

The Mediterranean, its Identity and its Media

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What are the identity stakes that are conveyed through the media in the Mediterranean region? To what extent does the media landscape encourage the development of the idea of a Mediterranean identity?

In dealing with these two questions, it is of course difficult to avoid the increasingly recurrent problem of identity, just as it is certain that we cannot consider such an issue on the basis of a single theory, regardless of which discipline it may belong to. Thus, psychology, sociology, anthropology, politics and now mediology, among others, are all fields of reflection that offer specific ways to approach the issue of identity. Defining the ways in which these specific approaches interrelate with each other is without doubt a complex undertaking, above all because emotion is very implicated with the work that would be necessary to reach such a definition.

One important component is that the idea of Mediterranean identity has entered a historic phase of unprecedented richness and complexity, as the European Union is one of the greatest economic, political, strategic and cultural challenges of today. There is no other experiment like it. Historically hostile countries have been converted into nations that are coordinating and cooperating together in every sphere, via the construction of a network of interests, reciprocal relations and legitimate institutions, all supported by the will of the people.

Despite the pro-federation fervour and

policies on unification, integration and partnership, the discourses on identity have been brought dramatically into the foreground in recent times. With the new doubts that have been cast on a whole host of historic achievements, such as the idea of sovereignty, nationhood, frontiers, the process of building Europe, the age of globalisation, the accelerated migration of institutions, *imaginaires*, and so forth, serious questions have been raised concerning the self and others, spatial location, relations with the times and the new perceptions of reality. These profound changes put certain already fragile or weakened layers in an unavoidable dilemma, faced with the question of whether to assert their identity in a «pathological» or at least exaggerated manner, or to accept the loss of fundamental elements that are essential to their identity. These options are felt by some to be a tragic choice between integrity and disintegration.

The media of all genres and forms are there to show, expose, discuss and even dramatise the demands regarding identity that are constantly expressed in the various regions of the Mediterranean, and the multimedia is becoming increasingly involved in the historical and cultural context that pervades the idea of the Mediterranean identity. Nothing is clear or definitive. Initiatives begin and are blocked; accords are signed but not implemented; intentions are paraded but not carried out. Despite all their complementary assets, the two shores of the Mediterranean run into constant obstacles that prevent the bridges from being built. The Israeli-Arab conflict, the inequality between the north and the south of the Mediterranean, the Ameri-

can desire for power, to name but a few, are all factors that thwart the Euro-Mediterranean strategy for closer partnerships and greater reciprocity. Sadly, certain parts of the media contribute to the creation of clichés and formulate prejudices that are in no way beneficial to the process of the idea of the Mediterranean identity taking root. Above all, given that whenever a civilisation, a nation or a people, or a social group within a society, experience disintegration or destruction, their system of values, relationships and modes of perception and organisation become altered, and open to the incorporation of new components. In the context of the Mediterranean world, and via the media, there has been a proliferation of the discourses on identity, made up of a variety of approaches and an increase in interpretations, each in accordance with its own source, status and purpose.

The media, and television in particular, are unquestionably privileged circles in which the identity stakes in the Mediterranean world may be expressed. Furthermore, television is in the process of dramatically overturning the mental structures, cultural references and aesthetic sensibilities of our region. Television makes everything possible. It can show, reveal and enlighten, as well as hide, obscure and mask exchanges. It is a multidimensional machine and a medium of strategic importance in shaping the expectations, shortcomings, frustrations and desires of the peoples of the Mediterranean.

If the Euro-Mediterranean venture, as it was formulated at the Barcelona conference in 1995 and which remains, despite resistance, an undertaking that

THE MEDIA IN THE ARAB HUMAN DEVELOPMENT REPORT

Challenges for the Arab Media in the Construction of the Society of Information

The Arab media comes up against internal and external boundaries in its role as transmitters of information, and the challenges that face them are intensifying with the rapid development of information technologies and diffusion, which has provided the media with a pivotal role in the construction of societies of information all over the world.

The boundaries across access to the media and information technologies, governmental restrictions and the passivity of audiences are elements that slow the diffusion of knowledge through new technologies, and the policies of information and communication place the media under the control of political authorities. The media itself suffers from deficiencies in planning, documentation, and research, as well as a significant lack of flexibility. To this must be added the fickleness of popular customs.

Arab countries need to be in close cooperation with each other in order to increase the capacity and independence of their media as a vital means to the transmission of information and a means of increasing the awareness concerning governments and public services.

However, the last few years have seen an improvement in the environment of information accessibility within the Arab world. Despite the prevalence of official channels, the Arab press has entered a phase characterised by incipient competition. Certain newspapers, some of them published outside the Arab world, are producing high quality journalism with a margin of freedom that is significantly greater than that of the official press. In some cases, these newspapers have been able to break through barriers and censorship thanks to the Internet.

These changes have not only taken place in the printed press. Television has experi-

enced an even greater transformation. Private-owned Arab television channels have been competing with the largest international channels, as has been witnessed during the Iraqi conflict. Independent Arab channels have broken the monopoly of the big channels in their emissions of images and news.

Although the environment is not at its most favourable for the development of the network of knowledge, the media has created information and documentation centres which provide Arab researchers with the opportunity to exploit the benefits of the digital revolution.

At present the hope lies in the fact that these initial transformations in the Arab media will broaden the margins of political freedom, increase the quality of the media, and strengthen the relations between good governance and the society of information.

Arab Human Development Report 2003.

<http://www.undp.org/rbas/ahdr/>

is highly relevant to the present day, proposes association as the basis for cooperation between the two shores of the Mediterranean, and if European political leaders justify this project through the widespread sense of disappointment that is felt in the countries of the south-east Mediterranean due to the inequality in relations in this current period of writing a new chapter of the relations between the inhabitants of the Mediterranean, founded on cooperation, association and mutual understanding – if the intentions of Europeans are thus formulated, then the region contains European interests and economic motives of great importance. The countries of the southeast Mediterranean are the leading trade partners to the European Union after Japan and the United States. The importance of the Mediterranean market to European institutions exceeds the value of their exports to Japan. Furthermore, the member states of the European Union dominate more than half of the foreign trade of the southeast Mediterranean countries.

There are glaring economic inequalities between the north and the south, and it would be very difficult to talk of a homogenous entity of Mediterranean

countries. Trade and the elimination of customs barriers may be beneficial for the members with regard to *rapprochement*, but they can also have a negative impact when the partners involved have different levels of growth and development.

In a context in which globalisation has become the economic, political and media watchword, observers are drawn to the strategic and economic stakes in the Mediterranean basin. Most analysts cannot resist commenting that European policy is, when all is said and done, a response to American incursions in the region. The amount of American aid forwarded to countries in the southeast Mediterranean exceeds by far the sum granted by the European Union. The American presence has become even more firmly established since the events of 11th September, as a result of the US's strategic decision to fight «international terrorism», and in particular «Islamic» terrorism. The United States has achieved this by signing free-trade agreements with certain Mediterranean countries and by financing a number of media supports such as Radio Sawa and other forms of communication, in order to counter the

negative view that the peoples in the region have of America.

Furthermore, the European trend, and especially from the Arab point of view, has put an end to Euro-Arab dialogue and has replaced it with the Euro-Mediterranean dialogue in order to integrate the Arab peoples of the region into a vast and blurred identity, in the name of a Mediterranean identity that is founded on geographical distribution and that excludes any sense of national or civilisational identity for the good of the causes of tolerance, universality, peace and the fight against terrorism. The Barcelona Declaration and the Plan of Future Action made the Western model of civilisation and culture the sole benchmark for the anticipated Mediterranean venture. The absence of the principle of equality between civilisations was striking: western principles were presented as the expression of a triumphant, superior civilisation that tended to spread its values by causing other Mediterranean cultures, in particular Islamic culture, to disappear. The function of the media is to show, exaggerate or emphasise certain aspects of Mediterranean situations, at the cost of others. This is not to say that we should widen the gap between the

PROPOSALS OF THE HIGH-LEVEL ADVISORY GROUP FOR INTERCULTURAL DIALOGUE IN THE MEDITERRANEAN AREA

The High-level Advisory Group for Intercultural Dialogue in the Mediterranean Area, established with the initiative of the President of the European Commission, has selected in its report twenty proposals of action with the aim of enhancing project effectiveness, four of which are concerned with the mass media.

To make the media a vital instrument of equality and mutual knowledge

17. Promoting the development of courses dealing with cultural diversity in schools of journalism, film academies and colleges that cater for the teaching of publishing skills.

18. Organising and educating the general public and the viewing public in particular, using a range of specifically directed measures:

- creation of film-clubs;
- involvement of young people in programme design, which would draw on experience in *popularising science* (to be included in the terms of the franchises of television stations so that the programmes are attractive and achieve the desired effect).

19. Encouraging the production of specific programmes on mainstream channels for the purposes of the aforementioned popularisation, and the production and distribution of films made in and about the Mediterranean region.

20. Drawing on the Euromed Audiovisual Programme to:

- Promote channels and local distribution

relays in the southern countries, and encourage the creation of «neighbourhood channels» to link immigrant populations with the countries of the South from which they originate, while being careful to avoid the formation of ghettos.

▪ Provide EU co-funding to support the installation of one or more multilingual unencrypted television channels on existing Mediterranean satellites.

▪ Promote the creation of a media observatory, attached to the Euro-Mediterranean Foundation, which would, as would the Foundation, enjoy complete independence.

http://europa.eu.int/comm/commissioners/prodi/pdf/spirit_report_en.pdf

two shores. On the contrary, regional co-operation has become an essential necessity in the light of the sweeping changes that are taking place in the Mediterranean and in the world as a whole. Nevertheless, a realistic project, one that does not conceal within it the seeds of its own destruction, is one that is supported by equal structures and counter-balanced parties, with the consequence of safeguarding the unity of civilisation, political cohesion and the specific cultural personality of the two main partners (in this case the Arab-Islamic south-east and the western north), the aim of the project being to serve their common interests.

The major European concerns in co-operation and partnership accords with non-European Mediterranean countries can be summarised as the desire to guarantee security within the region, and the fight against drug trafficking, clandestine immigration, terrorism and religious extremism, which are in any case the leading and favourite topics of the media, especially in Europe. However, it is also true that Europe's openness towards the Mediterranean and its stated aspiration to pursue a free-trade zone constitute a change in relations between the two shores of the Mediterranean, especially with regard to the process of democratisation in the countries in the south, which is an indisputably complex process in which political, educational, social, cultural and identity-related considerations are all at play,

and in which the media has an important role in establishing openings for civil liberties and in positively shaping disparities. The European community has played a remarkable part in speeding up the process of democratisation in the southern European countries of Spain, Portugal and Greece, which spent decades under military and fascist rule. Evidently, democracy has evolved on the basis of internal circumstances and politics founded on the principles of citizenship, rule of law, changes in government and peaceful compromise, with the purpose of resolving the community's problems, but in the countries of the south-eastern Mediterranean, the surrounding regional environment could be capable of triggering this process and supporting the democratic forces in their struggles against despotism, poverty and religious extremism.

The Mediterranean is capable of finding its own modes of application and of establishing a climate that will make it possible for a transition to democracy to take place in the countries of the south-east, just as happened in Spain, Portugal and Greece. But this presupposes a break with the hypocritical political attitude of the regimes in power, as well as effective development aid with the establishment of investment projects that will create jobs and wealth, the promotion of initiatives in civil society and the creation of arenas so that the voice of the people can be heard, debates held and civil liberties

exercised. The notion of the Mediterranean identity cannot be adopted until such time as new horizons are opened up on the southern shore, and the injustice that Israel constantly imposes on the Palestinian people and countries in the region is effectively ended. The Mediterranean identity, in all its plurality, diversity and also its complexity, presents itself, often consciously, as an inflexible identity. There exists a mosaic of references and registers of identity, and the media, particularly television, is both the reflection of this mosaic and a formidable mechanism for consolidating it. In the current context of injustice and inequality, the rebirth of the world, which has been dubbed globalisation, engenders cultural responses and demands concerning identity that have never before been taken into account.

We are currently witnessing major upheavals in the media within the Mediterranean region. Attempting to define every aspect of this shake-up would be an impossible undertaking, for how can we talk of the «role of the media in building a sense of identity in the Mediterranean?» In a small country alone, such as Lebanon, that has emerged with difficulty from a civil war, there are numerous media genres and each religious or political faction has acquired its own television channel or newspaper, such as *LBC* of the Lebanese forces; *Al Manar* of Hezbollah; *Al Mustaqbal* of Rafiq Hariri, the Sunni prime minister; *NBN* of Nabih Barri,

the leader of the Shiite Amal movement and speaker of the Lebanese parliament; and *New TV* of the Sunnis of the South, in addition to the multitude of other television and radio broadcasters. If this occurs in a country like Lebanon, which has a population of just three million, what can we say of the complex state of affairs in Turkey, the media and the political stakes in the Balkans, the battles between the media in Italy, the dozens of Egyptian channels broadcasting via the Nile-Set satellite, and regional diversity and the media in Spain? In addition, there has been a proliferation of satellite dishes throughout the Mediterranean region, above all on its southern shores, where the pirating of satellite channels is a common practice that makes it possible to receive all the satellite broadcasts and channels in every language, including Arab stations such as *al-Jazeera*, *Abou Dhabi* and *al-Arabiya*, which shape the essence of different

idealisms, as well as Islamic channels such as *Iqrae* and others that bombard viewers with daily sermons calling on them to adhere to an Islam that is rigid, Wahhabite (the official doctrine of Saudi Arabia) and fundamentalist.

We have a veritable carnival of channels, images and discourses in the Mediterranean. Every state has its own motives and media stakes, and with such a mosaic of identities, how can we promote the idea of a single Mediterranean identity? Can it be used to good advantage without a Euro-Mediterranean project that is centred on equitable development, real democracy and a creative culture?

The Mediterranean project, as initiated by the Barcelona Conference and supported by the spirit of partnership, has always been and is still an unprecedented historic venture. Sadly, it is hampered by a number of obstacles that are linked to the very vision of this initiative and its economic, human and

cultural foundations, and by despotism and chauvinism and the colonisation of Palestinian lands. These handicaps mean that the Mediterranean process has not materialised in inter-Mediterranean relations at any level of trade and communication.

There can be no doubt that the media have a crucial role to play in the building of identities, just as it would be tautological to say that the perverse relations between the media and the various authorities have interfered in the development of the notion of the Mediterranean identity. Stereotypes, prejudices, xenophobia, «islamophobia», migration, arrogance, and similar sources, are the basis of so many of the images, clichés and amalgams that the media incessantly produce about one group or another, in their frequent disregard of the strategic need to work toward achieving a closer partnership and friendship, and improved interculturalism.