The ministerial conference held in Barcelona on November 27-28, 1995 was then regarded as a historical landmark in the relationship between the European Union and Mediterranean countries: a vast programme of cooperation had been launched by the 27 partners based on a shared vision of the region’s destiny. Twenty years later, most of the political concepts used at the Barcelona conference have either become obsolete or are radically challenged by the long series of events that took place in the interval: September 11, 2001; the launching and subsequent failure of the Mediterranean Union; the Arab Spring of 2011; and finally the proclamation of the Islamic State in June 2014.

Looking back at these two decades, it is important to understand what has happened and what remains of the initial political assumptions.

The Barcelona Process as a Shared Vision

The Euro-Mediterranean Partnership started as an ambitious project between equals, offering shared economic and social objectives, a forum for political and security dialogue and an avenue for the development of civil societies based on shared values. This partnership – quickly known as ‘the Barcelona Process’ – was the subject of an unprecedented joint preparation over nearly one full year. It was defined as a “necessary ambition,” for both a European Union in need of stability and prosperity in its immediate neighbourhood and for the Mediterranean Partners who, beyond market access, investment and know how, expected a better cultural and social understanding.

As a result, the EU’s financial means were substantially increased, cooperation policies were diversified, and a large number of networks created in many different fields, from political science to economic research, from heritage conservation to cooperation among small and medium-size enterprises.

The Shock of September 11, 2001

The massive attack of al-Qaeda on New York and Washington, the first large-scale terrorism act inspired by a radical Islamic movement on US territory, sent shockwaves through not only the United States but also Europe and the Arab world. It was followed by major terrorist attacks in Tunisia (against the Djerba Synagogue on April 11, 2002), in Madrid (March 2004) and London (July 2007). The ‘Western model’ was directly challenged at its very heart.

Predictably, the reaction of the European Union consisted in significantly beefing up counter-terrorism policies and seeking cooperation from ‘moderate’ Arab leaders. This, in turn, was seen by a number of these leaders, particularly those then in power in Tunisia, Egypt and Syria, as an opportunity to create a new type of relationship with Western governments. The ‘selling argument’ became: ‘we will be your best buffer against Islamic terrorism.’ A typical example was the way in which the Ben Ali regime in Tunisia cooperated with France, Germany and the US in the enquiry into the Djerba bombing and in effect ‘offered’ them the means to arrest the then number four of al-Qaeda, himself the planner of the September 11, 2001 attacks on New York and Washington.
The ‘price’ exacted from Western countries was indeed a much less critical eye on human rights abuses in the countries concerned. Without saying it openly, an entire pillar of the Barcelona Process had been sacrificed to anti-terrorism policies.

**An Ephemeral Union for the Mediterranean**

When elected in May 2007, French President Nicolas Sarkozy promoted one of his personal projects, the Union for the Mediterranean, by which he essentially intended to shelve the Barcelona Process and promote his own vision of relations between Europe and the Mediterranean region, based on a stronger focus on private investment and a much weaker emphasis on governance. Several conceptual and protocol mistakes – such as co-opting unilaterally then Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak – made this policy initiative quite unpalatable for other Arab leaders.

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Meanwhile, across Europe’s southern neighbourhood, Islamic conservatism was becoming more deeply rooted than ever before, not just within Islamist parties but throughout entire societies, including those long perceived as predominantly ‘secular’ and ‘modern’ such as Tunisia and Turkey. Their societal, scientific, and legal norms, long-inspired by Europe’s, were now regularly challenged. A different concept of society and state was being discussed or introduced in a number of countries.

In parallel, the image of Europe in the region kept being tarnished by the deep resentment toward the EU for its lack of influence on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Year after year, Arab populations felt increasingly let down by the very group of countries – the European Union – which had promoted fundamental rights and shared values in Barcelona in 1995 but kept cooperating with repressive Arab regimes.

**The Arab Spring of 2011**

In a matter of weeks, starting in a small town in Tunisia in December 2010 and spreading like wildfire to Egypt, Syria and Libya, a popular movement raged across the Arab world. At first sight, the message heard from the ‘Arab street’ was music to European ears: individual rights, freedom of expression, stopping corruption, accountability, free elections and dignity were the mottos of all the protests.

Very quickly, seemingly unshakable dictators fell one by one in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya, while Syria was plunged into the ugliest civil war imaginable. When elections were finally held in the first three countries, they produced religiously conservative regimes that had little resemblance with the ‘shared values’ of the Barcelona Process. Conservative Islamic norms were the result of the wave of free elections, and only Jordan and Morocco managed to produce enough consensual reforms to keep their societies away from bloody developments.

The political landscape in the EU’s southern neighbourhood had changed radically and Europe realised that these countries were undergoing deeper political and societal changes than what was meeting the eye. The pre-existing EU assumptions about its southern neighbourhood had been shattered.

**The Intrusion of the Islamic State**

On 28 June, 2014, a self-proclaimed ‘Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant’ (ISIL) appeared on the map and started expanding its territorial grip on large swaths of Iraq and Syria, based on the failures of the respective states. It rapidly expanded its political influence through the affiliation of radical movements in the Egyptian Sinai, Libya, and Northern Nigeria.

With its territorial control, military aptitude, unimaginable violence, cultural revisionism, and massive recruitment of jihadists in a number of European countries, the Maghreb, Turkey and the Gulf, the caliphate of Daesh now presents a challenge that no
Western diplomacy has had to cope with before. All the premises of the Barcelona Process are now finding their absolute opposite in the narrative and objectives of Daesh.

**Where Does the EU Stand?**

These developments render the EU’s traditional model (liberal democracy) and methodology (personal high-level talks and financial incentives towards good governance) largely ineffectual. EU leaders are now suddenly confronted with failed states (Libya, Syria), or movements they cannot even conceive to interact with (al-Baghdadi). Elsewhere, as in Tunisia, the EU is now dealing with an unprecedented governing coalition between liberals (Nidaa Tounes) and Islamists (Ennahdha) with radically diverging societal objectives.

The comfortable days of dealing with like-minded liberal interlocutors are largely over: the ‘EU model’ is becoming less sellable in today’s global environment and the EU’s brand of democracy and civilisation is being fundamentally challenged.

Yet, a large segment of the civil society in neighbouring Arab and Muslim countries is very much looking for better governance, accountability, freedom of speech and independent justice. This means that, even if the ‘shared values’ narrative is of little political relevance today, even if one should not be overly naïve about expectations from the EU, the EU should continue to support citizens who support these values. It is very telling that women organisations in Tunisia have managed to counter the Islamic party’s intention to change the definition of the role of women in society through a constitutional change. It is similarly relevant that a last-minute civic movement in Turkey manage to scrupulously invigilate the ballot counting in the 7 June legislative elections, making them more credible.

The comfortable days of dealing with like-minded liberal interlocutors are largely over: the ‘EU model’ is becoming less sellable in today’s global environment and the EU’s brand of democracy and civilisation is being fundamentally challenged.

While it is high time it adjusted to the Mediterranean region’s new realities, the EU needs to continue promoting its values with the appropriate measure of realism.