

A Common Area of Peace and Stability: an Unattainable Goal?

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Conflicts in the Mediterranean usually meet two criteria: they are enduring, and they have a regional dimension. Conflicts such as the Arab-Israeli conflict or those in the Western Sahara and Cyprus already seemed old twenty years ago, and yet they continue to await a negotiated solution. Likewise, the conflict that tore Algeria apart in the 1990s has lingering effects even today in the form of terrorist groups operating in the Maghreb and Sahel that can trace their origins to the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC). More recently, this list has been expanded to include new sources of violence, in both North Africa and the Levant. In fact, in terms of the number of victims and complexity of the parties involved, the war that has been consuming Syria since 2011 is the new epicentre of Mediterranean violence.

Twenty years ago, in 1995, the ministers who laid the cornerstone of the Barcelona Process undertook, among other things, to create an area of peace and stability. The Mediterranean of 2014 is not only far from meeting this goal, but also experiencing one of the worst crises of violence, terrorism, refugees and internally displaced persons in its contemporary history. The sheer magnitude of the crisis makes the feebleness of the dialogue and cooperation on peace and security issues all the more palpable. This article will identify why it has been so hard to make progress in this area for the last twenty years and, on that basis, will then outline certain steps that could reverse the trend.

Twenty Years of Conflict and Setbacks

Regional conflicts conditioned the inception, development and subsequent transformation of the Euro-Mediterranean process. Although their existence has served as a powerful argument for the EU to pay more attention to its southern neighbours, these conflicts, especially the Arab-Israeli conflict, have also held cooperation in the region hostage.

The genesis of the Barcelona Process was marked by the window for peace that opened in the second half of the 1990s. Previously, the EU had been working on the creation of a Euro-Maghreb partnership, an idea endorsed at the European Council meeting in Lisbon in 1992. It was not until after the 1993 Oslo Accords that the decision was made to expand the project to include the countries of the Western Mediterranean, culminating in the Euro-Mediterranean Conference of Barcelona in 1995. What was achieved there still seems revolutionary today: the Arab countries sat at the same table as Israel, Israel participated in an international platform of which Palestine was a member in full standing, and all the parties were able to agree on a declaration and plan of action.

In 1995, the Arab-Israeli conflict was not the only source of tension in the Mediterranean. In the Maghreb, Algeria had been caught up in a wave of appalling violence for three years, and the war in the Balkans was still being waged and had even led to a NATO intervention. These two conflicts had an unequal effect on Euro-Mediterranean relations. The situation in Algeria sounded the alarms in many European capitals, especially those of the nearest European countries, which called for all Europeans to pay more attention to the Mediterranean. In contrast, the

Balkans war led to the exclusion of the countries involved from the Barcelona Process.

With regard to the impact of these conflicts on the subsequent development of Euro-Mediterranean relations, most notably they have been a millstone for both political dialogue and technical cooperation. During the first five years of the Barcelona Process, so-called 'partnership measures' were implemented. These measures included, among other things, support for the Euro-Mediterranean Study Commission (EuroMeSCo), the network of think tanks specialised in foreign policy and security issues, and a pilot plan to mitigate the effects of natural disasters. However, with the second Intifada, in 2000, the obstacles proliferated. Hence the unsuccessful attempt to adopt a charter for peace and stability that would have established the guiding principles and action protocols for addressing issues related to conflict prevention and management, disarmament and non-proliferation, and the fight against cyber terrorism and organised crime. The then French Presidency of the EU ultimately had to remove the text from the agenda in order to be able to hold the Euro-Mediterranean conference in Marseilles, and the drafts of the document have remained filed away ever since, as the necessary circumstances have not yet presented themselves to renew the discussion.

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In order to prevent a complete paralysis, the decision was made to work on less sensitive issues, such as natural disasters and cooperation between civil protection units. The possibility for those Mediterranean Partner Countries (MPCs) that so wished to explore cooperation measures with the EU within the framework of the former European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP) was also broached. Of all the MPCs, only two, Morocco and Turkey, took steps to do so,

although in Turkey's case, the country's membership in NATO was the most relevant factor. Likewise bilaterally, beginning in 2004, work began on the implementation of the European Neighbourhood Policy, a framework for relations that the EU offered to new Eastern European and old Mediterranean neighbours alike. However, under the new policy, security issues were given less priority.

At the same time, terrorism had emerged as the top issue on the agenda. Ever since the brutal attacks of 11 September in New York, terrorism has not only conditioned the global agenda, but also the tepid Euro-Mediterranean security cooperation. Djerba in 2002, Casablanca and Istanbul in 2003, Madrid in 2004, and London in 2005 also suffered large attacks, and terrorism began to be perceived as a threat to all. Until then, it had been addressed as a problem limited to certain countries and with very local causes. Since 2002, the need for greater progress on counter-terrorism cooperation has been a recurring theme in political declarations, and, in 2005, an effort was made to take things one step further with the adoption of a Code of Conduct on Countering Terrorism. However, the failure to reach a consensus on a definition of what is and is not terrorism prevented that text from becoming operational.

Too many setbacks in too short a time. It was this feeling of fatigue that the then French President Nicolas Sarkozy drew on to promote a new initiative to 'reinvent' Euro-Mediterranean relations: the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM), whose philosophy included setting the thorniest issues (security, democracy, human rights) aside in order to focus on specific cooperation projects in areas of overlapping interest, such as energy, the environment, research or reactivation of the business network. Originally, Sarkozy aimed to pursue this initiative outside the EU, with the participation of only the coastal countries. However, this idea met with strong resistance, especially from Germany, and he ultimately bowed to the pressure. The result was the launch of the UfM at the Paris Summit in 2008, including full EU participation and the metamorphosis, albeit implicit and incomplete, of the original Barcelona Process.

Despite the success of the Paris Summit and of the attempt to rid the agenda of political issues, the regional conflicts soon proved able to block, or at least slow, the new initiative as well. Most obviously, it was not possible to hold a Euro-Mediterranean meeting

of Foreign Ministers for a full seven years (from November 2008 to April 2015), and the second UfM summit, which, according to the agreed calendar, should have taken place in 2010 in Barcelona, had to be postponed indefinitely.

Synchronised Crises

In 2011, the Arab world was the scene of a wave of protests that began in Tunisia and Egypt and spread, with uneven force and disparate results, across North Africa and the Middle East. Although the initial protests were eminently peaceful and called for social justice, freedom and dignity, in certain contexts, such as Syria, Yemen or Libya, they soon degenerated into violence and even armed conflicts. What began as a political and social protest gradually became a regional security and refugee crisis.

The EU's response to the first wave of protests and political change in the Arab world was to adapt the existing principles and policies to the new reality. The clearest example of this trend was the acceleration, in 2011, of a previously scheduled review of the European Neighbourhood Policy. As part of this process, additional funds were mobilised and new instruments were implemented to support both civil society and governments willing to carry out reforms. At the discursive level, the concept of partnership was revived, and a new incentive structure based on the by then famous '3 Ms' (money, market and mobility) was defined.

The response to the authoritarian counter-reaction and to the emergence of new hotbeds of conflict combined sanctions against the Gaddafi regime in Libya and the Assad regime in Syria with a conspicuous silence vis-à-vis the intensification of the repression of opposition movements in much of the region. At the same time, various European states, led by France and the United Kingdom, became deeply involved in the NATO operation in Libya and later discussed the possibility of conducting a military intervention in Syria against al-Assad, something that was ruled out both because the US rejected the option and because of domestic resistance to becoming involved in a high-risk mission. London and Paris, as well as other European partners, did join the US-led coalition against the so-called Islamic State. Since July 2014, this coalition has been bombing targets in

Syria and Iraq and has provided support for Iraqi government troops and Kurdish fighters.

The fact that these processes are taking place at the same time as one of the worst crises the European continent has ever experienced has conditioned the responses of both the EU and its Member States to these events. If the EU had not been immersed in such a large crisis itself, it could have reacted more generously. As it stands, its response has fallen quite short of the initial demands for the EU to offer a species of Mediterranean 'Marshall Plan.' It must be remembered that in 2011, the Greek debt crisis and the bailouts of the peripheral economies were the main and, in some cases, sole cause of concern for European leaders. Not only was there a lack of generosity, but also of attention at the most senior political decision-making levels. Proof of this can be seen in the scant attention paid to the situation in the Mediterranean at the European Council meetings of 2011, which almost exclusively addressed internal economic issues. Moreover, the European crisis had weakened countries such as Spain, Italy, Greece and Portugal, which had traditionally promoted initiatives to strengthen the Union's Mediterranean policy. At the same time, some countries, particularly France and the United Kingdom, had asserted their autonomy in foreign policy and defence matters, although that trend predates the crisis.

Compounding matters, in 2014, another crisis broke out: Russia annexed Crimea, triggering an armed conflict in eastern Ukraine that would become the largest challenge to the European security order of the last forty years. The crises were piling up at the EU's borders. Therefore, even though the status of the southern countries swiftly declined over the course of 2014, especially following the collapse of the state structure in Libya and, above all, the emergence of the self-styled Islamic State in Syria and Iraq, this situation did not immediately translate to greater European attention to the South. For many European countries, these crises continued to seem too remote, both geographically and emotionally, compared to what was happening in Eastern Europe.

2015: A Turning Point?

In 2015, Mediterranean issues were once again included on the European agenda. Not so much be-

cause the EU had already overcome its internal problems or resolved the crisis in Ukraine, but because Europeans began to suffer the consequences of the instability in the southern Mediterranean in the form of terrorism and refugees. The attacks in Paris, Copenhagen and Tunisia (the latter including 14 European victims), as well as the shipwrecks in the Strait of Sicily, raised the alarm in Brussels and the rest of the European capitals.

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The success of the Ministerial Meeting held in Barcelona on 13 April 2015 to discuss the revision of the European Neighbourhood Policy suggested a certain Mediterranean awakening. The Ministers had not met for seven years. That they could do so now was not only the result of the quirks of the Israeli political calendar (because the country was immersed in negotiations to form a government, it was represented by a Secretary of State rather than the acting Minister, Avigdor Lieberman), but also of a shared desire to demonstrate that cooperation between Europeans and their Mediterranean partners was once again a priority.

The announcement on 16 March that the EU was willing to conduct a peace stabilisation and maintenance operation in Libya, provided there was first a national unity government, should be interpreted in the same vein. As should the growing recognition that insufficient resources had been dedicated to handling the humanitarian emergency in the Mediterranean and that the coastal countries could not bear the full responsibility for that alone. The European Council meeting of 23 April 2014 aimed to express unity and solidarity. However, the lacklustre offer of the European governments (they agreed to relocate only 5,000 refugees), as well as disagreements on the quota system and the formulas for calculating it proposed by the European Commission a few weeks later, had the opposite effect.

One point on which there was agreement was the shoring up of the Poseidon and Triton operations,

the two programmes that the European Agency for the Management of Operational Cooperation at the External Borders (Frontex) conducts in the Mediterranean, as well as the initiative to implement a naval mission to stop human trafficking. The mission, called EUNAVFOR MED, was inspired by the anti-piracy operations in the Horn of Africa and is expected to be conducted in three stages. The first consists of the identification of the traffickers and will focus on international waters. In the second, the European forces will search and seize suspicious vessels found in the high seas. At the end of that stage, and with a mandate from the Libyan government or the United Nations Security Council, the scope of action will be expanded to include Libyan territorial waters. The mission's mandate also includes using all necessary means to disable the vessels.

Post-2015: Agenda, Scope and Risks for Security Cooperation

The depth and intensity of the changes that have taken place in the last five years will be reflected in the content of security cooperation in the Mediterranean. It is not so much that new issues or threats will emerge as that existing ones will be viewed in a new light. Let us take three examples. The first is counter-terrorism. A decade ago, the EU was mainly concerned with suffering attacks by groups based in neighbouring countries. Today, the EU itself has become a venue for the radicalisation and recruitment of combatants and terrorists that might launch attacks on European soil or target neighbouring countries. Consequently, the strategies and tools used to fight this shared common threat must be modified. The second is the existence of weak and collapsed States, a reality that can be found increasingly close to home. Hence, the need for the EU to take actions to prevent the consequences of such breakdowns from affecting it directly and the even greater need for it to have the necessary tools for stabilisation, the reconstruction of state structures and the promotion of national reconciliation processes. The third and final example is the massive increase in refugees and internally displaced persons now fleeing the spiral of violence and destruction in an attempt to reach European territory. The EU has thus been forced to reassess its sea rescue missions, the support it offers to

neighbouring countries that, despite their meagre resources, host most of these refugees, and its instruments for combatting criminal networks whose lists of crimes include human trafficking.

As for the scope of the cooperation, this new reality will gradually be translated into greater flexibility and broader horizons. The cooperation will become more flexible because informal cooperation mechanisms, which do not involve all countries and which tend to be lower-profile, seem like a good way to overcome the obstacles that have slowed progress on security and defence cooperation at the Mediterranean level. And the horizons will be broadened insofar as the European Union has accepted the idea that it should have a policy towards its neighbours' neighbours. In the context of the Mediterranean security agenda, this means defining a comprehensive vision of security in the Maghreb and Sahel and continuing to explore strategic dialogue with the Arab League.

If, to date, the old regional conflicts have acted as obstacles, when not outright barriers, for Euro-Mediterranean cooperation, in the coming years the opposite may prove to be true: the new conflicts may push governments on both sides of the sea to engage in dialogue and cooperate on security issues. The renewed interest in security cooperation with neighbouring countries is both an opportunity and a risk.

Another risk, which cannot be ruled out, is that the EU will remain consumed by its own crises and that this will prevent it from playing a more active role in the Mediterranean

As in the past, in a highly unstable context in which the EU requires the collaboration of its neighbours' security forces in order to assure its own security or strengthen its borders, the Europeans may ease their demands with regard to reform and respect for fundamental freedoms. This could put political activists and civil society organisations in a difficult spot. Another especially vulnerable group is third-country immigrants and refugees, who tend to suffer abuse and mistreatment, but whose situation takes a backseat to Europe's need for its partner countries to cooper-

ate and, above all, to tighten their borders. The third potential victim of this situation is policy consistency. When it comes to rights and freedoms, the messages sent by Brussels and those sent by other European capitals are too often rife with contradictions.

Another risk, which cannot be ruled out, is that the EU will remain consumed by its own crises and that this will prevent it from playing a more active role in the Mediterranean. In retrospect, a Europe that had solved both its internal crises and those festering on its eastern border might arguably have responded more generously and ambitiously to the changes that have been sweeping North Africa and the Middle East since 2011. In 2015, we have seen that, even without having resolved these challenges, the EU seems to have recognised the extent to which the current spiral of violence will directly impact its security. It still has a long way to go before it re-embraces the goal of turning the Mediterranean into an area of peace and stability.

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