

Dossier: Europe and the Mediterranean

France and the Mediterranean

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France 'and' the Mediterranean or France 'in' the Mediterranean? Despite their great similarity, these two options are nonetheless profoundly different. The former uses a coordinating conjunction usually employed to unite essentially different elements. In this case, it would emphasize the otherness of France vis-à-vis a Mediterranean that is foreign to it. On the contrary, the latter uses a preposition imbued with a strongly inclusive sense. The truth most likely lies somewhere in between, as is often the case. In fact, obviously, beyond the semantic nuances to which it is probably not useful to dedicate much time, it is the matter of the relationship, understood in all of its dimensions, that France has with this multi-scalar area that is actually at issue here. It is therefore with a certain surprise that one notes the absence of the entry 'France' in the remarkable *Dictionnaire de la Méditerranée*.² Not that the 'great nation' is ever truly absent, but its presence is interwoven in a diffuse manner. France's influence informs the history of the Mediterranean, this impregnation being expressed itself in a multitude of variations.

The Mediterranean, a French Intellectual Passion

The Mediterranean seems to be above all the object of an intellectual passion for France. First, the result

of the assertion of the Latin world, then its evolution, it is an idea more than an area of geopolitical projection. This argument has lent a great deal of legitimacy to colonial enterprises, particularly French ones in the Mediterranean. The ultimate point being to erase all traces of the betrayal described by Lucien Febvre: "After the secession of Orient, soon would come, in addition and no less seriously, the secession of the Maghreb, that tragic secession of Northern Africa, so profoundly Romanized, so profoundly Christianized, and which was brusquely turning its back to the Roman world and, for centuries, perhaps forever, moving into the anti-Europe circle. That was [...] the great defection, the one that broke Mediterranean unity, that broke the family of these 'circum-Mediterranean' countries."³ But the Mediterranean can also be that 'middle' sea, where a fanciful confluence takes place between worlds that hubris has separated. It was in this spirit that Paul Valéry and Albert Camus would forge their Mediterranean projects. The former would create in Nice the Centre Universitaire Méditerranéen, symbol of the "ideal of the most complete and perfect human development."⁴ The Mediterranean was then seen as the place where "they managed to combine the word and reason" better than elsewhere, in an extraordinary "civilization-making machine."⁵ For Camus, the Mediterranean is the meeting point "of a sensitive body and landscape," the crucible of that "Southern thinking" that turns the "Mediterranean dream" into a genuine political battle.⁶ Rejecting Maurras' unilateralism and racialism, Camus claimed an "open, attentive and even welcoming" Mediterranean. Without falling into the indictments anach-

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² D. ALBERA, M. CRIVELLO and M. TOZY (eds.) in collaboration with G. SEIMANDI. *Dictionnaire de la Méditerranée*, Actes Sud, 2016.

³ Lucien FEBVRE. "L'Europe surgit quand l'Empire s'écroule," *L'Europe. Genèse d'une civilisation*, Perrin, 1999, p. 92.

⁴ A. LAURENS. *Le rêve méditerranéen*, CNRS éditions, 2010, p. 36.

⁵ *ibid.*

⁶ T. FABRE. "Camus," in *Dictionnaire de la Méditerranée*, op. cit. p. 199.

ronistically denouncing colonialism too often made against him, there is no denying that Camus was the son of a time when the Mediterranean was “thought and imagined by Europeans.”⁷

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In another register, that of Mediterranean studies, of which he was the founder, the work of F. Braudel develops an innovative approach to understanding the Mediterranean as a “space built by social, economic and political circulation.” Included in these interrelations with Europe, the Atlantic and the Sahara, the “second face of the Mediterranean,” the latter remains but a “Western lake” where Islam is an “intruder” or even a “counter-Mediterranean” phenomenon.⁸ Neither “neutral” nor “innocent,”⁹ these representations are, in a sense, as much the product as the matrix of the spirit of the times in which they have prospered.

The Heart of the French Colonial Empire

The Mediterranean is the crucible of the very concept of colonization.¹⁰ France has taken part in it more than others. Indeed, as noted by A. Laurens, the “Mediterranean geopolitics of the 19th century

was built around the North-South axis of French penetration into the western Mediterranean Basin, which caused the helpless frustration of Italy, unified late, and now around the British West-East axis, continuing along the East Indies route.”¹¹ Inaugurated by the ambiguous Egypt expedition,¹² this sequence ends at the beginning of the 1960s. Launched “nearly by chance,”¹³ the conquest of Algeria placed France in the Mediterranean in the long term, even offering it a central role in what was the first globalization.

The Mediterranean was then nothing more than an ‘inland sea’ connecting the shores of the *Métropole* (i.e. France proper) to its North African possessions and departments. The appropriation of areas was done in the most violent of manners. After destroying all resistance, the colonizers proceeded to apply the theory of ‘*effectivités*’ or principle of effectiveness (i.e. claim of title to land by occupation...). This entailed relations of authority between the State, which claimed sovereignty, and the local population; in practical terms, it meant the materialization of territorial acquisition. ‘Appropriable’, subject to effective occupation, was any *terra nullius*, that is, in addition to abandoned or uninhabited lands, areas that did not belong to a so-called ‘civilized’ state.¹⁴ This policy amounted to denying the very reality of coherent human groups holding rights predating the invasion. Ostensibly absorbed into a French community that recognized in these people very few attributes of full citizenship, the colonial peoples were artificially added to a common heritage. Not without cynicism, and sifted through the filter of imperial expansionism, the Mediterranean idea brought the paradoxical promise of a “joint destiny.”¹⁵

It was in the Mediterranean, however, that France was to have its most symbolically painful and politi-

⁷ *ibid.* p. 200.

⁸ M. CRIVELLO, in *Dictionnaire de la Méditerranée*, op. cit., pp. 187-188.

⁹ D. ALBERA, M. CRIVELLO and M. TOZY, “Introduction,” in *Dictionnaire de la Méditerranée*, p. 13.

¹⁰ B. SÈBE, “Colonisation,” in *Dictionnaire de la Méditerranée*, op. cit., p. 265.

¹¹ *ibid.* p. 26.

¹² P. BRET, “Expédition d’Égypte,” in *Dictionnaire de la Méditerranée*, op. cit., p. 511.

¹³ B. SÈBE, op. cit., p. 268.

¹⁴ It is true that this concept, at least in its latest interpretation, has since been challenged by the International Court of Justice (ICJ) with regard to Western Sahara. In this case, Spain, as a colonial power, stated it was ready to follow the decolonization process suggested by the UN General Assembly (UNGA). Morocco, with the support of Mauritania, claimed these territories in order to regain its past territorial integrity. For the Court, the fact that the territory in question had not been a state at the time of conquest did not suffice to make it *terra nullius*. This territory was in fact inhabited by populations that “were socially and politically organized in tribes and under chiefs competent to represent them” (Western Sahara, Advisory Opinion, ICJ Reports 1975, p. 12; Section 81, p. 31), www.icj-cij.org/files/case-related/61/061-19751016-ADV-01-00-EN.pdf.

¹⁵ A. LAURENS, op. cit., p. 35.

cally costly decolonization experience,¹⁶ to the point, moreover, that this cruel rupture endlessly poisoned its relation to history. This rupture reshuffled the cards in various ways. The newly independent states rejected a reading of the Mediterranean too obviously marked by colonialist postulates. By a nearly automatic effect, this new order compelled France to profoundly rethink the relations that should unite it with an area over which it could no longer attempt to exercise any imperial prerogatives. It was through the European adventure that this restructuring process would begin.

‘European’ France and the Mediterranean

Just after the Second World War, France only retained its status of great power because of its formidable capacity to attach its strategic ambitions to projects that surpassed it but of which it was the main instigator. Aware that a confrontation again tearing apart the continent would plunge the country into the throes of an existential uncertainty insofar as its possible place in a world in which it would no longer be one of the linchpins, France felt that building Europe would allow it to continue to count. European states had to set forth the terms of a compromise between the desire to re-establish a lost power and the aspiration to build mechanisms of co-operation creating sufficiently close-knit solidarity to exclude any prospective conflicts. Reprising the elements supplied by J. Monnet, R. Schuman made his famous statement of 9 May 1950 under the golden decorations of the Clock Room at the Quai d’Orsay. In a brief statement, the essentials were set out; the idea was to launch an ambitious project, based on a pragmatic yet audacious method, where the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) would be but the first stage. There is unquestionably a ‘European’ manner of handling complexity. The European Communities were driven by a continuous dynamic of expansion, managing to find a common interest transcending the individual concerns even at critical stages. Hence, as of 1972 and on France’s initiative, an overall Mediterranean

policy was established, which became, over time, the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (1995) and eventually the European Neighbourhood Policy. Acting as a filter, the European project allowed a healthy distancing from the colonial experience, opening the perspective of more balanced cooperation for the South shore peoples. Through this process of ‘Mediterraneanization,’ the European Community offered France the precious resource of influence. In any case, the instrumentalization of the European project has reached its limits insofar as the Union has progressively become an indispensable partner, constraining any French strategies in the Mediterranean.¹⁷ Moreover, letting itself get carried away at times by rowdy activism, France itself has threatened the general economy of an institutional and political architecture that it largely helped conceive.

It was in the Mediterranean, however, that France was to have its most symbolically painful and politically costly decolonization experience

And this is how the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM), fervently launched by a recently elected President Sarkozy, emerged as the archetype of the ‘good idea gone wrong.’¹⁸ Underpinned by the simplistic, to say the least, project of reconnecting the unlikely combination of the Latin and Arab worlds,¹⁹ chemically unstable categories that are known to be hazardous to handle, the UfM succumbed to the ideological ambiguities in which it was shrouded. In its first draft, this project was put together as a means of lending France a freedom of action of which it would have been deprived in a European Union incidentally decried as irremediably mired down in the excesses of a functionalism without vision. In doing so, the idea was to evade the EU discipline that had become unbearable by entrusting the UfM with competences that, according to some,

¹⁶ D. SCHMID, “Le retour des français ?”, *Confluences Méditerranée* 2007/4, No. 63, p. 14.

¹⁷ D. SCHMID, *op. cit.*, p. 16.

¹⁸ J. F. DAGUZAN, “Les politiques méditerranéennes de l’Europe : trente ans d’occasions manquées,” *Politique étrangère*, 2016/4, p. 14.

¹⁹ *ibid.*

pertained exclusively to the European Union. There was also the will to regain control in the face of a Germany now exercising unshared power over a continent that the fall of the Berlin Wall had reconfigured. And finally, the manoeuvre aimed to settle the Turkish issue at a nominal cost by offering Ankara a sort of *trompe-l'oeil* alternative to accession. In fact, France did not conceal the fact that the integration of Turkey would herald an inevitable dissolution of the Union into an amorphous ensemble without autonomous political will. However, nothing went as planned. France was obliged to settle for a compromise consisting, on the one hand, of including all of its European partners, starting with Germany, obviously, but also the Mediterranean EU Member States, and on the other hand, reducing the perimeter of the UfM's competences to technical matters (Mediterranean Depollution, Maritime and Land Highways, Civil Protection, the Euro-Mediterranean University, Solar Energy and the Mediterranean Business Development Initiative), none of which, above all, would encroach upon the prerogative of the European Union.

This (relative) failure of French diplomacy does not obscure certain geopolitical recurrences. Hence, for instance, today no-one would dream of denying the centrality of the issues rooted in the Mediterranean soil. Migratory flows exercise a pressure (without this term implying the least value judgement) that no reasonable mind can objectively challenge. Nothing indicates that it could go otherwise in the foreseeable future. This is due to at least two reasons:

- Europe needs immigration more than ever because it constitutes a potential factor contributing to economic performance and social cohesion.²⁰
- The EU lives next to a crisis arc (terrorism and radicalisms being its most tangible expression) becoming embedded at its immediate or strategic borders.

This reality has doubtless contributed to informing the view of Europeans, including those distant from

the Mediterranean, of their environment. In this regard, France can claim the exercise of a singular responsibility, especially since it still has strong advantages.²¹ 'Influence' –it still holds considerable weight in the European Union, particularly at a time when the latter is experiencing one of the worse crises in its history. Moreover, in the Mediterranean area, it has a disputed but always very significant economic presence and a development aid policy that is still proactive. And finally, France retains a special relationship with the countries of the Maghreb as well as those of the Mashreq. In August 2017, at an annual conference of ambassadors, President Emmanuel Macron sketched out the contours of a strategy aiming to “create an integrated axis” in order to “bring [...] the European and African continents closer together via the Mediterranean,” which was also to be lent the function of an area of liaison. This means that the Maghreb must remain a central priority for France.

In any case, the instrumentalization of the European project has reached its limits insofar as the Union has progressively become an indispensable partner, constraining any French strategies in the Mediterranean

This reinvestment in the area first of all entails that Paris abandon any desire to go it alone. Without the support and involvement of the EU and its Member States, nothing will be possible in the long term. This requires that the EU itself be capable of structuring a Mediterranean policy that is not simply reactive but spatially and materially dense and comprehensive. Because, instead of a policy, for the time being, the EU is rather carrying out international 'action' whose results are mediocre. At no time has it managed to decisively influence the major is-

²⁰ Its active population will diminish inevitably by 2060 by some 50 million people even if immigration were to remain at its highest level and by 110 million if the latter decreased.

²¹ *Rapport Avicenne, Maghreb / Moyen-Orient, une priorité de la politique étrangère pour la France*, March 2017, <https://groupeavicenne.files.wordpress.com/2017/04/rapport-avicenne-final1.pdf>, p. 20.

sues underpinning the global balance. To be convinced, it suffices to realize that, though the EU is the primary supplier of humanitarian aid to Syria, its political influence is nil or nearly nil. By the same token, it was unable to stop the process of US disengagement from the Iran nuclear deal. In this regard, it is quite difficult to reply to D. de Rougemont, who questioned specifically European values, “those that would be missing from the world and from humanity if Europe were suddenly to vanish, engulfed by a catastrophe [...]?”²² Once we dissociate them from the capacity of the EU to assert its interests, these values are not enough to define its identity under conditions allowing it to accomplish its separating vocation. The defence and promotion of these values should arise from confluent interests. For, no matter how sophisticated, legal and institutional mechanisms will never suffice to create a community of interests. At best, they are its organic expression. Without indulging in a complacent narrative according to which national selfishness undermines the leadership of the Union, suffice it to note the modesty of achievements in this sphere attributable

to the EU. The latter remains a second-rate ‘actor.’ It is rash to imagine that France could, as things stand, rely on such an ethical partner to relaunch an ambitious Mediterranean policy.

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In any case, I will refrain from joining the chorus of experts, who have erred so often that we remember nothing of the acrobatic about-turns to which they are compelled by capricious current events.

²² D. DE ROUGEMONT, *Vingt-huit siècles d'Europe*, Payot, Paris, 1961, p. 354.