EUROPE, THE MEDITERRANEAN AND THE ARAB SPRING: CRISIS AS AN OPPORTUNITY

Report of the EuroMeSCo Annual Conference 2012

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Executive Summary

The Mediterranean region is going through one of its most important transformations of modern times. The rise of new leaderships, the emergence of democracies and the persistence of violent conflicts represent a major challenge in one of the youngest and most dynamic regions of the world. Against this backdrop, the Euro-Mediterranean political research community met in Barcelona to hold the EuroMeSCo Annual Conference 2012.

The conference produced intense debate on the factors behind the current state of play in the Arab world and Euro-Mediterranean relations, as well as what changes need to be seen in order to continue on the path to progress and development. The debates held during the roundtable discussion focused on what economic policies should be implemented to promote development in the region and the need for engagement with new economic, social and political actors. Three parallel working sessions explored the internal dynamics in countries of the Arab Spring and the role of civil society, the geostrategic consequences of the Arab Spring and, finally, the role of supranational and international institutions to promote Euro-Mediterranean relations, including the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM).

During the opening session, there was mention of all these challenges and the ways to reinvigorate Euro-Mediterranean cooperation in the framework of the economic crisis in Europe and the effects of the Arab Spring in Southern Mediterranean partners. Most speakers agreed that this cooperation should boost the capacity to deliver concrete results to the benefit of local populations. The session also focused on the crucial task of research institutes and think tanks to

guide the policies of such institutions, which underlined the responsibility of the Euro-Mediterranean Study Commission (EuroMeSCo) in providing sound advice to governments and Euro-Mediterranean institutions.

Roundtable Discussion: Europe and the New Mediterranean: Crisis as an Opportunity

This roundtable led by a panel of experts from think tanks from Belgium, Egypt, Turkey and the United Kingdom stressed that Europe and the Mediterranean need to seize the opportunity that current developments represent through cooperation. "Engagement" was the word preferred by most participants of this open session. According to the speakers, the Arab Spring was not fuelled by hatred of Western culture, but rather by the eagerness to lead better lives in freedom and dignity. Europe should not see the ongoing change as a threat, but as an opportunity to build long-lasting ties with its neighbours.

Turkey was praised for being a role model to follow – politically and economically. Its soft power, and not only its capacity as a donor, was one if its greatest assets, which makes it one of the Euro-Mediterranean countries most approved of by its Arab neighbours. According to the last Euromed Survey carried out by the European Institute of the Mediterranean (IEMed)[1] around 70% of respondents saw the Turkish model as suitable for their economies. However, it was also mentioned that the ambiguous state of EU-Turkey relations could lead to tensions in the region, which would in turn diminish the chance of cooperation, stability and prosperity in the Mediterranean.

The future of Euro-Mediterranean cooperation was also discussed. The Barcelona style of cooperation model was seen as an effective way of improving relations, and there was also mention of a need for more bilateral talks in regions which are

1. *Euromed Survey of Experts and Actors 2011,* accessible at: http://www.iemed.org/publicacions-en/historic-de-publicacions/enquesta-euromed/euromed-survey-of-experts-and-actors-2011?set_language=en.

close to each other. Cooperation between Southern European countries and North African regions was put forward as an example of necessary sub-regionalism experiences. However, most participants considered that such processes should still leave room for a common Euro-Mediterranean framework of cooperation.

The Economic Challenges Ahead

In the current context of crisis on both shores of the Mediterranean, economics was extensively discussed. The economic models in place were also widely criticized, and not only from a Southern Mediterranean standpoint. Europe was asked to revise its own system as a consequence of its current economic hardship. In the South, full empowerment of citizens and freedom was considered as not possible unless economic empowerment first takes place.

Crony capitalism was one of the factors which brought protestors onto the streets in late 2010 and early 2011 and, after years of clientelism and corruption, the private sector has gained a bad reputation in the region. Lack of finance for small and medium enterprises became an important topic when addressing economic challenges in the South. “Empowerment” at this level was considered the key word, as the future of the region depends on the success of these businesses. The power of the old economic elite was also considered to be holding back progress. There was mention of the need for innovative entrepreneurs in order to invigorate the economy and achieve a more robust growth. In this area there was insistence on the possibility of having northern and southern entrepreneurs work together and share experiences to improve the business climate and opportunities.

Inefficient bureaucracy in the Arab World was also seen as an obstacle to growth. The modernisation of public administrations and the State was considered of paramount importance to face the economic challenges ahead. Bloated public administrations often exhaust resources, with public spending sometimes being excessive, distorting and unsustainable. Democracy has often suffered from such

a situation, as it is difficult to hold a government accountable when it directly or indirectly employs large sectors of the workforce. Nonetheless, given the task that the State has always played in the region's economies, the participants considered that an urgent need for reform emerges in the framework of a transition to democracy.

Future Opportunities and Interactions

There was consensus on the need for strengthened cooperation between Europe and its Mediterranean partner countries. Many participants called for the search for common opportunities that would help both shores of the Mediterranean to engage with one another, especially in the current context of thriving new actors emerging after decades of marginalisation. For example, it was stressed that the Arab World is now full of well-educated and internationalised young people who are highly mobile. This is precisely what Europe – with a rapidly ageing population – needs. This should be seen as a chance to cooperate in mobility partnerships given the fact that interdependency drives mutual development. There was mention of the benefits of this interlinked mobility in the region in terms of education and cultural exchange.

Finally, there was a call for the inclusion of the rising political and social actors in all spheres of relations. Some voices in the conference pointed out that EuroMeSCo should be looking to these newcomers, engaging with them and leading the way for strengthened Euro-Mediterranean cooperation. The efforts of civil society organisations and networks, in particular research centres and think tanks, were considered a useful tool to accompany current processes of democratic transformation.

Working Session 1:
Internal Dynamics in Countries of the Arab Spring and the Role of Civil Society

This session examined the national dynamics and challenges at a social, political and economic level in the countries of the Arab Spring. These vary from one

country to another, according to their history, the nature of the regime in power, their geography, and so on. The session particularly introduced the cases of Egypt and Tunisia, two countries that are at the centre of the political developments in North Africa and that illustrate the importance of the national factors in the transition process.

The Actors of the Revolutionary and Post-Revolutionary Periods

The panellists analysed the four major actors that took part in the revolutionary and transition processes, their role, interests and objectives. Firstly, the autocratic governments who have sought to maintain their power. Secondly, the military institutions, whose objective is to maintain their status. In the case of Egypt and Tunisia, the military enjoyed autonomy vis-à-vis autocratic governments and distanced themselves from them when the revolutions broke out. In contrast, in the case of Libya and Syria the armed forces and the authoritarian regime constituted a single body, which can explain the regime's greater resistance. The third major force in this process is formed by the Islamist parties. They did not lead these drastic changes but managed to capitalise the population's discontent and the thirst for change, to the extent of achieving power through the elections.

Finally, civil society has emerged as the motor of the uprisings. It was categorised by panellists in two types. On the one hand, the traditional organisations, such as professional associations and trade unions and, on the other, a new social movement which expresses itself in a spontaneous and decentralised way and brings activists together through the social networks (Facebook, Twitter, etc.). The activists express positions which are more radical than those of the classical political parties.

The session also debated the different definitions of civil society as a whole as well as the possible evolutions in the mid-term. It was pointed out that the current analysis grids are not pertinent enough in relation to a reality under reconstruction. Tunisian civil society was the object of a more profound analysis. At present in Tunisia there are a large number of organisations advocating civic rights and

volunteering is increasing. Tunisian civil society played an extremely important role in the revolution and in the post-revolutionary period. It has been, for instance, very active in organising and monitoring the elections and has, henceforth, during the post-revolutionary period, acted as a counter-power to the parliamentary political forces and influenced certain decisions of the Constituent Assembly. Along with this organised civil society there is another highly active and uncontrolled society: the radical Islamists or Salafists. These are a risk for the transition processes as they oppose the democratic regime and the state institutions.

With reference to the relations between these actors, the participants argued that when the revolutionary process is short the opposition forces maintain unity but if it is prolonged there are more probabilities of division emerging (the case of Syria). During the post-revolutionary period there were attempts at reconciliation between the different actors in all the countries but the unity was undermined by the competition between the different forces.

The Transition Process: Key Issues

The debates dealt with issues related to transitional justice, the duration of the transition process and the direction it is taking as well as the design of a future political system, the role of religion in the new system and the responses to the most urgent socioeconomic challenges. The panellists emphasised certain conditions that benefit the transition process: a short period of time, the existence of an agreement or national pact and a consensus on the political procedures and foundations (electoral law, distribution of powers and their limits, minority rights, and so on). They also expressed the conviction that these foundations will not be changed by the first to achieve power. In the Tunisian case, we can say that there was a certain consensus about the path to follow. In contrast, in Egypt, there are difficulties for reaching an agreement between the actors on the fundamental principles and procedures, which may endanger the whole transitional process.

The debate focused on the diverse blockages that the transition processes are facing, such as the role of and respect for minorities, ideological divergence,

omnipotence of certain well-rooted religious structures, the risks of radicalisms and extremisms, and the structural and circumstantial socioeconomic problems. The issue of women, which had a crucial role in the people's mobilisations of the Arab Spring, was also stressed. The consequences of the revolutions for the status of women seem to be, for the time being, negative, notably because of the position of Islamists in this respect.

The session also examined the conflicting relation between civil power and an army which is still, in some countries, a major actor at a political and economic level. These relations, which are always evolving, are less the object of debate than the issue of secular state vs. religious state. However, the military control can become an obstacle to the transition towards a democratic civil system. Indeed, in all these countries there is a confrontation between military and civil control.

In the case of Egypt, before the revolution there was military control given that the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces had the final word in all these aspects, along with economic power and control over public administration. However, the population continues to regard the military institution positively and it is seen as a guardian of Egyptian interests. The military have therefore managed to maintain this power during the transition period. At the same time, civil power is highly divided and polarised. This is why it is probable that the passage from military power to a civil power in Egypt will be difficult, which would endanger the whole transition process.

Indeed, the issue of these processes is still uncertain and opinions on this subject diverge. Some believe that the authoritarian past will return, others that a Western-style democracy will finally be established or even that a new kind of Islamist democracy is emerging. What participants in the session pointed out is that, faced with these new internal dynamics, traditional partners, such as the European Union, must change their approach to these countries as they will have to confront different actors, who are not monolithic and who participate in the electoral and

democratic game. This may represent a challenge but will also be an opportunity to establish more balanced and mature relations.

Working Session 2:
Geostrategic Consequences of the Arab Spring

Even if the "Arab Spring" has been commonly regarded as the catalyst for change in North Africa and the Middle East, recent developments need to be framed within a wider picture of power shifts and long-standing social discontent with regime dysfunctions. These were the starting premises for the discussion held during the second workshop of the EuroMeSCo Annual Conference, which focused on the role of regional powers throughout the Arab Spring, the consolidation of Islamist parties as leading actors of democratic transitions in the Southern Mediterranean and the religious cleavage as a new element shaping regional dynamics.

International and Regional Actors

The Arab Spring has had a clear impact on the geopolitical landscape in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. Democratic transitions in Egypt and Tunisia and civil wars in Libya and Syria have engendered deep regional transformations that have allowed the emergence of some regional actors and weakened formerly powerful players in the region.

The EU and the United States have been depicted by many experts as having been caught totally off guard by the unfolding developments in the Southern Mediterranean. Overwhelmed by the magnitude of events and concerned about regional stability after the fall of Ben Ali in Tunisia and Mubarak in Egypt, the US and the EU initially responded to the revolts with hesitation. For years, both the EU and the US had tacitly supported the very regimes and ruling autocrats responsible for the general discontent in Arab societies. Now, these powers have to find a formula to keep on the right side of history (political view), to provide the necessary back-up instruments for civil society (people's view) and to guarantee

political democratic stability (security view). Beyond their well-articulated rhetoric, both powers have failed to provide an efficient strategy and their legitimacy and leverage to shape internal and regional dynamics in the Middle East has therefore been undermined.

At the regional level, one of the most interesting outcomes of the Arab Spring is the emergence of the Arab League and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) as major players. These actors have assumed a more dynamic and assertive stance in the MENA region to protect their interests, sometimes preventing unrest that could endanger their own stability and to extend their regional influence. The Arab League adopted a rather discreet position towards democratic transition in Egypt and Tunisia, but showed an unprecedented active engagement in recent developments over Libya and Syria (with a monitoring mission and by suspending Syria's membership). Saudi Arabia and Qatar have emerged as central actors, notwithstanding their direct engagement to prevent the spread of protests in Yemen and Bahrain.

Egypt has also consolidated its regional central position. The most populous country in the region has capitalized on Tahrir Square as a symbol for the transition to democracy and has placed itself in a position where it is perceived as a potential partner for any regional power and sometimes as an essential ally. Regional phenomena also have clear cut implications for other powerful states in the region. The current government in Israel is increasingly isolated in a regional context marked by the strong presence of political Islam; Iran has progressively lost its popularity among Arab peoples because of its support for Assad's regime; and Turkey, even though it has undoubtedly strengthened its role as a regional power, is currently facing a difficult situation due to the Syrian crisis and its fallouts (Kurd problem, refugees, end of the "zero-problem-with-neighbours" policy).

During this session, experts noted that the geopolitical dynamics in the region have been motivated for the first time more by internal dynamics than the wishes of international powers. The re-birth of the sense of citizenship in the Arab

countries has been pointed out as one of the elements that contributed to the success of the Arab awakening and the awareness-raising among Arab populations to be the masters of their destiny.

The Shift of Islamist Discourse

The Arab upheavals conferred a surprisingly great amount of power to Islamist parties in Egypt (Muslim Brotherhood) and Tunisia (Ennahda). After decades of being banned from political life, these organizations have suddenly faced the opportunity to rise to power, which entails a double challenge: there is a necessity to address people's needs and demands while also dealing with the immediate international and regional challenges. In the case of Egypt, for example, the new cabinet has had to address its relationship with Israel and it shares with Tunisia the challenge to redefine ties with the United States and the EU.

Islamist governments will likely smooth their ideological discourse to adopt a more pragmatic stance on certain foreign policy issues. At the same time, though, Islamist movements on the streets will keep displaying their traditional slogans against Western influence in the Arab world. The way this double dynamic is addressed by authorities remains a subject that will determine geopolitical shifts in the post-Arab Spring era.

A Sunni-Shia Confrontation?

The Arab Spring has brought about a renewed central role of religion in politics. As a result, religious considerations are not only likely to exert increasing influence on the internal calculations of the elite's regimes, but also on the regional dynamics. The Arab Spring has been widely regarded as having a modernising effect on the structure and ideological underpinnings of Islamist parties now that they are no longer only opposition movements. Nevertheless, the rise to power of Sunni Islamist movements has also been perceived as a threat by Shia majority states in the region.

The protracted Syrian civil conflict is a good example of these changes in regional dynamics: Saudi Arabia-backed opposition still fights against Assad's regime,

historically supported by Iran. Simultaneously, increasing tension between Saudi Arabia and Iran has been labelled by some experts as a sort of "New Cold War", although other experts considered that this fracture cannot provide an effective explanation for the complex dynamics of the region, notwithstanding the fact that some countries are not split into a Sunni-Shia confrontation. The issue of minorities, tribal affiliations, sub-regional rivalries and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict also need to be taken into consideration regarding the geopolitical fault lines of the region.

Working Session 3: How to Reinvigorate Euro-Mediterranean Relations? The Role of the Union for the Mediterranean

The wave of uprisings in the Arab World and the deep economic crisis in the EU are definitely reshaping the political, economic and social realities in the Mediterranean. This changing scenario was the starting point for the discussion held during the third working session, which focused on the challenges to multilateral cooperation among members of the UfM and the need to reform the overall structure of Euro-Mediterranean relations.

Variable Geometry and Policies to Provide the South with Greater Visibility

The Middle East and North Africa countries are immersed in a complex transition to democracy while the EU is still constrained by a two-speed reality as a result of its own financial crisis. These are some of the elements that highlight an increasing fragmentation of the Euro-Mediterranean reality and the danger of a widening gap between its northern and southern shores. The concept of variable geometry was regarded as a potentially useful framework for multilateral cooperation in this changing context.

The Euro-Mediterranean realities are evolving and some experts pointed out the need for institutions that can quickly react to new developments, while also providing some space for informal and bilateral approaches and promoting mutual interests in a tangible way. Despite acknowledging that technical oriented

institutions might be an efficient instrument to approach this complex reality, other experts pointed out that in the Mediterranean case it would not be possible, or even desirable, to separate technical cooperation from its political nature.

Although the EU provided a relatively fast response to the Arab Spring by offering its support to democracy and civil society, several participants lamented the fact that the EU's policies might not offer the desired results, given their emphasis on concepts such as conditionality. According to some participants, the current framework for Euro-Mediterranean relations risks being a short-term minded and top-down strategy and was accused of being "too European". Even if greater involvement of the Union is desirable, several experts highlighted that the EU's stance towards its southern neighbours should be less intrusive. In fact, what is required for an adequate performance of Euro-Mediterranean cooperation is the introduction of the necessary mechanisms to provide the South with greater visibility and the chance to redefine how they wish to interact with their northern neighbours. Euro-Mediterranean policies should also develop into more integrated Mediterranean policies.

The Role of the Union for the Mediterranean

Even though the Arab-Israeli conflict has generally been considered as one of the main obstacles for Euro-Mediterranean relations, multilateral dysfunctions could easily be blamed for the failure of regional integration projects. The UfM was initially presented as an ambitious political initiative with large projects that due to structural disagreements among member states has had to redefine itself as a project-based institution. The UfM has been marked by fragmentation and a fragile viability, even if it is still regarded as a useful instrument to face the economic challenges of the Arab Spring provided that a clear plan is put forward.

First of all, the "project oriented vs. political oriented" UfM dichotomy has to be addressed. The UfM might have a greater impact through simple plans than with big projects and its financial viability could be reassured through financial engineering and transparency guarantees. Additionally, adequate mechanisms to

stimulate entrepreneurship need to be found, contributing to the fulfilment of the UfM's mandate.

The UfM needs to adopt a bottom-up approach to adapt to a post-Arab Spring scenario, which calls for wider participation of civil society. In such a complex social, cultural and political context, it should offer mechanisms to facilitate greater engagement with civil society actors. This requires a systematic strategy defining the channels by which the different projects are translated into reality. Greater involvement of Member States throughout this process is also desirable in order to promote real exchange and mutual understanding between the Northern and the Southern Mediterranean.

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