GOVERNANCE AND CITIZENSHIP IN THE EUROMEDITERRANEAN SPACE

The EU and the Mediterranean: Towards a New Vision

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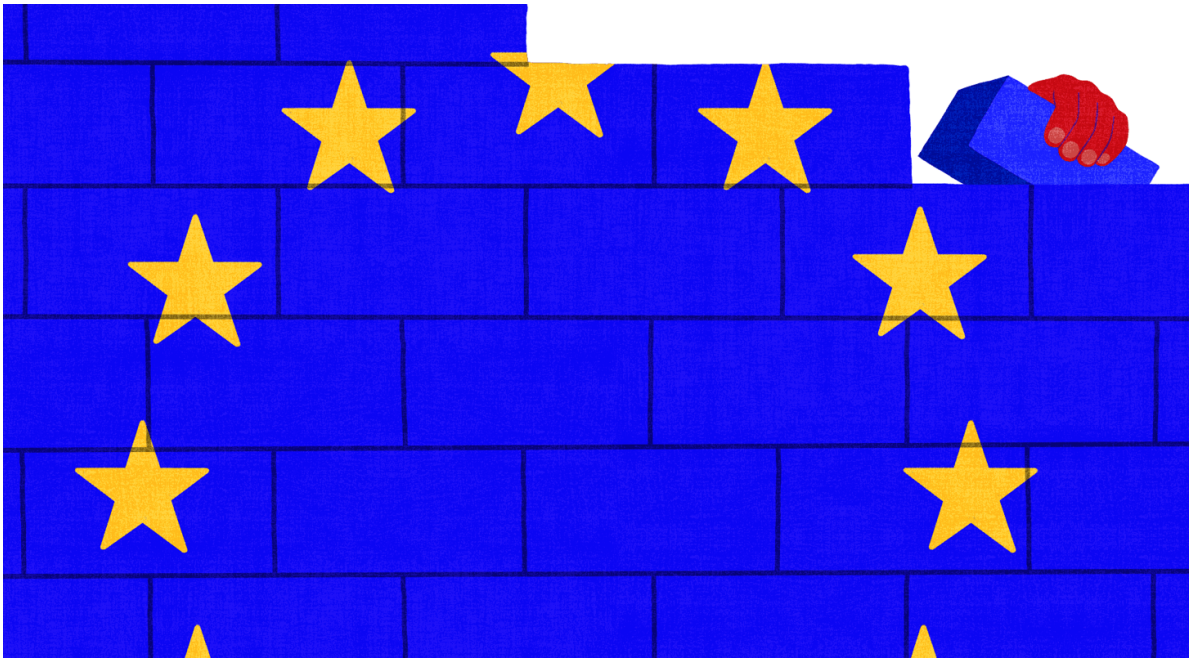

Il·lustració de Carole Hénaff

In its shared foreign policy, the European Community (EC) and then the European Union (EU) have historically reacted with high-profile initiatives to changes that have happened in the Middle East and North Africa. After the two Arab-Israeli wars in 1967 and 1973, the European Community developed the Global Mediterranean Policy (basically a bilateral trade policy with and the (albeit short-lived) Euro-Arab Dialogue. After the Camp David Accords in 1978, the twelve foreign ministers came out with the Declaració de Venècia, which reminded its partners in Washington and Tel Aviv that the Palestine question had been ignored and set the parameters for diplomacy in the 1990s. After the Cold War, the European Union built on the new momentum in international relations and attempted to forge a security community in the Mediterranean region with the Barcelona Process. In the early 2000s, it developed the European Neighbourhood Policy in response to both the Eastern enlargement and the stalling of the Barcelona Process. Whilst the Arab uprisings in 2011 took the EU by surprise, it responded swiftly with a revision of the European Neighbourhood Policy and the boosting of its capacities to support civil society.

However, 25 years into the Barcelona process and 10 years into the Arab uprisings, this pattern has ostensibly been lost. It is now difficult to detect any new initiative on the side of

the European Union that reacts to the ongoing Arab uprisings. The European Neighbourhood Policy has lost momentum; the EU now speaks of a “pragmatist turn” in its foreign policy, which seems to commit to stability rather than democracy. Furthermore, the EU has not come forward with decisive diplomatic initiatives in Syria or Libya, enabling other powers to do so in its stead, Russia and Turkey for example. In Israel/Palestine where the EU has been a key player over the past decades, one notes a deafening European silence in the face of intensifying violations of international law. The EU seems to have turned isolationist: its major new initiatives are inward-looking (the Defence Union) and Euro-centric (the Green Deal), whilst EU borders are becoming increasingly hard and harsh.

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This pragmatist/isolationist turn, however, is seen with increasing concern in Europe itself. Not only is the transatlantic partnership bound to change and the EU can no longer just sit on the US-American train, but the globe is moving on to a multiplex world where other regions are rising and Western modernity is not the dominant offer on the plate anymore. In such a world, the EU needs to open up again to its neighbours in the South who —in the form of the Arab uprisings— are driving forward a new imagination of their future to which the EU has failed to respond so far. 25 years after the Barcelona Process, the EU needs a new vision. In order to understand how such a new vision could look like, this contribution focuses on how the EU has been imagined and performed in the Mediterranean space 10 years into the uprisings to then reflect on possible alternatives.

Images of the EU’s Presence

In the framework of the European Commission funded Horizon2020 Project MEDRESET, we systematically inquired into images of EU presence and practices through 144 recursive multi-stakeholder consultations with mainly civil society and grassroots actors in Morocco, Tunisia, Lebanon, Egypt and Europe. We were surprised by just how critically the EU was seen; a trend which other research on resistance to Europe in the region corroborates. What we found is that the EU’s presence is described as invisible, incoherent, preferable to other powers, ambivalent, unresponsive, ineffective, divisive, and even neo-colonial.

Regarding its *invisibility*, in all countries, many interviewees either did not know or were not sure about what the EU’s role in their country was. The EU member states, instead, were perceived as more visible. Indeed, there has been a clear perception of *incoherence* between the policies of the EU and those of its member states. An Egyptian interviewee, for example, pointed to “contradictions between the position it [the EU] holds and those of individual member states; Brussels proclaims an agenda of democracy, human rights and

social equality, while member states conduct relations with the Egyptian government seemingly independently of these values and objectives." [1] Indeed, the EU is perceived as increasingly in crisis as the member states are taking center stage again. There was also a wide-spread image of the EU as *ineffective* in the region. In Lebanon, for example, we found a "widespread perception that EU policy is failing to achieve its goals" and that most of "those interviewed were disillusioned with the influence EU policy has on economic and civil development." [2]

At the same time, the EU is seen as *preferable to other actors*, notably the US and Gulf States. But while seen more positively, the EU was still perceived as *ambivalent* in supporting civil society on one hand and working with authoritarian rulers on the other. Furthermore, there was a perception that the EU was further diverting from democracy and human rights. With these policies, the EU is also seen as an *unresponsive* presence to what the needs of people struggling for democracy are. This unresponsiveness has also been linked to what the EU frames as a "pragmatic" foreign policy. As an interviewee in Egypt stated,

> Between 2011 and 2013, the EU policies toward the popular uprising in Egypt were very constructive and seemed promising in enhancing and supporting the democratic movements. But with the setback of the democratic Intifada, the rise of ISIS and other transnational terrorist groups, [and] the Syrian humanitarian crisis, the EU policy starts to become more pragmatic and realistic. Supporting democratic movements and civil society retreats, the co-operation and the rapprochement with new-born authoritarian regimes increased. [3]

Another dominant perception of the EU presence in the region was one of being *divisive*. Division, disparity and separation were key concepts at the heart of the interviews, whereby the main line of division, disparity, and separation runs between the North and South Mediterranean. This perception has been largely informed by EU trade policies in which the EU as a bloc is much more powerful than the Southern Mediterranean states; and it has also been informed by EU migration policies as a result of which the Mediterranean is increasingly seen as a border. This perceived divisive presence of the EU seems to undermine trust in the Mediterranean. Indeed, by some interviewees the presence of the EU in the Mediterranean was even perceived as *neo-colonial*. As an interviewee in Lebanon pointed out, the "EU says that they are no longer colonial but the need to control the ex-colonies is there. […]. They have to […] detach from the colonial past. They need to arrange their house first and then come and work in our region." Moreover, also the support to authoritarian regimes and the asymmetric distribution of wealth and the economic dependence of the Southern Mediterranean on Europe were mentioned as neo-colonial practiced.

EU Practices in the Mediterranean Space

These descriptions of the EU were linked to particular political practices of the EU, that is depoliticizing, securitizing and technocratic practices. *Depoliticizing practices* remove issues from the public debate, politics and decision-making processes of a country. An example that was raised here are EU migration or trade deals pursued with autocratic regimes which are more responsive to EU interests than to local needs. The case of Tunisia which is now a democracy in which such migration and trade deals are rejected is indicative of how the tides may turn once the region democratizes.

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Furthermore, particularly migration, but also the Arab uprisings themselves have become *securitized*. The general perception is, indeed, that in the initial phases of the uprisings, EU securitizing practices were less evident. However, after the coup in 2013, the EU is seen as returning to business as usual and to "having shifted towards counter-terrorism, security and control of migration." The EU is now seen as a much more self-interested, pragmatic actor than in previous years, pursuing "business as usual" to a greater extent than before. [5] Finally, interviewees also mentioned that EU member states continue to sell arms to highly autocratic regimes involved in conflicts. Also, the EuroMeSCo Surveys have highlighted that the securitization of migration policies and the arms exports from EU member states are seen as likely by experts in the Mediterranean to have a negative effect on the stability of the South. [6]

Finally, another key issue raised in the interviews were the EU's technocratic practices, that is presenting technical solutions for essentially political issues. EU programs were seen to respond to international trends (such as resilience for example) rather than local needs. Interviewees perceived EU contributions to be biased to pro-Western elites and civil society. In response to this, civil society has professionalized; it is not only organizing its activities in line with EU needs, but is even structurally dependent on donors. Some interviewees argued that the EU is supporting a range of inefficient, corrupt, and co-opted organizations. As an interviewee in Morocco has pointed out, "marginal actors are excluded from these funds." [7]

Alternatives

These perceptions notwithstanding, actors do remain interested to engage with the EU, but on an equal footing. What was specifically rejected is a "civilizing" rhetoric from the EU's side which denies agency to local actors. In terms of alternative EU policies, several ideas were outlined. Firstly, the EU should take account of the agency for democracy, social and

ecological justice in the region. This would mean *embracing the local struggle for democracy* and their own approach to development. Secondly, it would also mean *to account for the human security* of all peoples living in the Mediterranean and understanding security from their point of view, as social justice, ecological justice, freedom from occupation, and wars supported by European arms.

Finally, the EU needs to invest into a new two-way relationship where all voices matter equally. This would also mean to re-politicize the EU's own role in the region again and to actively think together about alternatives. Interviewees pointed to the importance of *connectivities and shared history —'histoire partagée'—* "giving back sense to this Mediterranean space, giving it again some life, to construct exchanges, common ideas and common practices. The first condition of this is liberty of movement." [8] Or, "instead of seeing this as a one-way relationship, Tunisians and Europeans today must rethink their "models" and, maybe even more importantly, "renew the paradigms governing the relations between the two shores of the Mediterranean, more responsive to the new context and with the aim of building a Mediterranean area that benefits all its citizens." [9]

To conclude, this essay has argued that in an increasingly multiplex world, the EU has turned pragmatist, isolating itself from the neighborhood rather than opening up to the Arab uprisings and their new imaginations for local futures as well as shared (as opposed to divided/separated) futures in the Mediterranean space. It has then shown how EU practices of the past decade has been seen rather critically by local civil society, particularly when it comes to cooperation with autocratic regimes, as well as European (arms) trade and migration policies. Nonetheless, interest and space for engagement remain, but on an equal footing. Thus, 25 years after the Barcelona process, it makes sense for the EU to turn outwards again, but in listening modus, and learn from the uprisings. This process might also help a Europe which is increasingly divided by the rise of ethnocentric nationalism "to put its own house in order", as an interviewee in Lebanon has put it.

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