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The EU-MENA partnership: time for a reset

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The storm raging across the Southern Neighbourhood, as the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region is also known in European terminology, is not about to subside any time soon. Beyond crisis management, current dysfunctions need a long-term, sustained and transformative approach. That was the spirit of the Barcelona Declaration and the original concept of the European neighbourhood policy. Obviously, it didn't work as expected. The question is why, and how to put the train back on the tracks.

The currently crumbling regional order is the result of the dismantlement of the Ottoman empire by France and Britain, and to some extent Italy, after WWI, and their subsequent colonial empire-building. After WWII, energy and Cold War rivalries, with the US and USSR entering the fray, added another layer of confrontation, the background against which Arab nationalisms developed. Alignment with respective patrons was more important than good governance. Countries in the region also became juicy markets for weapons sales, creating long-term challenges for arms control.

During periods of transition, the kind of which we are witnessing in the MENA region, geography and history come back with a vengeance. Centuries-old narratives are resurrected to motivate players' behaviour. Outside powers continue to suffer from a lack of understanding of social and cultural dynamics in the region. Too often, they are inspired by a patronising attitude that distorts their narratives and policies.

The MENA region has for centuries had an influence on European culture and politics. The populations of the region are not only Arabs, but also Kurds, Jews, Turks, Assyrians, Persians, Berbers, etc. They speak a variety of languages. Islam is not the only religion, and many religious minorities continue to thrive and participate in the political life of their countries. The Levant is the birthplace of the three monotheistic religions. Christianity was brought to Europe by "migrants" from the Holy Land.

The Eastern Mediterranean and the Gulf remain a bridge between the Atlantic and Eurasia (as well as Africa). If only for this reason, it deserves immediate and sustained attention, as it threatens to become a black hole in the globalizing world, isolating Western Europe to the periphery of the Eurasian landmass, while the trend in the US is rather to retreat from the region.

The last decade has been dominated by the “Arab Springs”. Citizens across the region consistently say the most common problems they face are low income, poor job prospects, government corruption, declining state services, and abuse of power by the elites. A frequent criticism of the Western and European approaches and of assistance programmes by civil society in the region has been that they did nothing to change the status quo (or worsened the situation through failed military interventions or lack of planning for reconstruction). So people decided to take the matter into their own hands. Fear made way for courage, and power was in the street. Who will ultimately pick it up remains to be seen.

These revolutions have paved the way for the return of Russia to the region, eager to reaffirm its status as a great power, including by encircling NATO on its Southern flank and by promoting its economic and energy interests. They have also facilitated the rise of a neo-ottoman Turkey and underlined Iranian regional ambitions, opening the door to a regional proxy war between Iran and Arab powers led by the Arab Gulf countries. (Which enjoy the support of Israel, which regularly strikes Iranian targets in Syria and elsewhere). They reflect the impact of globalization and climate change. We have witnessed escalation all over, and continued interconnection between issues. This is not limited to the region, and global instability continues to fuel regional conflicts and to be fuelled by them. The emergence of non-state actors such as the Islamic State has created further instability in and beyond the region and new threats for a stable regional order. Now the pandemic is adding another layer of challenges to conflict resolution, and has a serious impact on the price of oil and gas. The lines of the Middle East are once again re-drawn and the intersection of conflicts accentuated and complexified.

Turkey’s hiring of Syrian militia, including jihadists, to fight its proxy wars in Libya and Nagorno-Karabakh, as well as its aggressive behaviour in the eastern Mediterranean, have upset its allies in NATO (the NATO Secretary-General expressed his concern about his organisation’s “Turkish problem”, especially concerning the activation

of Russian-delivered S-400). Qatar and Turkey are united around a common vision of Islam embodied by the Muslim Brotherhood, and have developed strong military and economic cooperation, further enhancing Erdogan’s vision of a prominent place for Turkey in any future regional order.

WINDS OF CHANGE?

Recent moves by the UAE and Bahrain to establish diplomatic relations with Israel, with Sudan and Morocco now going the same way, possibly followed by other Arab Gulf countries, could be potential game-changers. Informal relations (economic, intelligence) have been going on for some time, but normalization with Israel is motivated by several reasons: concerns about the progressive retreat of the US from the region (initiated during the Obama administration) and the potential impact on national security – essentially the Iranian threat, and less strategic attention for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict – concerns that are shared by Israel.

There have also been windfalls recently, related to access to US advanced weaponry (F-35 and other); economic modernization away from exclusive reliance on oil and gas, including through benefits from Israeli tech; debt relief and international assistance for Sudan, after the US removed Khartoum from its list of state-sponsors of terrorism; US recognition of Morocco’s sovereignty over the Western Sahara; alternatives to China’s ambitions. Ahead of the US presidential elections, Trump wanted diplomatic achievements to burnish his record. Even if these moves didn’t change the outcome of the presidential election, the Biden administration will not reverse them. Finally, the reconciliation process within the GCC, ending the boycott of Qatar (which started in 2017), constitutes another signal of changing priorities.

AN AGENDA FOR ACTION?

As far as concrete areas of focus and opportunities are concerned, in a perspective of stabilization and cooperation, one should start with current moves to reduce tensions or resolve individual and local conflicts, including through UN or international mediation, in order

to facilitate progress towards the goal. Then one should widen the scope of understandings and involve other interested parties and ultimately include the parameters of individual agreements into a body of principles applicable in other similar situations, underlining the commonality of interests.

Several policy-makers and academics, including Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Bogdanov, have outlined concepts for a Gulf security architecture referring to the Helsinki process and the OSCE system. Iranian Foreign Minister Zarif often reminds audiences of the call for post-war arrangements included in UNSC resolution 598 after the end of the Iran-Iraq war. Other ideas have been put on the table recently: the Hormuz Peace Endeavour (HOPE) by Iran, a collective security concept for the Persian gulf area by Russia, a Middle East Strategic Alliance by the US. One could also find inspiration in the Madrid conference after the first Gulf War in 1991 and the multilateral process it launched, provided the same leadership could be mustered today among big powers.

Among ongoing processes: discrete talks between UAE and Iranian officials about the security of navigation in the Gulf; discrete rapprochement towards dialogue between Saudi Arabia and Iran at track-2 level; European/Russian/Chinese efforts to salvage the JCPOA and move beyond the nuclear issue; outreach by the Iranian Foreign Minister to Gulf countries; supporting an effective transition in Sudan with AU mediation; support of peaceful transition in Algeria; consolidating the democratic process in Tunisia; complementing maritime protection operations in the Gulf with an early warning mechanism (that should include Russia and Israel). The future of EMASoH (European Maritime Awareness in the Strait of Hormuz) is not clear. European maritime operation Irini, monitoring the implementation of the arms embargo on Libya, is a good template for post-conflict mechanisms of enforcement.

Thematic issues offer opportunities to engage in positive and innovative approaches, far from zero-sum games.

Security: friendship does not need to exist prior to agreeing on security arrangements, as demonstrated during the Cold War (“make peace, not love”). Cooperation and integration between former enemies are essential ingredients to create lasting peace. The European Union is a peace project above all. Arms control regimes should take precedence in a region which is the biggest buyer of weapons per capita in the world, the main providers being the permanent members of the UNSC and Germany.

Energy: one could think of the recent creation of the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum, based in Cairo and including Israel, as a good example of alternative, regionally owned organizations, in association with external partners, sharing common interests. The exclusion of Turkey, though, has created new tensions over Cyprus. The US has shown interest to be part of the mechanism. Its status as first oil and gas producer in the world offers a plausible explanation.

Global Health: the COVID pandemic had demonstrated once again that health issues can be drivers of conflict, and the urgent need for better international cooperation.

TACTICAL AND STRATEGIC

No regional order will be sustainable if local players, countries and people do not take ownership. Egyptian mediation in the Libyan conflict, and Qatari hosting of the reconciliation talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban are two recent and encouraging examples.

Methodological approaches should include all stakeholders. Not only governments, but also sub-state entities, such as provinces or cities, civil society, including business, women and youth. Cross-border networks should be encouraged along with people-to-people exchanges. Digital technologies should be widely used. International assistance has to be designed by its beneficiaries first, on the basis of local initiatives, with emphasis on capacity-building and resilience: it would be cheaper and more effective. The role of donors is to create

the space for these initiatives to flourish. Dialogue and cooperation should happen at all levels simultaneously to design policy advice for decision-makers: track 1 and 2 as well as civil society initiatives could usefully widen the awareness of converging interests and bring practical experience to the fore, contributing to a more comprehensive and robust policy advice. The cumulative effect of addressing interrelated issues in parallel rather than consecutive sequences should be considered.

CONCLUSION: THE EU

Finally, Europe's strategic absence in managing the crises and offering exit strategies has to be addressed as a matter of urgency, especially given US disengagement from the region (which will not go away under the Biden presidency). Increasing great power competition, in transactional mode, far from European ideals of multilateralism, is another cause for urgency.

The European Neighbourhood Policy for the South is globally a failure. Even if original intentions were in the right place, the tools and the monitoring of processes have been deficient. The lack of understanding of social dynamics in partner countries, especially in times of transition, and insufficient or ineffective attention for the strategic designs of other actors are the main causes of this outcome. Divisions among EU Member States (see for instance France and Italy over Libya) and narrowly defined national interests (such as arms sales) breed ineffective and incoherent policies. There is no need to invent a new European design. The Barcelona declaration

of November 1995 has not aged a bit. Only the bureaucratic process that followed has. And the political will behind it has almost died.

Leadership in Europe is of the essence for leadership of Europe in the world, including in the Middle East. The transition at the head of the European institutions, including the promise of a "Geopolitical Commission", is a unique opportunity to advance a strategic agenda for a more self-reliant Europe and to push for a new world order, including a stable and prosperous Middle East, in accordance with European values and interests.

Convincing the US of the value of a recalibrated transatlantic partnership for the Middle East and engaging efficiently with Russia and China, in view of the increasing geo-centrality of Eurasia, on issues such as climate change and migration, economy and energy, WMD proliferation, terrorism and radicalization, should be part of this ambitious agenda.

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