

Lights and Shadows in the Democratic Transitions of the Southern Mediterranean Countries: The Role of Europe

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Looking back at history, those of us who have been modestly advocating a process of Euro-Mediterranean integration for more than 25 years now might be tempted to feel somewhat frustrated. Many of the dreams and goals we set for ourselves at the start – peace, prosperity and modernity for our ‘common sea’ – have yet to be realised. At the same time, however, we might feel satisfied that we had the necessary foresight to identify, even then, the risks and challenges this region could pose for Europe. We sounded the alarms and revealed that the true security risks for Europe’s future would come from the South. We decried the lack of interest in Euro-Mediterranean policy shown by our partners in the East and North, and we called for greater attention to be given to this vital area for the strategic interests of the citizens of Europe.

Today, as I write these words, on the threshold of the twentieth anniversary of the Barcelona Conference, I believe it is more legitimate than ever to demand a genuine mobilisation of the European political class. The challenges we once foretold are now erupting before our eyes in the capitals and along the borders of Europe. The terrorist attacks in Paris and Tunisia, the ongoing wars in Libya and Syria, and the widespread instability in the Middle East should be reason enough for our political leaders to establish this border region as the ‘priority of priorities.’ The Medi-

terranean is coming apart, economic disparities are growing, and the ‘Mare Nostrum’ is becoming a burial ground for immigrants in search of a better life. Moreover, the clash of civilisations would seem to lend credence to the theories of Samuel Huntington, and Mediterranean cultural and civilisational history is becoming compartmentalised, isolated in mutually exclusive universes. Europe must respond to this state of affairs swiftly, effectively and with the necessary political will, although not before first understanding how we got to this point, which strains all conceivable limits.

A History of the Processes of Change

The year 2010 could have been the year of the consolidation of EU Mediterranean policy and, at the same time, of the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM). However, the timing was wrong. The Spanish government, which held the rotating Presidency of the EU, had to exercise the office under a new framework: the Treaty of Lisbon. Under the new European rules, the power to conduct European foreign policy fell to the President of the European Council and the High Representative. The rotating Presidency was responsible solely for supporting their efforts and lacked the capacity and tools of the past, although it sought a more important role for those areas it considered to be of greatest interest. Logically, Spain wanted to make the Mediterranean one of the priority areas of its Presidency. The year 2010 marked the fifteenth anniversary of the Barcelona Declaration; that fact, together with the situation in the region, called for greater European political commitment to addressing the region’s challenges. However, the second UfM Summit, set to follow the first, which took place in Paris in 2008, could not be

held. The reasons were manifold. In addition to the jealousy and prominent role played by France, which sought to retain the Presidency of the UfM and hold an extraordinary summit in Paris on the Middle East peace process, the intransigence of certain Arab states made holding the summit extremely hard. They refused to sit at the same table as Israel and, in particular, as its Foreign Minister. Moreover, things were already starting to heat up in most of the countries on the southern shore, which likewise did little to foster the atmosphere needed to hold the high-level meeting.

I remember my final, somewhat desperate attempt, when I was no longer in the government, to convince the Arab leaders to attend the event in November 2010. I visited the main capitals of the South and managed to convince most of the Heads of State. It was the last time I saw Ben Ali in his palace in Carthage. However, Brussels had the final say on whether the meeting would be held, and it preferred not to force the issue of a summit that, at the time, had no guarantee of success. Aware of that fact, or perhaps unconsciously, Europeans and Arabs alike implicitly decided that the normal course of events would lead to a 'crisis foretold.'

Europe and the Arab Spring: from Enthusiasm to a Gradual Distancing

The self-immolation of the Tunisian Mohamed Bouazizi and the fall of Ben Ali in early 2011, as well as the subsequent mobilisations and changes that took place in Egypt, Libya, Syria and virtually the entire Arab world, were initially met with great enthusiasm in the European capitals. The Muslim-Arab world seemed to have clearly come to understand European values and principles once and for all. The door to modernity opened for societies that sought to embrace and establish themselves along Western lines. The slogan 'Welcome to democracy' echoed incessantly in the halls of many a European chancellery. At last, 'the Arabs' had given up and would embrace the European-Western model. Everything was unfolding just as the somewhat naive predictions of the analysts in Brussels had said. However, the lack of serious analyses and the profound ignorance of the European pseudo-experts, who were unable to predict and understand the contradictions and situ-

ation on the ground in these countries, soon became apparent. Europe either did not understand, or did not want to understand, the depth and significance of the changes sweeping the region.

In the midst of this impasse came the 'revolutionary tsunami,' engulfing the entire Arab world. The events should have shaken from its stupor a European political class that had failed to react with the same energy and vision that González, Kohl and Mitterrand had shown in Europe's enlargement to the East or in the statement regarding the fall of the Berlin Wall in late 1989 and early 1990. North Africa and the Muslim world were witnessing a stellar moment of their history. And yet, in my view, the European response was tepid and late, lacking the necessary political, economic and financial impetus and commitment.

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This attitude cannot be explained by the international and endogenous crises then rocking the countries of the EU. Some will argue that it was the actions of several European states that prevented another barbaric attack against the citizens of Benghazi and that the 'responsibility to protect' doctrine was first invoked to stop the bloody madness of the Libyan leader. That is all true, and the European reaction can no doubt be 'justified' on many other grounds, as well; however, one would be hard-pressed to explain that reaction to the Arab citizens who took to the streets of Tunis, Cairo and Benghazi, preaching principles and values that many Europeans had hitherto considered antithetical to Muslim-Arab culture and idiosyncrasy. How often have we heard, in political circles and milieus, that Arabs or Muslims do not go well with democracy and freedom, that the *umma* would not allow citizens to stand up for their rights and freedoms? Well, the Arab social movements were a model of

modernity, engagement (Twitter, Facebook, etc.) and civic-mindedness at the start. And they needed a more positive, committed reaction from their European neighbours.

The European Council took more than two months to take a position on the Arab Spring; that is, not until eight weeks after the fall of Ben Ali, in the lead-up to the military intervention in Libya. The response was ambiguous and lacking in suitable political, economic and financial proposals given the scale and urgency of the events. The EU's initial reaction was perhaps comprehensible and even appropriate, for it took place at the start of the process, although this process increasingly picked up in terms both of speed and geographical and strategic intensity. However, between the European Council meeting of 2011 until almost 2013, not a single meeting was held that included a line or remark on the events playing out throughout the entire southern Mediterranean. Not even in October, two days after the first democratic elections were held in Tunisia, and four days after the end of the war in Libya. The Heads of State and Government neither welcomed nor supported these processes. This distancing was also the dominant note at subsequent European Council meetings. It was not until the arrival of the new set of EU leaders that a gradual awakening of interest in the region could be seen. The current High Representative, Federica Mogherini, seems willing to give the necessary attention to this situation, to which her predecessor devoted neither the effort nor the attention that should be expected of Europe.

The Role of Europe in the Crisis

Each of the economic, social and political crises on the southern shore of the Mediterranean evidenced a lack of European involvement, as well as a halt in the political and diplomatic dialogue.

Tunisia

Initially, this country was an exception due to the efforts of the EU representative, Bernardino León, who personally and proactively helped to see the internal reconciliation process, with all its ups and downs and contradictions, through to the end. In Tunisia,

the democratic aspirations of society, which sought to take a decisive step forward towards modernity, were met. For the countries rocked by internal crises, the assistance and commitment received from Europe were insufficient. Following the dramatic attack at the Bardo Museum, Tunisia urgently needed the European Union to approve a series of diplomatic, economic and social measures; however, given how things stand, I am not convinced this will happen any time soon.

Egypt and Libya

In the cases of Egypt and Libya, European policy towards North Africa has probably 'unconsciously' mimicked American approaches and policies. For various reasons and calculations, Washington erroneously believed that the time had come for 'political Islam' in the countries of North Africa. Under such circumstances, it concluded, the most advisable path was to support and position itself 'at the front of the protest' to foster 'regime change.' To this end, it backed the Muslim Brotherhood, the most popular political force in the different Egyptian electoral processes and the one that irreversibly set in motion the 'Islamist tsunami.'

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The Europeans adopted this view, which can be considered legitimate, if arguable, reflexively and without rigorous debate. They believed in the virtues of President Morsi, and a resolution was adopted by the UN Security Council authorising a military intervention in Libya to prevent the use of that country's air space. No one said a word when the Western powers overstepped their authority in implementing it. The tyrannical and arbitrary 'Colonel Gaddafi' fell, but, other than the 'photo opportunity' for President Sarkozy and Prime Minister Cameron in Tripoli, no European mission was sent to the country. Neither the President of the European Council nor the High Representative travelled to Libya, and there was no

'post-conflict' follow-up. Today, the situation is explosive, a fact that can only be understood in the context of the country's tribal complexity and the inaction of the international community, in general, and of Europe, in particular.

Syria

This country may well be the paradigm of the West's analytical misguidedness and lack of a political and diplomatic strategy, resulting in one of the most serious conflicts of the century. For one thing, the Syrian political reality itself was misjudged; it was thought that, like Ben Ali and Mubarak before him, Bashar al-Assad would be the next domino to fall following peaceful civic uprisings. How many times have we heard, in European political and diplomatic circles, that al-Assad would not make it to the end of the year? It has been four years now since the conflict broke out, and the situation is catastrophic.

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The indifference and lack of mass mobilisations of the international community and segments of global public opinion, and, in particular, of European public opinion, have made it impossible to demand more of our political leaders and call for new types of actions. However, one must never stop trying when what is at stake is human life and halting the downward spiral of violence and destruction. When observing and attempting to determine how we came to this point, we must ask how it is that the international community has been unable to prevent this tragedy, a tragedy that some seem determined to forget or not to acknowledge at all and in which more than 200,000 people have already lost their lives as the country is torn apart. Indeed, it has splintered into various communities in conflict, leading to the displacement of nearly 12,000,000 people. Perhaps the easiest thing to do is to point the finger at

the primary culprits or at those who claim that the only way to resolve or transcend the bloody crisis is to let the Syrian 'catharsis' play itself out. I disagree. As I have said before, what has been done from the start has been to clear the way for civil war rather than seek an agreement through a political and/or diplomatic solution.

Today, we could continue as we have so far, letting the clock tick down until the conflicts and desperation ultimately leave no option but to seek a negotiated solution. Alternatively, we could accelerate the process and firmly demand an urgent end to the crisis. Or do we simply plan to grow used to living with ongoing regional conflicts in which death and destruction are merely part of everyday life? How is it possible that we have not yet been able to impose a cease-fire in Syria? What are we waiting for? A glance at the many conflicts that have plagued the world since World War II shows that peace was always achieved following a relatively short cessation in the hostilities. This is what happened in Korea, Vietnam and the various wars in the Middle East, in 1956, 1967, 1973 and 1982. Why have we failed to achieve it in Syria? Some might argue, not without reason, that the Russian and Chinese vetoes in the Security Council are to blame. Indeed, that is probably one of the main reasons, but it is also worth noting the lack of effective diplomacy to convince those players to put an end to the fighting.

With the war in Syria, we have witnessed what I call 'drone diplomacy,' that is, remote diplomacy with no envoys or accredited ambassadors. Today, the international community in Damascus consists only of intelligence operatives, news media and NGOs struggling to meet humanitarian needs. No longer is anyone negotiating an end to the conflict on the ground, except for Staffan de Mistura, the special envoy of the Secretary General of the UN, whose work is always difficult.

From here on, we must avoid the errors committed in the diplomatic management at the start of the Syrian crisis. In the very first weeks of the conflict, it was proclaimed, far and wide, that the goal was regime change and that Bashar al-Assad should immediately step down. Subsequently, red lines were drawn, which, should they be crossed, would lead the United States and its allies to engage in a military intervention; when they were crossed, a negotiated solution

was sought to dismantle Syria's chemical weapons cache instead, and the parties looked the other way so that the war could continue. The opposition militias were armed, thereby 'facilitating,' with the connivance of nearly all the players involved, the creation of the West's great enemy: the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant. It was armed and funded and was allowed to occupy the political and military ground of a moderate and modern opposition, despite the obvious flimsiness of such an approach. Rather than laying the groundwork for 'diplomacy, dialogue and politics,' a military option was chosen, in which the al-Nusra Front militias showed a greater capacity than the rationalist representatives of an opposition who felt more comfortable in the sitting rooms of Paris or Washington or the capitals of the Gulf.

The vast majority of analysts believe that Bashar al-Assad bears the brunt of the responsibility, and that may be true; however, what seems clear is that the President remains at the head of his government in Damascus. Why has he not sought, or does he not now seek, a political or diplomatic formula for a negotiated exit, one with a reasonable timeline, process and agreement the primary objective of which is to defend the Syrian people and safeguard the population from horror, chaos and violence? Just a few days ago, the US Secretary of State, John Kerry, acknowledged that they 'will have to negotiate with Bashar al-Assad.' Could not this decision have been made much earlier?

It has been said that the Geneva I and Geneva II conferences were failures. Perhaps. But in diplomacy, when something fails, a solution must always be sought. Why not urgently hold a Geneva III conference under a different set of parameters and with different parties? How is it possible that, although everyone agrees that Iran is a key player in its support for the Syrian regime, with influence and capacity to act, it has never been invited to the negotiating table? If we can hold talks with Iran to curb its future nuclear capabilities, can we not also talk to Tehran to end the war in Syria?

A Few Exceptions: Morocco and Algeria

In contrast to the widespread and increasingly troublesome destabilisation in the eastern Mediterranean, which affects the future of what we call the Middle

East, the Maghreb, with the exception of Libya, has proven itself better able to adapt to the emerging challenges of the future. As we have already seen, Tunisia has successfully completed multiple stages of its democratic construction, and it is expected to receive urgent and unconditional support from the international community. Like Tunisia, Morocco and Algeria have also risen to the challenge of changing Arab societies and taken measures to adapt to the new winds of political and social revision and reform.

Morocco

The Alawite Kingdom is the most significant case. The vision and strategy of King Mohamed VI, who has sought amendments to the Constitution, have satisfied the legitimate aspirations of the country's citizens by transferring some of his powers to democratically elected governments. He has proven able to effectively interpret the times and incorporate them into the country's reform process, always through the lens of the monarchy. Today, Morocco is undeniably a country that has suitably reconciled tradition and change and that, thanks to its good relations with Europe, is making gradual but steady progress in the process of modernisation.

Algeria

For different reasons, this country, too, has successfully managed to avoid the destabilising trends found in other Arab countries in recent years. With the memories of the difficult decades of terrorist violence and internal conflict still fresh, this country has chosen instead to pursue its own, controlled and peaceful process of reform.

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These two large countries, Morocco and Algeria, should become the key pillars in the region's process of change. We would moreover be quite pleased to

see a swift, bilateral reconciliation that puts an end to the historical conflict of the Western Sahara.

A Crisis Stalled: Peace in the Middle East

The negotiations between Israelis and Palestinians have always been a destabilising factor in the Euro-Mediterranean cooperation process. Many attempts have been made to encapsulate the Israeli-Palestinian crisis within Mediterranean policy. Other European approaches have sought to emphasise the Western Mediterranean instead, and to resuscitate such undertakings as the 5+5 Initiative. Everything is just easier between the Maghreb and the countries of southern Europe, some analysts claim. And yet, inevitably, the Israeli-Palestinian question comes up and demands an urgent solution. It seems like the political leaders would rather close their eyes to an eternally thorny and intractable reality. The 'two state' solution of two countries living side by side in peace and security is a prerequisite for the true establishment of a framework for peace, security and prosperity in the Mediterranean. Those who think that an alternative diplomatic architecture can be built by excluding this conflict are wrong. Today more than ever, we must leverage the various Mediterranean fora to promote a definitive solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Europe and the New Mediterranean Challenges

Today, there is no more time for excuses. The problems are unfolding before our eyes; they are no long-

er mere predictions or hypotheses. The European Union cannot adopt an 'ostrich policy' and hide behind inaction. A new vision, a new strategy and a new project for the Mediterranean are needed. We must understand that this region is not a marginal one. Europe must take the lead, together with the countries of the southern shore, to endow the Mediterranean with a new centrality.

In geopolitical understandings, in which security issues are interlinked, it is difficult to ignore the roots of the main risks and opportunities for Europe's future. Sustainable economic development, global terrorism, clandestine immigration, energy dependence, food security, epidemics, climate change and the peaceful co-existence or clash of cultures all have their origin and will play out within a single vertical space: Europe, the Mediterranean and Africa.

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The Mediterranean is the nexus between the two continents and, thus, the centre of gravity from which policies can be set and institutions created to address this new reality. Consequently, Europe must not ignore its geopolitical centre: the Mediterranean.