
ENLARGEMENT AND NEIGHBOURHOOD

Towards a Paradigm Shift in Euro-Mediterranean Relations

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Arab societies have chosen 2011 as the year of the fall of the “wall of fear” from kleptocratic and brutal regimes. North African and Middle Eastern countries are undergoing rapid transformations after decades of apparent immobility and misleading stability. Under different circumstances, but driven by the same fundamental feeling, millions of Arabs have put their physical integrity at risk to call for dignity, opportunities and good governance. The entire world witnessed how Tunisian and Egyptian protesters, assisted by new information technologies, were the first to force their corrupt presidents to leave in a peaceful and non-ideological manner. The results of social uprisings vary from one country to another, but transitions towards a new relationship between state and society and new forms of governance are already underway across the Southern and Eastern Mediterranean.

Uprisings in the European Union’s (EU) Southern neighbourhood caught many both within and beyond the region by surprise, including European governments and institutions. The rapid spread of the social protests that sparked off in Tunisia at the beginning of 2011 to virtually all Arab countries has challenged the ability of European institutions and national governments to predict, analyse and react to the unfolding events. This has led to hesitant, late and uncoordinated reactions – if not unfortunate statements by European politicians – to the democratic demands expressed by Arab societies. The close ties between Western governments and the toppled Tunisian and Egyptian regimes, as well as other authoritarian Arab regimes that still cling to power, have significantly conditioned European positions and contributed to damaging their image.

Euro-Mediterranean relations in a changing region

Euro-Mediterranean relations call for a “mental revolution” on the European side in order to truly understand and react to the wave of changes that are extending throughout Arab countries and transforming the political culture of their societies. The reasons are manifold.

The sociopolitical changes that are brewing in those societies have to be considered in combination with the ineffectiveness of some of the European initiatives conceived in recent years. The Union for the Mediterranean (UfM), pompously launched by President Nicolas Sarkozy in 2008, has been trapped in a stalemate virtually since its earliest stages. The aim of this initiative was to bridge the results, visibility and co-ownership deficits of previous European policies. However, its implementation has resulted in an obstacle- and boycott-ridden political dialogue, poorly functional institutional structures and generalised confusion regarding its objectives and the means to achieve them.

Although the EU’s image in the Mediterranean is not in its best shape and Euro-Mediterranean cooperation has not generated excessive enthusiasm among European governments for years, it is impossible to turn a blind eye and ignore what is happening in the EU’s southern neighbourhood. The Euro-Mediterranean region has been and will always be a central area in the Union’s external and proximity relations. Successive initiatives have been rolled out in the region, orchestrated to a lesser or greater extent by European institutions. Among them are: the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership, also known as the Barcelona Process, launched in 1995; the integration of Mediterranean countries in the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) as of 2004; and the unsuccessful attempts to turn the UfM into an instrument for regional transformation. Despite the different tools and approaches involved, all these initiatives share the goal of promoting political, economic and social convergence to prevent the Mediterranean from becoming the “iron curtain” of the 21st century.

To these genuinely Euro-Mediterranean initiatives must be added the repeated and more or less discrete attempts to keep the Euro-Arab dialogue alive, as well as the implementation of a sub-regional dialogue in the Western Mediterranean known as the 5+5 and, in parallel, the robust bilateral policies of some EU Member States with third countries in the Mediterranean. In this respect, the Mediterranean can be seen as one of the regions where the EU has made more significant efforts and where high doses of creativity and imagination have been invested to re-think cooperation frameworks. However, it is also a region that has generated high levels of frustration. Current changes and uncertainties in the region should prompt a profound reflection on what has brought us here and lead to a joint effort to escape the apparent deadlock in which the region seems to be stuck, grasping the opportunities that might arise in this new phase.

The need to put an end to stagnation

Those in charge of managing Euro-Mediterranean relations in European institutions or national capitals during recent years have not had an easy task. The feelings of fatigue and, at times, frustration have not favoured effort mobilisation. These feelings also permeated the countries that held the EU’s rotating presidency before the new phase started with the triumph of the Tunisian revolution in January 2011.

Of all the most recent Presidencies, Spain was the country that devoted the most efforts to strengthen the UfM and produce a qualitative jump in bilateral relations with some Mediterranean partners. In fact, Spain had already used previous Presidencies (1989, 1995 and 2002) to promote the EU's Mediterranean agenda. However, the specific nature of the 2010 institutional setting (the coming into force of the Lisbon Treaty and the lack of definition of the UfM's "communitarisation"), the economic environment (global economic and financial crises) and the regional context (growing tensions in the Middle East and lack of progress in the regional integration of the southern countries) did not enable initial aspirations to materialise in the form of tangible results.

The efforts did not bear the expected results. Under the Spanish Presidency, some progress was made in launching the UfM Secretariat, based in Barcelona, but the overall results were relatively disappointing. The impossibility of holding a summit of Heads of State and Government with the 43 members of the UfM (postponed twice, first under the Spanish and then under the Belgian Presidency) and the ongoing negative impact of regional tensions, even on technical and sectoral activities, have spread the feeling that Euro-Mediterranean cooperation, at least in its multilateral dimension, has been subject to the ups and downs of regional conflicts, particularly the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Similarly, no substantial progress has been made in bilateral terms. Even though the first EU-Morocco Summit was held in March 2010 in Granada – the first with an Arab country and with a third country after the coming into force of the Lisbon Treaty, the "advanced status" granted to Morocco has not yet translated into effective commitments and continues to prioritise the symbolic dimension over tangible results. With regard to remaining bilateral relations, the possibility of granting Tunisia and Egypt an "advanced status" (months before the revolts), based on formulas similar to that of Morocco, met strong resistance, especially by human rights organisations, who claimed that these regimes did not deserve such an acknowledgement. As for Syria, the Partnership Agreement could not be signed, while the negotiation of the Framework Agreement with Libya was negatively affected by a crisis between the latter and Switzerland. In the case of Israel, political circumstances prevented any form of progress in bilateral relations and, as a result, the Association Council was suspended. Finally, the government of Algeria expressed its dissatisfaction with the implementation of some of the clauses of its Partnership Agreement and said it would request a revision.

The Belgian Presidency inherited this troubled scenario in the Mediterranean. However, it ended up taking a back seat, leaving the leading role in the hands of the European institutions, on the one hand, and France (that holds the northern co-presidency of the UfM) and Spain (as host of the summit that was never held) on the other. Hungary, in turn, assumed the rotating presidency at the beginning of 2011, in identical circumstances and with an even smaller degree of attention given to the Mediterranean agenda. Nonetheless, the ENP strategic review process continued under this presidency and, more importantly, the sensitive and complex negotiation

process for the Financial Perspectives of 2014-2020 started, which is key to the shaping of the UE's Mediterranean policy.

The financial dimension adds to the need to unblock the regional dimension of Euro-Mediterranean relations and to react to the new political and social realities after Ben Ali's fall in Tunisia and Hosni Mubarak's in Egypt, as well as the growing climate of discontent that exists in Mediterranean Arab countries. In a context in which economic recovery is yet to be consolidated and temptations to "renationalise" certain European policies are still alive in some capital cities, the EU faces, collectively, the challenge of giving new meaning to a contested and questionable Mediterranean policy.

This review process started with a letter sent, on 10 February, by Vice-President of the European Commission / High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Catherine Ashton requesting her European counterparts to submit contributions regarding the future of the EU's policy towards Southern Mediterranean countries. Several countries submitted "non-papers", and on 8 March a Joint Communication was issued by the High Representative and Commissioner for Enlargement and Neighbourhood Policy Štefan Füle, giving some hints concerning the policy's review and the creation of a "Partnership for Democracy and Shared Prosperity with the Southern Mediterranean".¹ On 11 March, in a climate of emergency, due to the situation in Libya, the Heads of State and Government agreed a *de minimis* statement welcoming the review process, which was to be followed by concrete proposals on the much-needed ENP reform.

A changing Mediterranean brings new opportunities

Poland, Denmark and Cyprus, the three countries that will hold, successively, the rotating presidency of the EU Council during the second half of 2011 and in 2012, will find a complex landscape in the Union's southern neighbourhood. They are unlikely to have the same influence or the same ability to take action as the countries that held this position before the full enforcement of the Lisbon Treaty. However, nothing prevents them from putting items on the agenda and acting constructively through Europe's institutions to find solutions for some of the major problems in Euro-Mediterranean relations. In fact, in view of the current stagnation, some voices are being raised calling for a greater involvement of countries other than the "Med Trio" (France, Spain and Italy), whose approaches to the countries to their south have shown limitations or reveal high doses of voluntarism that do not yield the tangible results needed to bridge the emotional and economic gap that separates societies across the Euro-Mediterranean space.

1. European Council, European Parliament, Council, European Economic and Social Committee, and Committee of Regions, Joint Communication, "A Partnership for Democracy and Shared Prosperity with the Southern Mediterranean", COM(2011) 200 final, 8 March 2011, available at: http://www.eeas.europa.eu/euromed/docs/com2011_200_en.pdf

The policies promoted by the EU towards the Mediterranean have been criticised for decades for lacking both the political will and the means required to pursue the declared objectives, among them the creation of an area of peace, stability and prosperity across the Mediterranean, as stated in the Barcelona Declaration of 1995. Nonetheless, the tacit agreement under which the EU granted a quasi-acritical support to regimes detested by their own people in exchange for stability and access to resources is no longer valid in the new context. In this respect, the implicit acknowledgement of the reality contained in the Joint Communication of the Commission and High Representative cannot be ignored, as the text states that “the EU has to take the clear and strategic option of supporting the quest for the principles and values that it cherishes”.²

The transitions now underway in some Arab countries and those that may occur from now until 2013 will certainly attract the attention of the Trio Presidency comprising Poland, Denmark and Cyprus. The uncertainties and difficulties inherent to transitions from authoritarian regimes to participative systems will significantly shape the Euro-Mediterranean agenda in the coming years. These uncertainties are generating fears across Europe on the potential threats and risks that might arise as a result of the transformation of the southern police states. Many have voiced concerns regarding the potential inflows of refugees or new migration flows from the Maghreb, the possibility of having radical parties find their way to power in democratic elections, and the risk of dissemination of terrorist and criminal activities. However, aware as the EU might be of these potential – though not inevitable – risks, it would be a major mistake for the EU, indecisive and absorbed by its internal problems as it may be, to be largely guided by these fears.

Over a period that might last for years, it will be difficult for the EU to apply a common approach to its southern neighbourhood, since the changes that are currently taking place can lead to highly diverse scenarios. For the time being, three basic scenarios can be envisaged for Arab countries: (1) a general trend towards democratic transitions; (2) highly diverse situations from one country to another, combining democratisation with repression; and (3) counter-revolutionary processes from “old guard” forces or radical sectors, thus endangering the trend initiated in 2011. How these events will unfold remains to be seen, but the scenario that will prevail will depend, to a large extent, on whether the EU will contribute to the creation of a “democratic, stable, prosperous and peaceful Southern Mediterranean”, which is precisely what these populations demand.

Towards a paradigm shift in Euro-Mediterranean relations?

There is no doubt that the fall of Ben Ali and Mubarak represents a turning point in the political and social evolution of the Arab countries. This requires much more than a mere change in

2. *Ibid.*

approach or minor changes in Euro-Mediterranean relations. In fact, it is highly likely that we are witnessing a “paradigm shift” as suggested by the President of the United States Barack Obama on 11 February, shortly after the forced resignation of Mubarak, when he said that “Egyptian people changed their country, and in doing so changed the world”.³

The EU should compensate for its slow response to pro-democratic demands by involving itself in a decided and generous manner (in terms of funds, but principally of political will) in favour of democratic transitions. To do so, it should abandon an approach that is focused, on the one hand, on the “securitisation” of Euro-Mediterranean relations and, on the other, on the belief that commercial and economic liberalisation will solve all problems and bring about democracy and good governance. Stability and prosperity in the Mediterranean can be best achieved with the support of “strong states” instead of “fierce states”, as has been the case until now. Actively fostering good governance in Arab countries will necessarily translate into new opportunities for societies and economies on both shores of the Mediterranean. To do this, it is all the more necessary to resume the objectives and the “Barcelona spirit” of 1995, since its diagnosis was accurate, although there was a lack of political will, the context was adverse and the means were not tailored to meet the ends.

The EU and its southern neighbourhood have to put an end to the climate of stagnation in which they have lived over the past years. It is essential to find solutions and to examine the best way to achieve them: through bilateralisation, another form of multilateralism or “recommunitarisation”, using and readjusting what has proved useful until now. At the current stage, the ENP must be strengthened with a powerful multilateral dimension in the South, which goes hand in hand with the Eastern Partnership, driven by the Commission in close contact with the neighbouring countries’ governments and societies. Further resources are needed and, more importantly, should be better used so as to support specific economic and social development projects that make a visible difference in peoples’ lives. Results will be all the better if the administrative procedures for the projects’ management are simplified and the formalities and fund-transfer deadlines streamlined.

Conditionality, if efficiently applied, can strengthen the incentives / disincentives systems required to promote good governance and balanced development within the southern Mediterranean states. It is also necessary to impose a healthy and reformist competition process between them. In addition, in those countries that show satisfactory progress in their political transition (criteria must be defined first to determine what this means), a more ambitious partnership framework should be proposed, with a new generation of partnership agreements that go beyond the vague proposals contained in the “advanced status”. Furthermore, a serious and realistic reflection on agricultural liberalisation should be launched. Although liberalisation, in itself, is no solution to the existing imbalances – and

3. Barack Obama, *Remarks by the President over Egypt*, The White House, 11 February 2011, available at: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/02/11/remarks-president-egypt>

could even prove detrimental for some farmers in the South, it is essential to reinforce the weight of agriculture in Euro-Mediterranean relations and, in order to encompass rural development and territorial cohesion, go beyond a merely commercial liberalisation. In addition, democratic progress in specific countries should be accompanied by measures aimed at facilitating the movement of people within the EU through the signing of Mobility Partnerships, as proposed in the 8 March Communication.

Moreover, it is important to grasp the wave of mutual sympathy that the Arab uprisings have raised among citizens on both shores of the Mediterranean. Civil societies need to be a fundamental vector to materialise the paradigm shift. Relations should move beyond the current P2P approach (“palace to palace” or “president to president”) and move towards a “people to people” approach. This is also the responsibility of civil society organisations on both shores. Furthermore, the EU needs to be prepared to respond both rapidly and resolutely in the event that a country decides to opt for repression or for regression in the democratisation process, which is contrary to the will of the people. The EU must not choose silence; a more courageous declaratory policy is called for as well as more objective criteria to assess the reformist drive and a sole voice to denounce abuses against the freedoms of individuals in neighbouring countries.

It is possible that the UfM could become, in the future, the framework for Euro-Mediterranean political dialogue and regional integration. However, at a time as critical, vulnerable and highly changing as the one in which we are currently living, it would be wrong to believe that this is the most useful framework to channel European reactions *vis-à-vis* the new political situation and the development and cooperation needs of our partners. Nonetheless, nothing prevents the UfM Secretariat from seeking partners to launch efficient and feasible technical cooperation projects. If it is successful in its attempt, it should be adequately backed by Member States and European institutions.

All paradigm shifts in international relations entail a profound revision of policies, objectives and means to achieve them. The EU should decide as soon as possible whether we are facing a paradigm shift in North Africa and the Middle East or whether only a change in approach is required, with a partial review of the policies deployed to date. Regardless of what its choice is – and we consider it should choose the first option – it should act accordingly, investing both means and political will during the coming years. Europe’s credibility as a global player, as well as its own future security and wellbeing will depend, to a large extent, on the EU’s capacity to accompany democratic transitions in its southern neighbourhood and to foster progress in these societies.