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EUROPE AND THE MEDITERRANEAN:
WHEN OBSESSION FOR SECURITY MISSES THE REAL WORLD

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Abstract

Security (fear of immigration, Islamism and terrorism) has been the main factor in the European decision to launch a protracted and complex program of cooperation and development with the Arab Mediterranean countries. The main partners of the European Union countries were the Arab authoritarian regimes, seen as the best bulwark against the “Islamist threat”. Support for the development of a civil society that could in the long term create the conditions for a transition towards democracy was mostly subcontracted to NGO’s or independent Foundations and restricted to technical issues. But the Arab Spring showed the failure of this policy: secularism is not a prerequisite for the rise of a democratic movement, islamist parties should be engaged and not shunned, and new patterns of migration (mobility instead of immigration) should be acknowledged.

Keywords

Mediterranean, Europe, Islam, Islamism, terrorism, immigration, security, "arab spring", democratisation, religion, secularism.

1. When security concerns lead to aid for development

From 1988 onwards, the European Union has launched an ambitious program of partnership with the southern part of the Mediterranean Sea. The project took a more institutionalized form in 1995 under the name of “Barcelona Process”, or “Euro-Mediterranean partnership”. The project of the “Union for the Mediterranean”, launched in July 2008 by the French President, Nicolas Sarkozy, was supposed to encompass and enlarge the previous structures, although it had been launched with little consultation between the different governments. Based in Barcelona, it took over the Barcelona Process, and was conceived as an inter-government structure to deal with all the dimensions of cooperation.

The aim of the Barcelona process was to go beyond the purely economical and bilateral agreements signed between the EU and some Mediterranean countries, in order to build up a regional framework of cooperation in different fields. The necessity to have an all-encompassing policy of cooperation with the other side of the Mediterranean was understood essentially as a way to deal with security issues, namely immigration, terrorism and the spread of radical Islam. The three issues were seen as closely connected. While the debate on immigration in the United States focusses on the immigration of Catholic Latinos, in Europe, the debate on Islam is largely shaped by the process of massive immigration that started in the 1960s and led to the permanent settlement of a huge Muslim population in Western Europe. Immigration and fear of Islamic radicalism are thus intimately linked in Europe. This debate on “Islam in Europe” had a spill-over effect on European policy towards the Middle East. Interestingly enough immigration was not seen as an economic issue (as it was in the sixties and early seventies), but as a “threat”: the fear of immigration has been playing a greater role in European domestic politics since the 1980’s, and the rise of populist movements in the first decade of the XXIth century pushed the governments in charge to put the control of immigration on the top of their agenda. Islam has been seen as a threat at two levels: in geo-strategic terms the rise of radical Islam in the Middle East raised the ghost of a global confrontation between the West and the Muslim world; in purely security terms, the second generation immigrants was seen as a fertile soil for recruiting terrorism. The growing visibility of a Muslim faith community in Europe is seen as a geo-strategic issue: in fact religious radicalisation is too often seen, without real debate on the issue, as a harbinger for political radicalisation and terrorism. Veil, mosques, burqas became a top issue in public debate, fuelling a pervasive islamophobia, that plays on this connexion between external and domestic threats.

The Algerian civil war, starting in 1992, followed almost ten years later by the terror attack of 9/XI, lumped together the two threats (domestic and geo-strategic) and made the Middle East appear as a global security issue: Islam became associated with global jihad. The rise of Islamism in the Arab countries could pit the Muslim World against the West, entailing a risk of terrorism, armed conflicts and a threat on the energy supply. The Europeans have a rather “territorial” perception of the threat: enemies are on our borders, and could attack with the help of a fifth column, already living in Europe. Hence to secure its border Europe should prevent its Mediterranean neighbours to turn into Islamic republics. Due to the fact that both immigration and Islamic radicalization were seen as a consequence of unemployment, demographic tensions and lack of economic development, a policy of cooperation to promote development was explicitly seen as part and parcels of a quest for security. One of the possible ways to diminish the flux of immigration from the South was to favour an economic development; of course the European Union was well aware of the structural obstacles to such a development (bureaucracy, corruption, bad governance), and proposed also to help the Arab states to reform themselves.

2. A double track policy of cooperation

It is thus clear that security was the key word of the policy of cooperation. This was a two-level cooperation. On one hand, security, counter terrorism, immigration control, and, often, management of Islam in Europe, were dealt with in direct negotiations with the different regimes at an official level (for instance, the composition of the French Council of Muslim Faith has been negotiated, behind the curtain, between the French government and its Algerian and Moroccan counterpart, although officially the Council is elected by the believers). A technical support for promoting good governance and for reforming institutions was also offered to the regimes, but of course they took only what fit with their own security concerns (training of riot police for instance).

On the other hand, the long term perspective of the Barcelona process was to bring the Arab societies closer to the Western model of democracy and religious freedom by encouraging democratisation, gender equality, the development of a civil society, and by establishing a dialogue between “civilizations”. The European Union tried to address directly the Arab “civil societies”, knowing perfectly well that the regimes will not reform themselves. The idea was to strengthen in the long run a “modern” civil society that could be the basis for a process of secular democratisation, rejecting both “Islamic fundamentalism” and “dictatorship”. The regimes were thus seen as a bulwark against radicalism, necessary as long as the civil society was not mature enough to reject “radicalism” by itself.

The problem was that from the beginning the decision was taken to give priority to state to state relations, putting the regimes at the core of the process, even when they were part of the problem (Algeria, Libya). And of course, by definition, the regimes were either reluctant or totally opposed to any direct contacts and cooperation between the European states and the civil society, not to speak of the opposition. The regimes wanted to have the monopoly of the dialogue, with the clear objective to stay in charge. It is only in the case of Libya that the EU briefly succeeded in pushing the regime to give up terrorism and to collaborate in a program of reducing the sub-saharian immigration, with of course a price to be paid: turning a blind eye on the repression of freedom (and Europe will have to set the bill in 2011), and accepting to be taken hostage by the policy of the regime (who alternatively closed and opened the tap of immigration).

Europe never considered seriously engaging the Islamists: endeavours by private NGO’s (for instance the “San Egidio” community based in Rome) were turned down, mostly at the request of France. The Arab states never hesitated to blackmail any government that could be tempted to discuss with the Islamists. The consequence is that the debate on Islam was managed in the loose framework of different initiatives (like the “Alliance of Civilizations”), which involved mainly (although not exclusively) officials and clerics closely associated with the regimes

The second level of the European policy was hence sub-contracted to NGO’s, all of them heavily subsidized by Brussels or by the different governments. They were supposed to work directly with the “civil society” without antagonizing the regimes: this supposes a low profile and a purely technical approach, avoiding political issues. In this framework, all the programs that could create a political problem (democratization, freedom of press, gender issue) were adjudicated either to local NGO’s or to big Foundations that would deal at a larger level, as the Foundation Anna Lindt for the inter-cultural dialogue, the different German “Stiftung” (Adenauer, Ebert).

3. The intellectual framework: clash/dialogue of civilizations

But besides the feasibility of such a dual track approach (which would show its limit during the Arab spring), the issue is the coherence of the intellectual framework that underlines all the process. Roughly speaking the project was based from the beginning on the “clash of civilizations” paradigm and tried to turn it into a “dialogue of civilizations” paradigm. This means that the “dialogue” shares the same premises that the “clash” theory and differs only in offering a more pro-active policy of engagement instead of containment. The common premise may be summed up that way: there is an “Islamic civilization” or “culture” (the two terms being here used indistinctively) which is based on the tenets of Islam as a religion; this culture is all encompassing and determinates the political culture, the economic life and the social relations of the Muslims, who continued as migrants to be “acted” by their Islamic culture. Conversely, Europe is defined as Christian and/or secular, and thus, in both cases cannot integrate Muslims, except if they stop to be Muslims; although this last point was not officially stated as such during the 1990’s: it is only after 2001 that more and more European politicians, under the pressure of the populist movements, begun to stress the “Christian” identity of Europe, whatever it means. This is tantamount to putting in place a policy of reciprocal “capitulations” (a set of agreements between the Ottoman Empire and the French monarchy, which gave France a right of representing and patronizing the Oriental Christians): the Europeans are supposed to protect the Christian Middle Eastern minorities (they failed, but feel guilty, -see for instance the debate on the Armenian genocide), while Muslim states speak in the name of a supposedly Muslim diaspora in Europe (as some Arab countries tried to do during the Danish cartoons affair). The model of the late Ottoman *millet* paradigm is back or, more precisely, never ceased to be at the core of the definition of a peaceful trans-Mediterranean co-existence.

This perception presupposes that the close connection between territory, religion and culture that characterized the great historical empires is still at work, and that this has been and still is a great challenge for Western countries.

To sum up, the policies set down there have included:

- Preventing new migrations by developing the southern Mediterranean tier.
- Integrating Muslims settled in Europe through a policy of some sort of affirmative action.
- Preventing religious radicalization through a “dialogue with Islam”.

We will see how this intellectual framework did shape European policies, and why it is largely irrelevant. The whole approach of the Mediterranean is still based on geostrategic security considerations, rather than acknowledgement of an in-depth tectonic change: integration, mobility, democratization.

4. Integration of migrants

The European states have forged tools to integrate Muslim migrants starting out from the premise of the encounter between two “civilizations”. These tools have taken the form of two models of policy, both officially aimed at insuring the integration of the second generation of Muslim migrants: the mostly French “assimilationist” model, and the Northern European “multi-culturalist” model. Although apparently in total contradiction, they in fact share the same basic assumption that there is a permanent connection between religion and culture. In the assimilationist model, new citizens should join a new national secular political culture, and thus give up their faith or limit it to the private sphere: to join a new culture is to accept a new definition of religion and embrace the secularism that has explicitly been constructed against religion (*laïcité*). In the multiculturalist model, religion is perceived as being permanently linked with a culture of origin and thus both terms (religion and culture) are used almost as synonyms: the term “Muslim” tends to be used as a neo-ethnic term and not as a reference to

an individual faith (hence the headlines on the “Muslim revolt” during the youth riots in the French suburbs in 2005). I argue that both models are in fact modern transcriptions of the old European Westphalian principle: *cujus regio-ejus religio*.

For the French model, assimilation is conditioned on a prerequisite: secularization. There can only be integration if religion is restricted to the private sphere. Laïcité is more or less the official “religion” or at least political ideology: instead of being cast in terms of neutrality (which is both the letter and the spirit of the 1905 Law that established the separation of Church and State), it is too often presented as a system of positive values which supersedes religious norms and beliefs. Assimilation here has something to do with the process of conversion, and the State has the right to check on conformity with the model (see for instance the decision of the French Conseil d’Etat to confirm the denial of citizenship to a burqa-wearing Moroccan woman for an “excessive practice of religion”). Hence laïcité appears to be more a state ideology or at least a national political culture than just a set of rules of the game. It is implicitly cast as some sort of “official” religion. I don’t want to make a too far-fetched comparison, but it somehow resembles the forced conversions imposed on the Muslims who became subjects after conquest (e.g. Spain after the fall of Granada in 1492).

Conversely, according to the multi-culturalist model, the second generation of immigrants should be allowed, and even encouraged, to stick with their culture of origin: that of the country of origin. But the group is defined as a “minority”, where religious and ethnic patterns are lumped together. Multi-culturalism is not “métissage” because it does not suppose a synthesis, a quest for a higher identity that could subsume the pristine identities, beyond the purely legal definition of citizenship. The model that comes to mind here is the Ottoman model of the millet: in this context, it is quite logical to hear proposals to integrate some part of the sharia into a personal status code that can be managed by religious courts of arbitration (as the Archbishop of Canterbury proposed in 2008). Moreover, to use a religious criterion to define the minority means that, symmetrically, the dominant group is also defined by its religion, even if it is a secularized form of that religion. We are still in the *cujus regio ejus religio*. It is not by chance that Prime Minister Tony Blair waited to leave Downing Street before announcing his conversion to Catholicism.

Without entering into details, the evolution of Muslims in Europe shows how in fact they adapt by disconnecting the religious marker (hallal for instance) from the cultural maker (“oriental food”) and recasting it with western cultural markers (hallal fast food). What is changing is not theology but religiosity, that is the way the believer experiences his or her relation with religion. What we see is an individualization of faith, a construction of religious congregations on the model of the other faiths (local mosques), a recasting of gender relations (executive women wearing the veil), and adaptation to Western institution (Muslim chaplains), a diversification of the religious field, a reconstruction of a faith community above the former ethno-cultural community. In fact, integration is done also through religious practices, and not through a growing secularization.

5. Immigration versus mobility

The European policy towards immigration does not reflect the new patterns of mobility and settlement around the Mediterranean. The bulk of migrations now come from beyond the Mediterranean. There is no longer a massive labour migration stemming from the Mediterranean countries. Fluxes are more fluid, circulation also goes in both directions: elderly Europeans are settling in Tunisia and Turkey for retirement, the jet-set has its fashionable quarters in Morocco. Many second generation graduates or entrepreneurs are looking for job opportunities or are investing in business and companies that play on trans-Mediterranean joint ventures (real estate, travel agencies, import-export, medical activities, education, holiday resorts, etc.). The increasing number of people with dual citizenship facilitates these new patterns of circulation. The informal or grey economy also, by definition, plays on these transnational networks which go far beyond family ties and “ethnic business”.

Migrations from the Mediterranean areas (not the new migrations from China, Iraq, Afghanistan or sub-Saharan Africa) are more flexible, temporary and reversible than before. In fact we should speak more of labour mobility or even professional mobility than labour migration: some educated young Moroccans may have a French passport, take a job in London, then return to Morocco or go to Abu-Dhabi to open a business. Instead, governments try to fix the population: visa restrictions force people to move less, but also to stay once they are in the West, legally or illegally, while they could move more easily if they feel more secure about their administrative status. The social status of many second generation immigrants has improved and is slowly changing the matrimonial patterns. The old pattern (marrying a cousin from the bled in order to bring new family members into Europe) is not dead but is increasingly being replaced by the mobility of young graduates and young entrepreneurs. Nevertheless, students and relatives are treated too often as potential immigrants. The fact that a country like Turkey is hardly exporting manpower any more is not taken into consideration. The process of territorialisation has been unable to stop illegal migration while thwarting many positive dynamics for mutual development. But once again, this endeavour to territorialize the populations is a legacy of the territorial statist nation-state, and is at the core of the populists' agenda.

The European construction process runs against the paradigm of the nation state and is more in tune with contemporary forms of mobility. Often mocked and despised, the evolutive and elusive European Union, where flexibility and bureaucracy make strange but already mature bedfellows, could deal perfectly with our Mediterranean complexity. Instead of aping the nation-state or dreaming of past empires, Europe could look positively upon its own incompleteness as a better tool to manage fluxes, de-territorialization and globalization. Europe has inaugurated a new relationship with territorialisation: there are different levels (the 27, Schengen, euro-zone) and a permanent virtual expansion because of its inability to define a real border. As we have seen, this does not mean an open space: borders have too often been replaced by internal fences, walls and ghettos, but at least there is a juxtaposition of different spaces.

6. Ignoring the Islamists and the role of Islam

The "Arab spring", but also its more shaky aftermath, shows how the European policy of fostering civil society without engaging the Islamists was a mistake. First the actors of the Arab spring, if they were open to the global world, were not a product of the policy of cooperation and development initiated by the European Union. Secondly there was not such a thing as the development of a "liberal Islam" preceding the spread of democratic ideas. And thirdly the Islamists might be the reluctant actors of a democratization process. To grasp what is happening, we must set aside a number of deep-rooted prejudices. The first of these is the assumption that democracy presupposes secularisation. The second is the idea that a democrat is, by definition, also a liberal. Historically, this has not been the case. The American Founding Fathers were not secularists; for them, the separation of church and state was a way of protecting religion from government, not the reverse. The French Third Republic was established in 1871 by a predominantly conservative, Catholic, monarchist parliament that had just crushed the Paris Commune. Christian democracy developed in Europe not because the church wanted to promote secular values, but because it was the only way that it could maintain political influence. Finally, let's not forget that populist movements in Europe today align themselves with Christian democracy in calling for the continent's Christian identity to be inscribed in the EU constitution.

Islamists in the Arab world deplore secularisation, the influence of western values and the excesses of individualism. Everywhere, they seek to affirm the centrality of religion to national identity and they are conservative in all areas except the economy. And in Egypt, like any party swept to power in an electoral landslide, they are tempted to think that they can dispense with the grubby business of forming alliances and distributing government posts equitably. In any case, why would the Islamists, with no democratic culture to speak of, behave like good democrats who believe in pluralism? No doubt many activists are asking themselves the same question.

The Islamists are certainly neither secularists nor liberals, but they can be democrats. It is not the convictions of political actors that shape their policies but the constraints to which they are subject. The Islamists are entering an entirely new political space: this was not a revolution in which a dictatorship was replaced by a regime that resembled its predecessor. There have been elections and there will be a parliament. Political parties have been formed and, whatever the disappointments and fears of the secular left, it will be difficult simply to close down this new space, because what brought it into being in the first place - a savvy, connected young generation, a spirit of protest - is still there. Islamist movements throughout the region are constrained to operate in a democratic arena that they didn't create and which has legitimacy in the eyes of the people.

It is significant, in this regard, that nowhere has the cult of the charismatic strong man reappeared. Instead, there are political parties and a new culture of debate that has influenced even the Islamists. These developments were not created by accident but are the direct consequence of deep social transformations that are irreversible, whatever the strength of the reactions to them. After all, you can't change a society by decree. In Iran, all the indicators suggest that society has become more modern and secular under the mullahs; although the law allows girls as young as nine to be married, statistics show that the average age at which Iranian women get married has continued to rise - today it stands at more than 25. In short, we are not seeing a return to a traditional society.

Furthermore, the protest movements in Egypt and Tunisia were shaped not by an ideology as all-encompassing as the regimes that they toppled (which was the case in Iran in 1979), but by the ideals of democracy, pluralism and good governance. In Iran in 1979, elections were held in the name of the Islamic Republic. The message was clear: this was an ideological revolution (even if there was disagreement about its complexion between the red of the Marxist-Leninists and the green of the Islamists). There is nothing of the kind in either Egypt or Tunisia. There is no revolutionary or ideological dynamic.

The "Islamic" electorate in Egypt today is not revolutionary; it is conservative. It wants order. It wants leaders who will kick-start the economy and affirm conventional religious values, but it is not ready for the great adventure of a caliphate or an Islamic republic. And the Muslim Brotherhood knows this. It needs to attract voters because it doesn't have the means to seize power by force, which in any case it does not wish to do. And even if it did, it does not have the technical wherewithal to do so, as it doesn't control the police or the armed forces and has no paramilitary militia. Moreover, the Islamists don't enjoy a religious monopoly of the public sphere. There are other movements, such as the Sufis and the Salafists. The paradox of the Arab spring is that al-Azhar Mosque in Cairo, one of Egypt's most important religious institutions, has found a new legitimacy: the imam of al-Azhar, Sheikh Ahmed el-Tayeb, has become an advocate of human rights, liberty and, above all, the separation of religious institutions from the state. This means that, in contrast to Iran, the Muslim Brotherhood is unable to "say what Islam says". The religious arena, too, has become pluralistic and open to democratic pressure, even if, for the faithful, there are some things that remain non-negotiable.

A credible and relevant policy of security, either domestic or regional, should reject the culturalist prejudices, not because they are not politically correct, but simply because they don't work.

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