

FOCUS interview

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“Europe should adjust its own policies to support the demands of the Arab revolutions”

Interview with Roberto Aliboni

Regarding the events in the Middle East and in the Arab World, in your opinion, what role must the European Union play in these processes?

In the last 15 years, European policy towards the Mediterranean officially aimed at fostering political reforms in non-EU partner countries. This policy was not accepted by partners. The EU renounced the use of conditionality to enforce it. So the policy did not succeed and in the 2000 Ministerial Conference in Marseilles the EU governments, while in practice dismissing it from the national policy sphere, left the Commission with the task of implementing the policy to the (very limited) extent it would have been accepted by partners under the principle of co-ownership. Ultimately, the events of 11th September 2001 removed political reform from the Mediterranean agenda of EU member states to replace it with the stability of and cooperation with the Southern Mediterranean regimes. During the 2000s, while the achievement of reforms has been confined to the Commission-led European Neighbourhood Policy's bilateral framework (again without any relevant success), the Barcelona Process, albeit initiated to compel authoritarian regimes to change, actually became a factor in the consolidation of regimes.

Demand for change and reforms now cogently and spontaneously comes from Southern Mediterranean peoples. While officially dedicated to reforms, in fact the EU and its member states are pursuing stability, as the latter is perceived as consonant with numerous interests (countering Iran's hegemonic nationalism, Israel's security, immigration control and countering terrorism). There is no doubt that the EU is facing many dilemmas. It must choose unambiguously between stability and change. And, if it opts for change, it must also find the way to recover credibility with Southern Mediterranean peoples.

In my view, the kind of stability the EU has supported in the 2000s is too fragile to be acceptable. It is only a way to put off problems, boost difficulties and prevent them from being solved. More democratic regimes on the other side of the Mediterranean will certainly present problems, but will be more reliable and allow for genuine stability in international relations.

So, my response is that the EU must unreservedly and actively support reforms and have no hesitation to intervene in emerging attempts at diluting change in order to ensure authentic reform. This approach will ensure friendship and cooperation with the new regimes that will emerge from current changes.

Do you think it is time to restart or reform Euro-Mediterranean policies or the project of the Union for the Mediterranean?

I don't think that the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM) is a framework which can be used to foster change in the current situation. The UfM is an intergovernmental body. It does not fit with the task of changing current governmental postures. As soon as the situation stabilises, the new governments may decide to have regional cooperation and, in the event, go back to the UfM (which, by the way, today is still an unfinished and very fragile edifice).

As for the EU, in the short run, it will have to provide effective and rapid assistance in a variety of realms (humanitarian and financial, during elections, etc.). It has the instruments and resources to do so. It can of course refer to the European Neighbourhood Policy framework, but it should be able and willing to act, even independently of existing, sometimes constraining, frameworks, if need be.

In the medium-term, it will have to rethink and revisit its policies. In principle, the ENP fits in with the emerging Mediterranean picture, but its sector objectives (e.g., in the realm of security governance and immigration, in other words, Justice, Security and Freedom) will have to be extensively reformed.

From a political angle, as soon as possible the EU must adopt a less hesitant declaratory policy (the stolid Ms. Ashton's management reflects a bad, anti-European initial choice but also an extremely weak political will and cohesion in the European Council); it must anticipate a more balanced position on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict (in this respect, the vote in the Security Council against the settlements was excellent). The "querelle des anciens et des modernes" on political Islam must come to an end. There is no doubt that more democratic regimes in the Southern Mediterranean countries will include Islamist parties too.

Do you think that Europeans are ready to accept the results of a future electoral process?

I think we must. I think we should do our best in order to support the electoral process. I don't think that we should reject elections if they are not in tune with our requirements. Personally, I think that in many countries Islamist parties will have some weight; there will be Islamist parties in the Parliaments of Libya, Tunisia and Egypt, etc. At the same time, I'm convinced that they will hardly represent a majority.

It is very interesting that Rachid Ghannouchi, the leader of the Islamist Party in Tunisia, has already declared that he doesn't want a majority. This is interesting because it shows moderation and political perceptiveness. This means that, at least in Tunisia, we are going to have a change which, by being moderate, will consolidate further change in a true democratic direction.