be realised in cooperation with Tunisia and Morocco.

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