Commentary

Pressing the Reset Button in Euro-Mediterranean Security Relations?

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Abstract

Almost two decades after the Barcelona Declaration, the European Union (EU) is still struggling to engage positively with its southern neighbours. Security has been the key concern in this relationship, with the EU putting forward a short-term agenda, often inconsistent with the policies, institutions and long-term goals of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership. This article argues that the so-called Arab Spring has induced a soul-searching process within the European institutions that has opened the possibility for Brussels to reinvent its relations with the Middle East and North Africa countries, particularly in the field of security.

Keywords

Security is a central concept in the understanding of Euro-Mediterranean relations (see e.g. Joffé 2008 and Pace 2010). Since 1995, with the institutionalisation of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP), and later with both the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) and the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM), the European Union (EU) has developed a myriad of policies and strategies vis-à-vis its southern neighbours with a clear security outlook. Such an approach has exposed the limits of the normative dimension (Manners 2002) of the EU's policy towards its neighbourhood, reinforced the status quo in autocratic regimes, and placed the EU in a weaker position to influence the 2011-12 events (the so-called Arab Spring) in its Southern neighbourhood.

This article's claim is that the reforms and revolutions that occurred and are still occurring in the southern Mediterranean have provided the EU with a unique opportunity to press the 'reset' button and re-energise its Euro-Mediterranean policy. To do so, it will certainly need to review its security understanding of the region, in particular whether it is willing to accommodate the security interests of its neighbours in a common understanding of Euro-Mediterranean security, or whether it intends to proceed, as it has done, particularly since 9/11, on a clear path of prioritising short-term security concerns. A preliminary overview of the EU's reaction to the events in the region tells us that such a security-paradigm shift has, despite the many measures and policies adopted by Brussels since 2011, yet to materialise.

This article first briefly addresses the institutional evolution of the EU's relation with its southern neighbours until 2011 from a security perspective. The second part analyses Brussels's reaction to the Arab Spring, with a focus on the policies and instruments proposed in order to face the southern Mediterranean's changing political landscape. Finally, the article will conclude with some reflections on how the EU might 're-frame' its approach vis-à-vis a post-Arab Spring Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region.

SECURITY IN THE EURO-MEDITERRANEAN RELATIONSHIP

The Euro-Mediterranean relationship had its basis in Brussels's belief that, by creating the necessary economic conditions, it would be possible to develop the MENA region and ultimately create a free trade area in the Mediterranean that would also be a zone of peace and prosperity. This inherently liberal project of security through trade was first attempted in the 1970s (Gomez and Christou 2004: 188), with the formation of the Global Mediterranean Policy in 1972 (Joffé 2008: 150). Even though the policy had limited success, it meant that the European Community (EC) was able, for the first time, to conceive of the region as a whole (Edmunds 2008). The political importance attached

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to it was, however, limited with the countries in the region finding themselves 'increasingly marginalized' (Gomez and Christou 2004: 189). Oddly enough, the most visible consequence of this rapprochement to the south would be the significant increase of the trade deficit of the Mediterranean countries with the EC – from four million Ecu in 1973 to nine million in 1979 (idem).

With the Cold War and its ideological geopolitics on the wane, Europe's interest in its southern neighbours was reinvigorated. Multiple initiatives were created such as the 5+5 initiative or the Western European Union (WEU) Mediterranean Dialogue. Both focused on the Maghreb region, which was an area of particular concern in terms of migration, as made clear by an aide of the then French President Jacques Chirac when he said: '[i]f we don't help North Africa, North Africa will come to us' (European Voice 1995).

Whatever the underlying motivations or the external perceptions, the success of the Oslo Accords in 1993 meant that the EU had an extraordinary opportunity to devise a policy encompassing the Maghreb, the Mashreq and Israel. The starting point was not particularly hopeful, given that Europe's investment in the region accounted, in that period, for less than three per cent of the EU's total, 'way behind EU investment in Asia and Latin America' (European Voice 1995). However, the establishment of the EMP meant that the EU would invest about two billion USD per year in the region, bringing with it the promise of dramatically shifting the pattern of economic and financial relations between both margins of the Mediterranean (Joffé 2005: 38). Institutionally, the partnership would be divided into three 'baskets': political and security; economy and finances; and, finally, social, cultural and human. Underlying the partnership was the neo-liberal 'logic that free-trade, increased private investment and macro-economic reform would stimulate socio-economic development, industrial modernisation and macro-economic reform' (Gomez and Christou 2004: 190); the belief in the economy as the answer to security concerns.

Despite its commercial and economy-related focus, the EMP was, in essence, an EU-led security project (Pace 2010, 433). The promise was to create the conditions for a productive dialogue between all partners (Soler i Lecha 2010: 234), an 'inclusionist approach' (Pace 2010: 432); an approach that should have resulted in a security area defined loosely as the Euro-Mediterranean space. In practice, though, the EMP failed in most accounts to 'live up to the expectations' (Del Sarto and Schumacher 2005: 17) in many sectors, including as a security project, as it was 'unable to create [either] a safer and more stable Euro-Mediterranean space, [or] a common narrative for Mediterranean security' (Soler i Lecha 2010: 233). In that regard, its inclusionist understanding of security was rapidly replaced 'by an 'exclusionist' policy, where the reduction of illegal migration from the south [took] top priority in EU security discourse' (Pace 2010: 432).

The EU adopted a securitized (see e.g. Buzan et al. 1998) approach to the region which was often embraced by political leaderships in the South, happy to see their regimes reinforced by a securitized view of their own society, such as in Tunisia, where President Ben Ali took the opportunity to 'monopolize the political scene' (Joffé 2008: 158), while repressing 'dangerous' Islamist movements. This resulted in a 'stability partnership' convenient to both the EU and the southern Mediterranean leaders (Behr 2012: 76). In that regard, 9/11 did not contribute to a dramatic change in Europe's security discourse towards the Mediterranean. It reinforced it, and eventually gave it a clearer, over-arching narrative within the Global War on Terror (GWOT) discourse, actively contributing to the macro-securitization of terrorism (Buzan and Wæver 2009). However, the key features of this discourse had already been defined in the 1990s.

THE EU AND THE POST-9/11 MEDITERRANEAN SECURITY LANDSCAPE

The EU's reaction to 9/11 in its Mediterranean neighbourhood led to institutional (both internal and external) and policy changes. The EU's most structured response to the changing security landscape came with the definition of a security strategy that defined the main axis of the EU's external relations from a security standpoint, with a special emphasis on its relations with the eastern and southern neighbours. Indeed, the 2003 *European Security Strategy* defined the security of EU's neighbourhood as one of its main strategic objectives. According to the document it was 'in the European interest that countries on our borders are well-governed' as 'neighbours who are engaged in violent conflict, weak states where organised crime flourishes, dysfunctional societies or exploding population growth on its borders all pose problems for Europe' (2003: 2). In more detail, the EU expected to 'promote a ring of well governed countries' with whom it could 'enjoy close and cooperative relations' (idem: 8). The 2004 European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) was, to a large extent, the outcome of this security concern.

Even though the ENP started to be prepared before the presentation of the *European Security Strategy,* its final version embodies the concerns stated in that document (Aliboni 2005: 1). The ENP was initially proposed by the United Kingdom and Sweden (Tassinari 2005: 8) in November 2002 during a General Affairs and External Relations session, and again in December during the Copenhagen Summit. In March 2003, the European Commission presented *Wider Europe – Neighbourhood: A New Framework for Relations with our Eastern and Southern Neighbours* and, one year later, in May 2004, the strategy that framed the ENP. Through the negotiation and implementation of action plans, it was expected that neighbouring countries in the east (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine) and south (Algeria, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Palestinian Authority and Tunisia) would move 'closer to the EU' (Commission 2003: 3) by implementing measures in areas such as political dialogue and reform; justice and home affairs; energy, transport, information society, environment and research and innovation; and social policy and people-to-people contacts.

In practice, the access to the EU internal market was the only visible incentive on offer (Tocci 2005: 24), and there was no clear path on how to get there. In the Barcelona Process, part of this path had been delineated by a more integrated southern Mediterranean. In the ENP, the role of regional horizontal cooperation was poorly defined (Del Sarto and Schumacher 2005) and ultimately distant from its other clear goal of differentiating between those countries that could progress faster (Balfour and Rotta 2005: 13). Despite stating in the 2003 document that '[i]n the context of a new EU neighbourhood policy, further regional and sub-regional cooperation and integration amongst the countries of the Southern Mediterranean will be strongly encouraged' (Commission 2003: 8), little was actually done in that regard. In short, the EU was not offering a true partnership but rather a relationship based on 'dependence' (Leonard, 2005: 107). The prospect of the ENP working as a trigger for sustainable development of the region was thus limited from the very start (Del Sarto and Schumacher 2005: 20).

This, arguably, was further evidence that the EU was primarily motivated by security and not normative concerns. Security certainly affected the ENP in both discourse and practice. The EU was, in the wording of the 2003 Commission document on Wider Europe, looking for a joint approach to address 'threats to mutual security, whether from the trans-border dimension of environmental and nuclear hazards, communicable diseases, illegal immigration, trafficking, organised crime or terrorist networks' (Commission 2003: 6). Some of these security issues were repeated in 2007, when the Commission, again focusing on conflicts, highlighted their potential consequences in terms of 'unmanageable migratory flows, disruption of energy supply and trade routes, or the creation of breeding grounds for terrorist and criminal activity of all kinds' (Commission 2007a: 6). This centrality of the security discourse contributed to a double process of division between high-priority and low-priority areas of action and between 'liberal' and 'illiberal zones of civilization', the former constituted of the EU members and

the latter the countries responsible for the 'dirty work' (Pace 2010: 432) of counter-terrorism. For instance, for the EU, it was more important to focus on Tunisia and Egypt's contribution to its counter-terrorism policy rather than on how those countries were performing in terms of political reforms.

By securing a cooperative relationship with southern Mediterranean regimes, the EU not only contributed to the reproduction of the status quo (Balfour 2011), it ended up 'enabling further insecurity and instability in the south' (Pace 2010: 432). The need to secure Europe caused European leaders to promote friendly relations and establish less than ethical agreements with regional dictators, such as the 2009 agreement between Italy and Libya, in which the former was allowed to return migrants to the latter without assessing whether they required international protection (Vogel 2011).

Regarding the division between high and low priority areas, a brief content-analysis of some of the action plans that have been approved for the region and respective annual reviews reveal a tendency to over-emphasise security-related issues, limiting the use of terms such as democracy or governance to a minimum.

Table 1: Security and Democracy in the ENP documents

ENP	Action Plan		2008 Report		2009 Report		2010 Report	
	Sec.	Dem.	Sec.	Dem.	Sec.	Dem.	Sec.	Dem.
Egypt	36	4	13	4	15	3	13	4
Israel	19	4	8	4	6	4	9	6
Morocco	25	3	13	3	13	3	9	7
Tunisia	28	6	13	6	13	3	13	5
Total	108	17	47	17	47	13	44	22

Source: Commission of the European Communities (2005a, 2005b, 2005c, 2005d, 2007b, 2008a, 2008b, 2008c, 2008d, 2009a, 2009b, 2009c, 2009d, 2010a, 2010b, 2010c, 2010d).

As seen in table 1, the term 'security' is used much more frequently than 'democracy' in the action plans, almost ten times more in the cases of Morocco and Egypt. There is no single case, counting both the action plans and reviews, in which this tendency has been reversed. The best results come from Israel and Morocco in the 2010 review (issued in 2011) in which they almost reach parity between the two concepts. This modest exercise does not allow for an extensive analysis of the content of these documents. It does however authorise the simple conclusion that security is a concept disproportionally more present in these documents than that of democracy.

The creation of the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM) is, to an extent, the corollary of this distorted policy between Europe and its Mediterranean neighbours. Underlying the establishment of the UfM was the acknowledgement of the difficulty in reforming the regimes in the MENA region and the need to re-focus on the development of technical issues (such as maritime safety, renewable energy or water storage), hoping that, in the long-term, some sort of spillover effect would allow these countries to become more democratic and free. It was an initiative actively promoted by French President Nicolas Sarkozy that was to include states on both sides of the Mediterranean, but not necessarily other European states. As expected, such an initiative was not particularly

well received in Brussels or other European capitals, and Sarkozy was forced to 'Europeanize' the initiative by integrating the Euro-Mediterranean Process under the title *Barcelona Process: Union for the Mediterranean*. The result has been a 'stalemate virtually since its [the UfM] earliest stages' (Amirah-Fernández and Soler i Lecha 2011: 2).

At the turn of the decade, the EU thus had an ENP in need of deep reform and a UfM that had integrated the EMP, and given it a more functionalist twist. Neither worked particularly well, but both showed a deep concern in promoting the stability of the neighbourhood (and, as a logical consequence, Europe's security), more than its democratisation (Dennison and Dworkin 2011: 9). Almost two decades after the signature of the Euro-Mediterranean Declaration, the EU was as unprepared to deal with the MENA region as it was in 1995; embroiled in a complex web of institutions with little political clutch and limited appeal to its southern neighbours. That would be rather visible when the first signs of discontent gave way to massive demonstrations, first in Tunisia, and soon after, across the whole region.

THE ARAB SPRING AND THE EU'S RESPONSE

Europe was taken by surprise with the events triggered in North Africa that would become known as the Arab Spring. It 'came late and off-balance to the protests, and worse, came to the revolutions without a shred of unity' (Torreblanca 2011). In addition to all the shortcomings in the EU's Mediterranean policy before 2011, the EU was now more concerned with its own financial crisis than with the success of the EU-Mediterranean relationship (Behr 2012: 77). The response was unclear (and slow) regarding Tunisia, late in relation to Egypt (Föderl-Schmid 2011), and strong-worded but ultimately 'marginal in the process that ensued' regarding Libya (Biscop 2012: 75). The same could be said of the conflict in Syria, where the EU has played a secondary role thus far. In Algeria, Bahrain, Yemen and Iraq, the EU refrained from taking any significant measures, while it enthusiastically endorsed the timid political reforms approved in Morocco and Jordan (Behr 2012: 79). Two years or so later, the same argument could be used regarding the latest developments in Egypt, with the EU supporting the political transition in the country despite Mohamed Morsi's attempt to expand significantly his executive powers (Norman 2013).

Some of the European early reactions to the Arab Spring clearly revealed the full extent of the intimacy between repressive regimes and European democracies. For instance, French foreign minister Michèle Alliot-Marie offered Tunisia France's expertise on crowd control after the first signs of unrest in the North African country. A few weeks later, and despite the regional unrest, David Cameron found it appropriate to head, together with more than 30 businessmen, to the Gulf region to promote the UK's defence industry. This was not uncommon, as illustrated by Amnesty International's report that in 2011 several European countries sold weaponry to the regimes they were criticising for using excessive violence against their own people. Further, a close look at the 2010 EU progress report on Egypt, for example, reveals that Cairo was closely working with the EU in security-related issues in the months preceding Mubarak's toppling. According to the document, Egypt was now part of a group of third countries with whom the EU was 'to conclude a framework agreement on their participation in EU crisis management operation'. In addition, Egypt was also actively working to 'deepen its cooperation' with the EU in counter-terrorism related issues (EC and HR 2011b: 8).

Once more, security concerns, particularly the potential inflow of migrants, were Europe's major concern as friendly regimes tumbled in Tunisia and Egypt. In a January 2011 European Council declaration (more than a month after the initial popular demonstrations in Tunisia), the heads of state and government of the EU expressed, in the first nine points of the declaration, their concerns and hopes regarding the unfolding

of events in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya. The following three points were, however, dedicated to the problem of migration movements, in which the European leaders stated their 'support to improve the control and management of borders and measures to facilitate the return of migrants to their countries of origin' (European Council 2011: 4). The first months of the Arab Spring therefore revealed the same EU security mind-set that had marked Euro-Mediterranean relations in the previous decade and that, in the concrete case of the MENA uprisings, led, in the words of former President of the European Commission Jacques Delors and former European Commissioner António Vitorino, 'to disproportionate insistence on the possible negative consequences of the ongoing 'revolutions', in terms of migration and radicalization' (2011).

Policy wise, the Arab Spring happened at a time in which the EU was reforming its ENP, for the first time since the Lisbon Treaty came into effect. The general revision of the policy and the adoption of specific measures for the southern Mediterranean were, to an extent, part of the same process. Regarding its southern dimension, there was the recognition by the EU that past mistakes had been made. According to European Commissioner Stefan Füle, even though the 'EU has always been active in promoting human rights and democracy in our neighbourhood' it is also clear that 'it has often focused too much on stability at the expense of other objectives and, more problematically, at the expense of our values'. As a result 'the time to bring our interests in line with our [European] values' (2011, 2) had arrived. These are particularly relevant words as they not only recognise the EU's wrongdoings (Balfour 2012), but they also highlight the mismatch between the values upheld by the EU and the ways in which it attempted to fulfil its interests. Similarly, the European Council President Herman Van Rompuy recognised that '[b]etting on stability alone therefore can not be the ultimate answer' (Van Rompuy 2011). At stake was not only the future of EU-Mediterranean relations, but also the credibility of the EU as a global actor.

Moving beyond mere rhetoric, the EU put forward both a revised ENP and a set of policies particularly directed at the Mediterranean, such as the Partnership for Democracy and Shared Prosperity with the South Mediterranean, the Dialogue for Migration, Mobility and Security with the Southern Mediterranean Countries, the Support for Partnership Reform and Inclusive Growth (SPRING) programme, and the Civil Society Facility (to both the Mediterranean and Eastern Europe). From the EU standpoint, these approaches are to contribute to levelling the playing field between Brussels and its neighbours. They are based on a 'more for more' principle, in which each partner country has increasing access to the EU's funding opportunities policies as it fulfills its reform commitments, and on 'mutual accountability and conditionality' (Füle 2011), in which the EU is as accountable to its neighbouring partners as those partners are to the EU. The latter is supposed to fulfil Brussels's promises based on what became known as the three Ms (money, mobility and markets) whereas the former are responsible for implementing the reform commitments negotiated with the EU. According to the official discourse, Brussels is actively involved in supporting these countries' reforms, in an attempt to help them build a 'deep democracy', of 'the kind that lasts' (EC and HR 2011a: 2). Moreover, the EU has also appointed a Special Representative to the region with the aim of working more closely with all the relevant stakeholders of the transition and reform processes undergoing in the region. An additional (when compared with the original budget) EUR 1 billion was allocated to the ENP (South and East) to cover these policies and the EU has also managed to guarantee additional funding lines from other international institutions and partner countries (particularly through the G8-Deauville initiative).

It is unclear at this point whether these measures will succeed in contributing to the democratization of southern Mediterranean or to the strengthening of ties between the EU and the countries in the region. Thus far, and in line with the view of some regional experts, the EU is, despite the historical events unfolding in the MENA region, still to change its neighbourhood paradigm (Behr 2012: 87). This has consequences. For a start, the EU seems increasingly to have to compete (and necessarily) cooperate with

other actors in the region: the Arab Gulf, Iran, Turkey, Russia and China. The Mediterranean is no longer (if it ever was) the EU's backyard, which means that the EU's policy shortcomings might result in someone else's increased influence in the region. Brussels has, to some extent understood that, and has developed ties with the Arab League and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and is, through the Special Representative, attempting to provide a permanent dialogue with regional stakeholders. It does however seem to lack the will and the policy imagination to guarantee a significant influential role next to its southern neighbours.

For all the rhetoric, both the new and the amended policy frameworks within which it relates to the region remain unbalanced (maintaining a vertical relationship between Brussels and its neighbours); underfunded (particularly when compared with the values the GCC is investing in the region); and if anything, more complex and difficult to understand for the common citizen on both sides of the Mediterranean (who often do not how to benefit from the opportunities provided by the EU's credit lines as a result of the involvement of so many councils, groups, policies and plans).

In security terms, there remains a one-sided understanding of the risks and challenges both sides face. For instance, in the recently presented *Supporting closer cooperation and regional integration in the Maghreb: Algeria, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco and Tunisia*, the Commission and the High Representative identified as one of the main challenges facing the Maghreb, 'Global Threats', that correspond to the Al Qaida threat in the Maghreb and Sahel region. It is puzzling why in a document dedicated to the Maghreb it was necessary to include a sub-section on 'global' threats; more so that the EU finds it acceptable to identify what is a 'paramount concern in the [Maghreb] region' as if it belonged to it; as if it could speak for the whole region. This is the type of prescriptive analysis that has informed the Euro-Mediterranean relationship since its early days and that has qualitatively to change if the EU is to remain a credible partner in the region.

REVAMPING THE EURO-MEDITERRANEAN RELATIONSHIP: OLD WINE IN NEW BOTTLES?

Concerned with the potential flux of refugees, anxious about the establishment of theocracies in the neighbourhood, crudely honest about its less than ethical relations with some of the now deposed regimes, and mostly focused on sorting out its own internal financial problems, the EU took some time to react in a concerted manner to the unfolding Arab Spring. As seen above, the EU responses have involved a good degree of self-censorship and an enhanced reform-orientated discourse. Translating it into a coherent approach towards the region will certainly be a complex and long process. The fact that this is the first attempt to renew the institutional relationship after the Lisbon Treaty came into force will potentially allow for a more competent handling of the issues and policies at stake (EC and HR 2011a: 1). Having the tools and the policies, it remains to be seen how effective these new policies will turn out to be. So far, the results are far from perfect.

The problems are wide and deep, starting with the EU's lack of institutional creativity when dealing with its southern neighbours. The EU has largely reproduced the same 'solutions' it has been offering since the onset of the Barcelona Process: privileged access to market, incentives for market liberalisation, south-south cooperation, a differentiated approach between countries (a principle included in the 2004 ENP), strong rhetorical but limited financial support to civil society initiatives (Behr 2012, 83).

As argued by Kristina Kauch, '[i]If the EU is to preserve its influence in the MENA over the coming decade, it must come up with something qualitatively new' (2012: 2); it will have to support 'the broader goal of popular empowerment' while avoiding assessing it from a supposedly 'fixed European political model' (Dennison and Dworkin 2011: 3). This

will require Brussels to accept it must deal with political parties of different backgrounds, including conservative Islamic ones, if necessary. In order to do so, it is crucial for the EU to fine-tune its balance between security and reform.

The issue is more complicated than a mere trade-off, given that member states will certainly not accept jeopardising their security for what they see as potentially destabilising political movements that ultimately might not cooperate in security related matters. But again, the issue is also not just about the fear of Islamic parties and their potentially negative consequences. Indeed, the problem is the same today as in 1995 and the Barcelona Process: what security and for whom? In that field, the EU remains mostly focused on guaranteeing the latter instead of meaningfully considering the former. It is time to press the reset button.

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