2. A Multipolar South Mediterranean: the EU in Search of a Role

Rosa Balfour, Director of Europe in the World, European Policy Centre.
(Draft version, not to be quoted)

The changing politics of North Africa and the Middle East

The growing heterogeneity of those parts of the world which the EU calls its ‘Southern neighbourhood’ since the Arab revolutions of 2011 is becoming an acquired notion. Not that the North African and Middle Eastern states were homogeneous prior to 2011, given their diversity, their conflicts, unequal socio-economic development and distribution of resources, and inability to cooperate among each other as a region.

Yet the domino-effect turmoil brought about since the fall of the Ben Ali regime in Tunisia has intensified the diverse challenges across this part of the world. While some countries, through revolution (Tunisia) or elements of reform (Morocco and Jordan), have embarked on consolidating more or less pluralist governments seeking closer relations with the EU, states have collapsed into civil and regional war (Syria), with serious implications for neighbouring countries (Lebanon) that the conflict becomes a region-wide one. Libya too appears on the brink of a civil war along tribal rather than sectarian lines. The hopes for Egypt’s Spring were dashed first by President Mohammed Morsi’s non-democratic style of government and then by the military coup which ushered in the new regime of President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, accompanied by a widespread and violent repression of the opposition. Palestinian-Israeli relations, despite renewed efforts from the US and the EU, do not seem to be heading towards a solution to the longest standing conflict of the area.

The South Mediterranean itself is challenged by exogenous pressures perhaps unprecedented in scale. The war in Syria and in Libya in 2011, instability in Mali and the Horn of Africa have made the regions south of North Africa an attractive space for al-Qaeda infiltrations and various jihadist groups. From Mali all the way to Afghanistan and Iraq, a so-called ‘arc of instability’ is making North Africa and the Middle East vulnerable to incursions undermining its own internal stability. The region has become more important as a route for transiting refugees from Sub-Saharan Africa (with recent latent conflicts in South Sudan, Central African Republic, Democratic Republic of Congo) and from Syria and Afghanistan, as well as a destination for immigration. In short, alongside the internal demographic and socio-economic fragilities, and internal political discontent which the Arab revolutions and movements in the region brought to the fore, these
states are also vulnerable to unprecedented external challenges which are making the international relations of these governments more global and less singularly focused on Europe.¹

This multipolar focus of the MENA states is mirrored in the growing role of other actors. In recent years the Gulf states and Turkey have made efforts to play a bigger political role in North Africa and the Middle East, alongside economic and financial involvement. Migration patterns have changed showing that Middle Eastern citizens are increasingly moving to the Gulf in search of work opportunities. China has stepped up its presence in the region alongside other Asian players. The present survey and its past editions show how the role of other regional and non-regional actors has become perceived as growing in recent years, even if the US continues to be seen as the primary external actor shaping regional politics, making up for a far more multi-polar region.

The unprecedented external challenges which are facing MENA countries make their international relations more global.

Source: Compiled by the IEMed based on the results of the 3rd, 4th and 5th Euromed Survey

¹ For a synthetic picture of the situation in the region, see Giovanni Grevi, Daniel Keohane, Berenice Lee and Patricia Lewis (2013), Empowering Europe’s Future: Governance, Power and Options for the EU in a Changing World, Chatham House, ESPAS and FRIDE, Annex 1 on ‘The Strategic Neighbourhood’. For an analysis of population movement patterns, see International Centre for Migration Policy Development, MTM i-Map Project (Interactive Map on Migration in Africa, the Middle East, and the Mediterranean Region) by; Philippe Fargues (ed), EU NEIGHBOURHOOD MIGRATION REPORT 2013, Florence: Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies, Migration Policy Centre, European University Institute,. Presentation by Egypt FM, Egmont Institute, Brussels: 1 April 2014.
EU responses and the challenges of engagement

The EU’s response to the Arab Spring came soon after the events in Tunis, Cairo and Tripoli. In March the EU published its ‘Partnership’ and in May the scheduled ENP Review included upgraded policies reflecting the Partnership proposals. Essentially, these entailed sharpening the existing tools underpinning engagement across the Mediterranean: enhancing trade and aspects of economic integration, making aid more tailor-made to conditions, identifying new forms of cooperation on migratory patterns. The EU summed these efforts up into the ‘3 Ms’ (more market access, more money, more mobility), seen as incentives available to those countries willing to get closer to the EU and embark on political reforms to reflect the demands for pluralism and good governance coming from the uprisings. The EU thus refined the way it uses exercises its conditionality, aimed to adopt a more ‘differentiated’ approach to better target specific countries, in an effort to give more meaning to the notion of ‘partnership’.

In parallel to this approach, which essentially revised the ENP without changing its content, the EU also started to use a broader range of tools to engage in the region’s democratic processes as well as in its security. Since 2011, it sent six Election Observation Missions (EOM) to the region to support free and fair electoral processes and/or to support capacity building in the electoral field. The EU contributed to the creation of the European Endowment for Democracy (EED), an EU member state and Commission-funded non-governmental organization conceived to provide financial support to political actors working for democracy in the EU’s neighbourhood. It has stepped up assistance to civil society actors and NGOs with the aim to focus on local capacity building.

If these tools potentially could respond to the need to support the positive trends of people’s empowerment and self expression which have exploded over the past few years, other tools are conversely aimed at playing a role in containing the security risks which are emanating from the region. In the Spring of 2011 France and Britain were the two leading EU member states at the head of a NATO military operation in Libya. The Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) was also used to deploy missions in Libya (a border control mission – EUBAM). Further South, following another military intervention led by France in Mali, since 2011 the EU has deployed

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CSDP missions Mali, Niger, Somalia, Central African Republic. In addition, the EU approved two strategies – for the Sahel and for the Horn of Africa – appointed EU Special Representatives for the Mediterranean (since the spring of 2014 Special Envoy for Libya) and the Horn of Africa, adopted a ‘comprehensive approach’ towards Syria.4

The EU also tried to devise approaches which reflected the growing relevance of forms of multilateralism as a means to deal with the multipolarity of the region. The special task forces organized with Tunisia (in November 2011), Jordan (February 2012) and Egypt (November 2012) were efforts to mobilise EU financial and economic support, international organisations, the private sector and other donors and investors to address the deep economic crises in which the countries were, but it achieved limited results in reaching out towards non-European donors and businesses.

The EU’s position on the Syrian crisis consistently underlined the need for dialogue with the other regional actors – Turkey, the Gulf states – as well as the UN Security Council members. But it kept the non-proliferation talks with Iran separate from discussions over Syria. The breakthrough with Iran may vindicate this position, and there is no reason to believe that engaging Iran over the Syrian crisis would have produced better outcomes in the war. For the purpose of this anlaysis, the observation is that whatever discussions were carried out with regional partners over Syria, the EU does not seem to have made any particular inroads in its broader cooperation with the Gulf countries, Turkey, or Iran over North Africa and the Middle East. Despite the acknowledgement of the multipolarity of the region and the need to engage in dialogue with a wider variety of partners, the EU’s track record remains limited to a few initiatives of uncertain consequence.

A deeper look at the assumptions: how to move towards a paradigm shift in a multipolar region?

The EU’s overall response to the regional turmoil suggests that there is a willingness to engage and that the toolbox has widened to make it more capable of getting involved on a broader range of issues. Alongside the ENP framework, CSDP and EOMs have been mobilized to target specific issues. Methodologically, the ‘comprehensive approach’ is intended to connect the dots between the different EU tools and approaches, from development to military tools, to make them work better in unison.

The developments in the region, however, further challenge many of the assumptions upon which the EU has based its policies towards this part of the world – whereby with further it is intended that plenty of conceptual flaws in the EU’s policy set up pre-dated the Arab spring.

The path dependency between the EU’s regional approach towards the South Mediterranean and the Middle East Peace Process is sometimes forgotten. Among the key objectives (at that time innovative) of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership was the notion of contributing to building a region which was preparing for the peace to be heralded by the Oslo Accords. Yet regional cooperation has been one of the most outstanding non-achievements of two decades of efforts, the MEPP has not produced the expected results, and now its centrality in Euro-Mediterranean relations is challenged by competing tragic events in other parts of the Arab world.

The concept of ‘differentiation’ implies flexibility from a standard template rather than tailor made approaches towards individual situations. While this may appear an academic remark, the implication of a single template is that the degree of engagement with one country, the principles upon which such engagement will be based, and the mobilization of resources that such engagement will require will be evaluated by comparison with the policies devised towards other countries. Put differently, the question is whether the EU can justify that in its relations with Tunisia it expects the accomplishment of reforms in line with its conditionality policy (on the basis of which financial commitments are disbursed), while with Egypt it does not exert the same pressure, given the weight of that country and the contribution expected from Cairo to Europe’s broader security aims. It also implies that the template (in this case the ENP) is the most appropriate approach if accompanied by some flexible additional tools. In other words, it reinstates the ENP’s overarching principle of alignment to EU norms as the advantageous policy for the receiving country.
This, in turn, rests on the gravitational model of EU attraction which, in a multipolar region, is not necessarily competitive, with implications for the appropriatedness of the conditionality-based model as well as the partnership principle.

Finally, the changes in the region and the responses (differentiation, conditionality) beg again the more normative dilemma: how can the EU reconcile aims of creating security, restoring stability and supporting aspirations towards greater democratic principles in an increasingly contested and often hostile environment with multiple push and pull factors, when the EU’s overall influence is declining?

In strategic terms, the core dilemma for the EU is about engagement: the degree of engagement, how far this engagement should go, who to engage with, and on what grounds. The template of the European Neighbourhood, however much revised, has not addressed this, nor does the ‘comprehensive approach’ or the CSDP missions in the region and beyond offer many clues about the EU’s review of the strategic challenges to Europe coming from North Africa and the Middle East and beyond.

While the additional basket of tools and the institutional capability to manage them are welcome developments, these processes will be of little consequence if they are not understood as means rather than ends in themselves. What continues to lack in the EU’s engagement with the rest of

This graphic shows that, in the frame of the present multipolar scenario, only around 20% of respondents (both North and South, Maghreb or Mashrek) consider that EU influence as pace broker in region is high or very high. A better mark, around 40% considers when assessing the EU as a driver for rule of law and governance reform.

The EU should consider whether the principles of conditionality and partnership continue to be appropriate in the multipolar MENA region.

The new toolbox should be understood rather as mean and not as an end in itself.

The EU needs to design a platform around which it could build alliances with other partners to achieve commonly agreed aims.

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the world is the shared purpose of such engagement, a common agenda towards which EU tools, institutions, and its member states, can be mobilized, and a platform around which build alliances with other partners to achieve commonly agreed aims.

Perceptions and expectations: the search for an EU role

The mismatch between potential and achievements seems to be a constant feature of evaluations of the EU’s performance in international affairs. The famous formula of the ‘capabilities-expectations gap’ developed by Christopher Hill in the early 1990s is probably the most commonly used framework to assess the EU’s policy output compared to its stated goals. In addition to asking a set of questions measuring the satisfaction of EU policies and initiatives (to which responses are largely negative), this year’s Euromed survey also asks other relevant questions on the impact of the EU on the region and the role of international actors, including the EU, in the region.

The results show a clear perception of greater multipolarity in the region. Even if the US continues to be seen as the most influential actor, a number of others too play an important role, with Russian and Iran seen as increasingly important (60% of respondents see these two countries as having a 'very high' or 'high impact'), while the EU is seen as having such impact in 46% of responses, alongside Turkey and the Gulf Cooperation Council.

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This is somewhat at odds with an overall expectation that the EU can play an important role in the region which emerges clearly from the Survey of experts. The EU is uncontroversially recognized as a major trade and economic partner, while one third of respondents also see a role in promoting regional integration and the rule of law and governance.

Yet there is an expectation that the EU could play a stronger role in some of these areas, with democratic political reforms emerging as the top priority for the EU according to 30% of respondents (the second priority being creating job opportunities with 13%).

Source: Compiled by the IEMed based on the results of the 3rd 5th Euromed Survey
These results based on expert surveys do not clash with the Eurobarometer surveys carried out during the autumn of 2013. Despite the criticism of the EU’s performance and concrete impact, it still enjoys a benign view in North Africa (62% of Maghreb interviewees have a positive image) and partially in the Mashrek (with a much lower 42% - an extremely low 12% in Egypt deserves to be noted). Here too, alongside the perception of the EU as an economic and commercial actor, many see the EU as potentially playing a role in peace and security and human rights.\(^7\)

In twenty years since the conceptualization of the capabilities-expectations gap, it can be argued that successive foreign policy reforms have done much in terms of capabilities. But the expectations continue to fall short of the performance, with the sum of the tools not corresponding to an overall strategy: there appears to be scope for the EU to better perform in the South Mediterranean notwithstanding the current turmoil and uncertainty. Or, perhaps because of the uncertainty, the EU could even be seen as a potential ‘force for good’, helping the region with its key factors of instability. The decision on which course of action pursue will for the next EU leaders to take.

\(^7\) Baromètre du voisinage de l’UE – Sud de la Méditerranée – Automne 2013.