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**NOTIONS AND PERCEPTIONS IN THE
MEDITERRANEAN
PRELIMINARY NOTES FOR A DISCOURSE ON
SECURITY IN THE AREA**

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preliminary notes for a discourse on security in the area

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The notion of Mediterranean

The geopolitical notion of Mediterranean is less widely accepted on the southern shore of the Mediterranean basin than is probably thought by many continental, particularly southern Europeans.

Unlike some European visions (particularly in Southern Europe), in which the Mediterranean is often understood as an area of distinctive solidarity, Arabs do not perceive it as such; rather, they consider the Mediterranean as a medium for their relations with Europe, particularly Western Europe and the European Community. In other words, talking about Mediterranean relations is a way to talk about Euro-Arab relations.

This having been said, there are important differences among Arab countries and areas. In the Arab Maghreb, the notion of a Mediterranean link to Europe is widely accepted and popular. The same is true for the notion of a special solidarity and proximity to Southern European countries. No one, however, thinks of a Western Mediterranean solidarity (the "Five + Five" Group) as exclusive or preferential with respect to a wider solidarity with the European Community as a whole. In Maghrebi eyes, the first multilateral partner is the EC; for cultural, historical and geographic reasons, however, the South European countries bordering the Western basin of the Mediterranean sea may have a special bilateral relationship, or one as a "mentor" with respect to relations with the EC as a whole.

For many people in the Maghreb, the importance of the EC to the Maghreb countries should be reflected in a priority of the Maghreb to the EC. Consequently, the notion of Mediterranean tends to coincide with a privileged EC-Maghreb relationship.

The support for such a privileged relationship within the Mediterranean also suggests that Europe and the EC should de-emphasize their relations with the Eastern Arab Mediterranean countries (i.e. in general terms, the Near East), so as to concentrate on the Arab Maghreb.

It must be stressed that this vision reflects both the actual geoeconomic proximity of the Maghreb to the EC and the high degree of Westernization of the Maghrebi *élites* in power (higher than in the Near East and the in Arab Mashreq). There is no doubt that an Islamic Algeria would be more attracted by Islamic and Arab solidarities (though it would respect the constraints of geoeconomic proximity).

The vision of a privileged Euro-Maghreb relationship is also the outcome of current international and regional trends. Real and perceived differences between Western and Eastern Mediterranean have always existed, but the consequences of the 1990-91 Gulf war--with the US taking up the responsibility for the resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict--are now accentuating such differences. Differences are also exacerbated by the clear differentiation of the US and EC roles in the area: while the

US role in the Arab-Israeli negotiations provides Washington with an overwhelming weight in the Near East and the Gulf, the EC role within the multilateral talks on regional economic cooperation, on the sidelines of the negotiations, is confined to an eventual logistic role and is fading politically. On the other hand, the revived EC interest in the Maghreb (the Declaration on the Maghreb at the June 1992 European Council in Lisbon and the WEU decision in Petersberg to start a dialogue with the Maghreb countries) suggests that a US-EC division of labour is emerging in the Mediterranean such that the division between West and East in the area is acquiring a rationale that is even stronger than in the past.

These trends are also reflected in the Mediterranean notion which currently prevails in the Eastern Mediterranean Arab countries, i.e. Egypt, Jordan, Syria, the occupied Palestine and Lebanon. In these countries, "Mediterranean" is primarily understood as shorthand for relations with the EC. At present, these relations are regarded as very secondary with respect to their central relations with the US, which makes the Mediterranean a very distant political priority. Difficulties in the prospects for European integration, disenchantment with respect to expectations of a more pro-Arab attitude in Europe than in the US, and disappointments about the EC role in Bosnia coalesce to make Euro-Arab relations across the Mediterranean less and less interesting in the Near East.

These feelings are more balanced in Egypt, where the idea that relations with the EC are important is widespread, particularly in the civil service and in the government. Not only are the Egyptians considering strengthening of Euro-Arab relations beside and beyond the Arab-Israeli negotiations, they are also thinking that the strengthening of some form of Mediterranean solidarity will continue to prove to be a helpful and essential step toward a closer relation with the EC as a whole. For this reason, at the beginning of 1993, Egypt's diplomacy revisited its proposal of a "Mediterranean Forum" at the very moment that the Italo-Spanish CSCM proposal appeared completely by-passed by the Arab-Israeli negotiations and the US emerged as the sole player in the region.

It is worth mentioning that, in addition to indifference and disappointments, a more precise argument is now being developed in the Near East to counter the notion of the Mediterranean. The concept of Mediterranean economic cooperation now being aired at the multilateral Arab-Israeli talks is regarded--since it includes Israel--as an attempt by Israel and the West to replace the notion of Arab solidarity before the political negotiations are concluded. The attempt at establishing a Mediterranean framework for the future of the economic cooperation, so the argument goes, is also a way of putting pressure on the Arabs and Arab unity during the negotiations; consequently, many rebuff the Mediterranean notion or, at least, feel suspicious about it.

To conclude, a word on Libya. In Libya the notion of the Mediterranean also tends to emphasise the need for closer relations with the EC. Today, however, this is a tactical policy in addition to other policies which attempt to find a way out of Libya's international isolation. It is also the outcome of the old Third Worldist, anti-imperialist Mediterranean vision in which the offer to the European countries of Mediterranean solidarity was an attempt at creating splits and divisions in the Atlantic solidarity. In sum, with respect to the Mediterranean debate, Libya appears to be late and excluded--as is often the case.

Security perceptions related to the Mediterranean

Broadly speaking, security perceptions emerging in the Arab Mediterranean countries with respect to the Mediterranean area and Western Europe can be divided according to three main broad attitudes:

- (a) Western Europe might be an essential contribution to stability, democratization and security in the Arab world;
- (b) for various reasons, it is to be considered as a threat;
- (c) it is almost insignificant.

Assumptions underlying the first attitude are very similar to those of Western analysts: with the end of the East-West confrontation, there is no longer a mutual military threat across the Mediterranean; threats come from social, economic and cultural disparities--both North-South and South-South, and from the possibilities of South-South conflicts.

Consequently, security policies must be based on cooperation, development and dialogue. Shared institutions, like a CSCM, would be very helpful. It is important to note that those who support this school of thought are also those who emphasise the existence of social, political and economic frustrations at the root of Islamist movements rather than identity issues and cultural oppositions. This attitude is therefore that of many moderate, Westernized people.

The emphasis on socio-economic and political factors brings about the belief that Western Europe can give an essential contribution to modernization, development and democratization of the Arab Mediterranean countries and hence strengthen security both North-South and South-South.

Many Westernized, nationalist intellectuals, professionals and officials, however, believe that Western Europe, alone or as part of the Western/industrialized world, is emerging as a threat to the Arab/Muslim ensemble. Their conclusion is that, with the collapse of the Soviet Union, the US and, to a lesser extent, the Western countries are acquiring an absolute domination, politically, economically and culturally. They share this attitude to greater or lesser degrees with the Islamists, though their respective conclusions about cooperation and relations with the Western/industrialized world may be quite different. The search for and the assertion of identity is what unites and drives these different groups, though very often only as fellow-travellers. This school of thought is currently the most important one.

The Western world, which now includes the "White", "Christian/Orthodox" countries of the former Soviet Union, and consequently encompasses the heart of the industrialized world, tends to impose its culture on the Third World, beginning with its conception of human rights, and hence its political and economic dominance. The implementation of a new international order through the strengthening of the United Nations is only a tool in the hands of the Western world, which in cooperation with Russia dominates the Security Council and enforces its goals without any opposition whatsoever.

This vision reflects analyses of the Islamists very well, though it is shared by nationalists and the general public. It puts constant pressure on regimes and governments, particularly on those which are firmly allied to the Western world. In 1993 this pressure has brought about considerable clivages and attritions, broadly based on the "double standard" argument, from Bosnia to Somalia, from the 400 Palestinian deportees, to the resumption of bombing on Iraq and the violence against migrants and refugees in a number of West European countries. All these

developments are interpreted as evidence of anti-Muslim, anti-Arab policies directed at striking by design at the only culture and the only people who could eventually defy the will of power and the dominance of the Western world.

It must be noted that this vision is affected by the Western and European debate about reforming Western security institutions. Many in the Mediterranean evaluate the debate about including the "out-of-area" in the jurisdiction of NATO and about expanding an EC common foreign and security policy as preparatory steps towards attacking countries which would not fall in line with the "new international order". For example, this was an important factor determining the Algerian military intervention following the Islamists' victory in the December 1991 election. As superficial as it may be, this judgement is very diffuse. The assignment of NATO's AMF to Southern missions and the creation of the Stanavformed have been seen as evidences of such a Western design. It must be said that the nature of the Western and European debate encourages misinterpretations in the countries south of the Mediterranean, because such a debate focusses on institutions (and the trans-Atlantic, inter-European patterns of power relations) rather than on threats.

It should be mentioned that, ironically, Europe happens to be considered a threat even by moderate, Westernized people because Europeans fail to cooperate with and look after the Arab countries. This vision is very common in the Maghreb, but is also well-represented in Egypt. They complain of the NATO and EC trend to associate the former European communist countries while failing to consider similar approaches towards the South of the Mediterranean. Similarly, it is being said that the inability of the Western world to work out balanced policies to implement a just, new world order is a threat to the security of governments and people willing to have a dialogue with the West.

Finally, it must be pointed out that some people believe that Europe is actually unimportant with respect to Arab security. Security in the Arab world and the Gulf is more than ever in the hands of the US, as either the crucial ally or the capital enemy, as the case may be. In the Arab-Israeli negotiations, it is the only real broker. Moreover, the debate on NATO's role in the "out-of-area" will be determined by the Americans. Lastly, challenged to intervene militarily in the Yugoslav crisis, the Europeans failed to show any political cohesion or resolve. In conclusion, some think that the Europeans are neither a help nor a threat.

Conclusions

A few conclusions can be drawn from the discussion above:

- (a) Very few people believe that there is room for a distinctive Mediterranean solidarity; however, many North African countries think that a loose Mediterranean solidarity can help to set up a wider and viable Euro-Arab relationship.
- (b) In the eyes of the Arab countries, the Mediterranean area appears divided into a Western area, which seeks a privileged EC-Maghreb relation, and an Eastern area which looks mostly toward the US and considers Western Europe as a very secondary security partner.
- (c) While some consider Western Europe as an unimportant factor of security, the majority of peoples south of the Mediterranean strongly associate Western Europe to the threat posed in the post-Cold War world by the uncontrolled dominance of the US and the West.

(d) Some intellectuals and officials support a security vision very similar to the broad security notion which underlies the EC common security and foreign policy doctrine (and even the notion adopted by NATO's Rome Declaration); They look with interest at the possibility for the EC to resume a form of dialogue with the Arabs and to perform a positive role in relation to the Mediterranean security (both North-South and South-South).

(e) As a consequence of these differences, any comprehensive approach of the EC governments and institutions to an intellectual or policy dialogue with the countries south of the Mediterranean will require flexibility and imagination in order to emphasise and work out convergences: one point I found largely shared by people bearing different opinions was that the very success of the Arab-Israeli negotiations may give way to a renewed EC role; at this prospect, even many among those who now have a *Realpolitik* vision would agree to work together with the Europeans.