Whatever Happened to the Spirit of Barcelona?

Amb. James Moran
Senior fellow
Centre for European Policy Studies (CEPS), Brussels

Forged in the heady mid-nineties when it seemed that the bad old days of superpower rivalry were behind us, peace in the Middle East was imminent and regional integration of the type pioneered by the European Union was on the march, the Barcelona Declaration now looks like a high point for multilateralism in what the EU now terms the 'Southern Neighbourhood.' The Euro-Mediterranean partnership (EMP) launched back then aimed among other things to establish a Free Trade Area by 2010, as well as regional processes across the board, from security to cultural relations, with major new financial commitments to back them up.

The diverse Arabic speaking countries of the South, which one might say were 'divided in their unity,' were also given a fillip, as negotiations on new EU Association Agreements (AA) got underway, with AAs being signed with almost all EMP countries (including Israel) by the early 2000s.

Those agreements had a number of common aspects, including on regional cooperation but were essentially tailored to the differing circumstances of each country, so that while the AAs with less developed partners like Egypt and Palestine stressed economic and social development, the one with Israel focused on trade liberalization.

These AAs have largely stood the test of time and today are certainly the most robust legal basis and, arguably, one of the most important political instruments underlying the EU's relations with the South.

But the regional environment has changed in ways that no one could have foreseen in 1995. Contrary to Fukuyama's infamous thesis of the time, history did not come to an end. Indeed the past 20 years or so has seen an avalanche of it, not least in the EMP countries, starting with the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin in the same month as Barcelona was announced, which put paid to Middle East peace prospects, through the invasion of Iraq, the Arab uprisings of 2011 and their aftermath, to the advent of the terror and migration crises which have rocked both sides of the Mediterranean.

And in recent years, the role of other players in the region has caused a distinct turn for the worse when it comes to multilateralist approaches. Russia's resurgence in Syria and to a lesser but significant extent in Egypt and elsewhere is the most obvious example. Turkey and Iran have also gone in for power projection based on national interests.

At the same time, the US, once a generally benign, if not entirely convinced, partner in encouraging regional integration has scaled back its involvement, focusing mainly on fighting extremism and overtly taking sides in the Middle East, (notably Donald Trump's December 2017 announcement on Jerusalem as Israel's capital), which has brought the EU's traditional ally into discordance with the European position on the issue.

Saudi Arabia and some of the Gulf countries have also become much more active, flexing their financial and political muscle, some times for good, as in the support for Egypt's economic reforms under its IMF programme, but sometimes not, as in their penchant for military solutions to conflicts which the EU would prefer to be ended through UN-led processes. And the fallout from the worsening GCC/Iran tensions is yet another factor deepening fissures in the region, for example in the evolving Saudi relationship with Israel, based mainly on common cause against Tehran.

These developments and more have led to the region becoming more fractured and fragile than ever

before, and left the high ambitions of Barcelona looking like cathedrals in the desert. And they have brought about a sea change in the EU's view of the region.

Whereas it was once seen largely as an area of opportunity (some used to argue that it was itself a proto-EU in the making) the 'Southern Neighbourhood' is today often regarded as a place dominated by dangerous conflicts and threats. Given that some of the countries in the region, notably Morocco, Tunisia and Jordan, have continued to make generally peaceful progress, this may be an unfair appreciation, but one thing is certain: the mantra of the EU's 2016 Global Strategy, that external security, especially in the MENA area, is essential to Europe's internal security, was fairly well received by European leaders and citizens and continues to resonate today.

Bilateral or Bust?

So perhaps it is no wonder that the revised European Neighbourhood Policy, while continuing to support multi-sectoral regional programmes and organizations like the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM), has prioritized security and stability as key drivers for relations with the South. And since there is a lack of credible regional interlocutors in these areas, the EU is now more focused on the bilateral dimension, though one should add that there has also been an important new effort to upgrade the exchanges with the Arab League, involving both political dialogue and action, of which more later.

However, one is bound to wonder whether the EU is congenitally capable of effectively handling this new bilateralism in areas like security. An entity which is itself founded on (an albeit very successful) post-Westphalian vision of peaceful cooperation is bound to be seriously challenged when having to deal with issues like counter-terrorism, especially when its partners are states that can be intensely preoccupied with national sovereignty, at best only partly democratic in nature and often governed by regimes with a high degree of military involvement, and when the EU as an institution has only limited security mandates, capabilities and experience.

Egypt is a case in point, and a brief look at the experience so far is instructive. The new 'partnership priorities agreement' (PPA) under the revised ENP was agreed in July 2017, and, as elsewhere in the region, includes a strong commitment to the joint fight against terror and violent extremism, involving a comprehensive approach to addressing root causes, "with due respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, in order to counter and prevent radicalization and promote socio-economic development."

But despite major efforts by the EEAS and some Member States to follow through, security cooperation with the EU institutions remains at a rather low level, with disagreements over equipment supply (since 2013, the EU retains formal restrictions on the export of items that could be used for internal oppression), and the deployment of expert personnel to the EU Delegation in Cairo. Discord on what constitutes 'due respect' of rights and Europe's refusal to treat the Muslim Brotherhood as a terrorist organization have also caused a good deal of friction.

The role of other players in the region has caused a distinct turn for the worse when it comes to multilateralist approaches. Russia's resurgence in Syria and to a lesser but significant extent in Egypt and elsewhere is the most obvious example

With the two sides yet to find a modus operandi, it is a moot point whether much progress will be possible. The EU is also not always helped by Member States that fail to support these efforts or prefer to focus on other priorities, such as the supply of conventional arms to Cairo, which, among other things, undermines the spirit, if not the letter, of the 2013 restrictions at the EU level mentioned above.

On the other hand, there have been somewhat better results in the exchanges on migration, the other 'new' priority in the PP agreement. After long delays, the first Egyptian projects under the EU's Valletta facility are about to begin, and cooperation between the Egyptian Navy and operation Sophia to counter human trafficking and assist its victims is

improving, as Cairo seems to have understood that, at least when it comes to the high seas, EU military coordination has real meaning. That said, there is little sign of progress on forging a mobility partnership of the kind that is being negotiated with other partners in the region.

All this points to a classic weakness in the bilateral approach: since security is not a core European competence, absent a visible and coherent all-EU presence, the dialogue is not in practize 'bilateral' in the full meaning of the word. Knowing this, Cairo can play one off against the other when faced with demands that it does not like.

While it accounts for a third of the region's population, Egypt may not be typical of the entire region, but it does provide an illustration of some of the limits to bilateralism in the current context.

On the other hand, bilateral trade talks on Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreements (DCFTA) are underway with Morocco, Tunisia and Jordan and there is some hope that they will come to fruition. Even Egypt, which has traditionally been sceptical, has recently shown some interest in moving forward, at least on some aspects, although it is too soon to judge whether this will be sustained.

Should these DCFTA's come into force, they could, combined with the PEM convention on cumulation of origin, now close to full ratification, make a significant new contribution to incoming EU investment as well as intra-regional exchanges; essential requirements if these countries are to meet their investment needs and burgeoning demand for jobs from their fast-growing youthful populations.

What Future for Regionalism?

But notwithstanding these initiatives, the fact is that for all the efforts since 1995 to create that elusive Free Trade Area, MENA is still one of the least economically integrated areas of the world. 'South-South' exchanges remain very limited and this lack of interdependence remains a real drag on prospects for strengthening the regional dimension. Intra-regional processes such as Agadir have not made much headway and the UfM has struggled, especially beyond the Maghreb region, to find a role for itself in stimulating investment in genuinely regional infrastructure.

EMP regional development programmes continue and a few have had some success, notably in creating networks between officials, policymakers, businesspeople and civil society in sectors such as energy, technology and youth. But their effect is limited.

Given this, and the fact that, as mentioned above, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf are playing an ever greater role in the affairs of the neighbourhood, it may be time to seriously consider new political initiatives on the regional front that go beyond the somewhat artificial construct of the 'Southern Neighbourhood' per se. One such action could be the holding of a first Euro-Arab summit.

The EU holds regular summit meetings with most key partner countries and regions around the world, but there is one major region that has been conspicuous by its absence from the summit agenda, i.e., the Arab world, which is an odd omission to say the least, given the host of common challenges that preoccupy both the EU and this region.

For many years, a number of EU Member States, and virtually all those on the Arab side, have pushed for such a meeting, or at least have not obstructed it, but it was only in December 2016 at the last EU-Arab League (LAS) Foreign Ministers' meeting in Cairo that an agreement on the idea was reached.

Since then, there have been some working-level exchanges, but serious preparations have yet to get underway and it seems unlikely that it could take place before 2019, given the lead time needed to ensure that the substance is clearly identified and that the 50 countries involved (28-plus institutions on the EU side and the 22 Arab League member states) are properly represented at Head of State and/or Government level.

Why the delay? Schisms on the Arab side, namely the crisis over Qatar, which affects both the GCC (Gulf Cooperation Council) countries and most of the rest of the LAS, which is split on the Saudi-led initiative to isolate Doha. There may also be some doubts on the EU side about the prospects for a good turnout, given 'summit fatigue,' the venue proposed by LAS sources (Cairo) and domestic distractions such as Brexit. It certainly will not be easy to come up with meaningful common political messages on the most important issues, and there is a risk that it will degenerate into a talking shop.

But if history is any guide, there will always be internal divisions, Arab or European, standing in the way

of such an event. At the same time, the commitment has been made and there is now a pressing need to move forward.

Turning to what the substance of such a meeting could be, as noted, one of the many reasons why MENA and indeed the Gulf region is in such disarray is the woeful lack of progress on integration, despite historical affinities and it being home to the world's oldest post-war regional institution.

With that in mind, and without wishing to exaggerate the EU's influence on its Arab partners, the fact that the European Union would find it useful to upgrade its political relationship with the LAS as a group could help the latter regain some credibility with its own membership and citizens. That, in turn, might help it to take on a greater role in bringing peace and development to this atomized region.

Secondly, with a little imagination, it should be possible for the two sides to come up with some influential common messaging. At a time when the US has for now, to coin a phrase, taken itself off the table as an honest broker in the wake of the Jerusalem announcement, and where there is a dearth of viable alternatives, it is worth recalling that both sides have long been committed to the two-state solution and the Arab Peace Initiative, although few European or Arab leaders today seem to give this the attention it deserves. Crafting a strong common position which directly engages all of them could help to inject energy into the moribund peace process. Without that, the drums of war for yet another round of violence in Palestine and Israel will only beat louder, among other things giving extremists in MENA and in Europe itself new succour.

Apart from the appalling suffering visited on the peoples of those countries, the fallout from conflicts in Syria, Libya, Iraq and Yemen is fuelling instability, whether through the rise of Islamophobia and populism, or through unsustainable policies of repression in the name of security. A Euro-Arab summit in itself will not bring peace, not least because some of the parties to those wars will not be present, but again, it could give momentum to efforts, especially those led by the UN, to find solutions.

It might also help to sharpen joint action to fight the deprivation, terrorism, and irregular migration generated by these conflicts, all of which gnaw at the roots of societies on both sides. And depending on developments later in 2018, there may also be room for discussion about how best to cooperate on post-war governance and reconstruction, wherever that is a feasible proposition.

The summit could also address the deep-rooted economic challenges that the region faces. It may well be that after a few false starts, the transition to a post-hydrocarbon world has now begun in earnest and this obviously has fundamental, possibly existential consequences for a number of LAS countries, oil exporters and consumers alike. Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 programme is one of several signs that Arab governments now take this seriously.

Europe is, and most likely will continue to be, the prime source of foreign investment, development aid and trade for the region and has a vital part to play in its economic security, something that is evidently in the EU's own interest as well. One way to strengthen this aspect is through forging closer cooperation between the EU, UfM, European Development Banks and the Arab Funds on boosting investment in infrastructure and job creation in MENA. Up to now, there has been much talk about this, but not a great deal of action.

Europe is, and most likely will continue to be, the prime source of foreign investment, development aid and trade for the region and has a vital part to play in its economic security, something that is evidently in the EU's own interest as well

Moreover, the two regions' private sector organizations and companies could usefully organize a parallel exchange on investment. And given their crucial role in development and governance, civil society groups could also come together, even if there will undoubtedly be diverging opinions about how that should be managed.

The EU already has a wide-ranging programme of economic, development and security-related regional cooperation with the LAS Secretariat, mainly under the ENP, and there is an ambitious work programme in areas such as energy, the environment

and crisis management. While there have been some achievements, for example in raising the League's capacity to better monitor and help abate humanitarian crises, the summit could give new direction to calibrating these efforts to tackle new challenges in the region, and provide some operational 'deliverables.'

Last but not least, summits like this always give an opportunity for leaders to solve or at least progress on bilateral issues, whether they be within or between the respective regions, including in the challenging security dialogues underway now under the PPA's.

What Next?

However, as said, if it is to happen, serious work needs to get into gear very soon: the next EU-LAS Foreign Ministers meeting is due at the end of 2018, and, unless there is progress before then, both sides will have some explaining to do.

In conclusion, implementation of the PPAs is still in its early stages and it is too soon to judge whether the new stress on bilateralism will have the desired results. But there is no question that the approach gives rise to a new set of serious challenges. A complementary push at the regional level is probably needed if the EU's critical relationship with countries in the region is to be deepened in the way foreseen by the new ENP.

The EU already has a wide-ranging programme of economic, development and security-related regional cooperation with the LAS Secretariat, mainly under the ENP, and there is an ambitious work programme in areas such as energy, the environment and crisis management

The Euro-Arab summit is one way of achieving this, but should it prove impossible to deliver, other means of injecting new political energy into this dimension should be urgently considered. Leaders could do worse than revisit the spirit of Barcelona, even if the regional grouping that it spawned may have been overtaken by events since 1995.