DOCUMENTI

IAI

THE EUROPEAN UNION AND THE MEDITERRANEAN

by Alvaro de Vasconcelos

Paper prepared for the Mediterranean Study Commission
Rome, 25-26 February 1994

ISTITUTO AFFARI INTERNAZIONALI

IAI9443

* Draft *

THE EUROPEAN UNION AND THE MEDITERRANEAN

Álvaro de Vasconcelos

How will the policies of the European Union affect the Mediterranean, particularly in what concerns stability? Any answer to this question is inevitably overshadowed by a big question mark: how will the EU shape its external action? Will it remain largely constrained by the present feeble degree of political unity, or will it adopt a course of action commensurate with the economic power it represents?

All things considered, however, this is certainly not a time for immoderate optimism concerning the role of the European Union with regard to Mediterranean stability, or rather stabilisation.

Up to the beginning of 1992, when optimism was still the prevailing sentiment, the democratic capitals of Europe, namely those of the original Six, but also Madrid and even Lisbon, shared the firm belief that the Community would soon become not only a great single market, but that they were about to witness the birth of a decidedly political Europe, laid on firm foundations of cultural diversity among member states. A Europe able to face the formidable challenge of transition in its central and eastern parts, while at the same time contributing to create a sea of dialogue and modernity in the Mediterranean basin.

Such optimistic feelings were justified, when one considers how the intergovernmental conferences (IGCs) were progressing and the climate that made it possible to draft the Treaty on European Union (TUE), as well as the

initiatives that were undertaken with a view to compensating the EC's eastward pull with a new Mediterranean policy – CSCM and the cooperation process in the Western Mediterranean – which were also made possible by the new atmosphere which characterised relations between Rabat and Algiers, which had led, a few years before, to the Treaty of Marrakesh and the inception of the Arab Maghreb Union (UMA), in 1987.

Although the European Council held in Lisbon in June 1992 coincided with the first signs of the present crisis, when the recession and the European 'reflux' were beginning to hit the markets and the minds of most Europeans, the final statement nevertheless retained the important notion of an East/South equilibrium that should be kept (this is quite obvious in the regions defined as priority areas for joint action: central and eastern Europe, the Middle East and North Africa), and also the no less important notion that a 'comprehensive policy' should be sought in relation to those areas.

At the beginning of the present decade, the Community was still capable, as Edgar Morin has pointed out, of 'facing Islam as a part of itself', of its own diversity, either because of the emigrants settling in from North Africa, either because of the prospect, remote as it remains, of Turkish membership (Turkey's application was put forward in 1987), or because a democratic coexistence of European Islamists and European Christians was expected to take shape in the Balkans[1].

Political union – the European Union, in other words, that all the laboriously achieved intricacies and often

AVasconcelos

ambiguities of the Maastricht Treaty should have brought about – has not been achieved, even if it is long overdue. The EU remains largely a common market, and has so far been unable to design common policies to effectively face up to the three-fold crisis that began to develop in 1992.

First, a multifaceted internal crisis – economic and social (unemployment rising to alarming proportions), and also institutional on account of a perceived democratic deficit. Secondly, a crisis in the East, caused by the lasting difficulties of transition processes and by the resurgence of aggressive nationalism, which is principally to blame for the war in the former Yugoslavia. Thirdly, a crisis in the neighbouring South, in the Mediterranean, where a number of countries are seriously threatened by Islamic radicalism, an acute form of intolerance, reaching the verge of civil war, as in Algeria.

As a consequence, the Mediterranean initiatives of the EU were largely affected. The project of a CSCM, in spite of its underlying 'cooperative' approach to security, collapsed precisely because it was too ambitious. The cooperation process in the Western Mediterranean, the so-called Five+Five which was intent on becoming Twelve+Five is in a state of utter paralysis, owing not only to the problems with and sanctions against Libya but also to the fact that its southern interlocuteur, UMA, is itself paralysed due to the serious situation in Algeria. And Algeria is perhaps only the more lethal stage of the political and economic crisis several Arab and Islamic countries are now experiencing, e.g. Egypt. Contrasting positive signs also exist in the Mediterranean which should be brought into the picture: notably the peace accord between the Israelis and

the Palestinians, the importance of which cannot be overemphasised.

What kind of action should the EU be expected to undertake to face the serious problems afflicting the different Mediterranean regions in diverse ways, if one considers the most probable trend in European integration itself? The course the EU will take from now on is far from certain and open to much debate. Is it to remain a 'civilian power', little more than a common, single market? Or will the change in name actually correspond to a greater degree of political unity among its members, capable of translating into coherent external action, as the words 'European Union' would seem to imply? At present, the EU remains a 'civilian power', one that definitely privileges economic instruments in its foreign relations, although these should increasingly become subject to 'conditionality' and have incorporated the notion of stability through 'inclusion' and support to integration/cooperation.

A preventive strategy

Today, it is generally accepted as a fact in the EU that in North African countries existing problems are of a predominantly social and economic nature, and that political problems such as domestic instability are generated principally on that basis. The same is not generally felt in relation to the Middle East, where existing problems were viewed until quite recently from an almost exclusively strategic angle, although the Israeli-Palestinian peace accord may have begun to change perceptions in this regard. It is also widely recognised that no real military threat is

posed to Europe originating in the southern shore of the Mediterranean. Islamic (or any other form of religious or cultural fundamentlism) "can only gain ground by exploiting underdevelopment, unemployment, flagrant inequality, poverty": Jacques Delors's "word of warning" to those "who are already searching for the next enemy".[6] The lack of basic freedoms, bad governance and poor resource-management should also be added to the list. However, from Lisbon to Berlin, most would say that economic and social problems are the core issue, from which all other ills more or less directly ensue.

Even if they could claim no other merit, this at least the Five+Five and the CSCM project will have accomplished: recognition of the need for a 'preventive' strategy, a 'contextual' approach, designed to meet challenges before they have developed into outright dangers, which one of its promoters, Roberto Toscano bluntly justifies: "if today we should prove unequal to the task of fostering development through cooperation, tomorrow we will have to cope with dangers to security, threats and very costly remedies"[7] (doubtfully effective, however costly, one might add). European policy-makers make no secret of the dangers they have in mind, massive illegal immigration, refugees and asylum-seekers in growing numbers, terrorism, drugs and arms proliferation being among them.

The chief policy instrument available, the so-called renewed Mediterranean policy (RMP), approved by the European Council in December 1990, contemplates a 4,400 million ecu funding (1,300 million from the EC budget and 3,100 in EIB loans) for the five-year period 1992-96.[8]

AVasconcelos

The European Union is the largest trade partner by far in the Mediterranean, and with its RMP the largest donor of development aid and cooperation partner. According to the relevant declarations of the European Council, the RMP is designed as a means of supporting economic and political reform – the underlying objective being quite obviously to check immigration overflows and containing radical Islam. The latter is not dissimilar to one of the major driving forces behind the Marshall Plan, i.e. fostering the conditions of sustainability of European democracies and thus preventing the fundamentalists of the day -Communist parties- from actually attaining power. RMP, and the combined efforts of member states individually, however, fall far too short of their goal. More than any other factor, the effectiveness of economic support lies primarily with the recipient countries and their governments, and their ability to promote reform, thus becoming less vulnerable to radical political alternatives.

European policies are therefore in fact directed towards and more effective in countries which have performed better. Such is the present case of Morocco and Tunisia, who "continue to lead the way", according to the World Bank, "as far as monetary and budgetary discipline is concerned, resulting in controlling inflation (down to 6%), as well as implementation of structural reform,"[5] and has allowed a significant inflow of foreign investment. Countries where the political and economic situation is more difficult, especially when facing acute forms of radical Islam, like Algeria, the present Mediterranean policy can have little effect, not least because they are not in a position to absorb the social consequences of readjustment; the

unavoidable conclusion being that EU policies are less effective precisely where they are most needed.

'Coherence' and 'conditionality'

On the side of progress towards a 'comprehensive' external action, the notion of 'coherence', as set forth in the TUE, i.e. the linkage of foreign economic and trade policies and development aid and cooperation with decisions made within the framework of political cooperation/CFSP, should be listed as a significant progress. In other words, 'conditionality' and political objectives should preside over economic cooperation.

As a consequence of 'coherence', EU cooperation policies may in future be made increasingly dependant upon the success of political and economic reform in the region. The European Parliament has given a clear signal that it will be more exacting in this regard, and a shift in the orientation of cooperation policies in the Commission has also taken effect.

Greater emphasis on human rights and democratic institution-building on the part of the EU may therefore reasonably be expected. Not to the point of liberal triumphalism of the early days of the present decade, and not without due regard for the specifics and particular pace of each transition process (where there is one). Furthermore, it is painfully clear from the Algerian experience that democratic transition means a lot more than seeing elections through, however free and fair.

AVasconcelos

'Conditionality' is certainly not intended as, and should not be made to look like interference. Anti-western sentiments need no further fuelling as it is.

However, unconditional support to Islamic states who cooperate with the West can also reinforce anti-Western radicalism because this support goes by and large to repressive regimes, as Roberto Aliboni recently pointed out, "and on the other hand, pushing these regimes, as repressive as they may be, to make an unconditional opening to radical Islam would often correspond to a mere shift from secular repressive regimes to religious ones."[6]

Stability through integration

The partnership agreements with Maghreb countries – Morocco first,[7] Tunisia next and perhaps in time Algeria – as well as the customs union established with Turkey due to take effect in 1995, are to a limited extent a part of the 'policy of inclusion' which remains the number one method to face up to political transition in Europe in the last couple of decades: integration of the new democracies. The EU also tends to project its own integration model as a stabilising factor in those regions with which it establishes a relationship, clearly privileging group to group relations. That the emergence of UMA corresponded to increased interest in the region on the part of the EC is no coincidence. Be it in the Middle East, the Maghreb, or even the Gulf, Europeans are generally convinced that their own experience proves that greater economic integration and regional cooperation institutions are fundamental factors in overcoming tension between neighbours and dispel rivalry and antagonism,

burdensome legacies of the past. In particular, high expectations are placed in the role of regional cooperation in the reconciliation between Israelis, Palestinians and their neighbours. Jacques Delors has suggested this regional cooperation could follow the model, that has worked so well for Europe, of the European Steel and Coal Community. The joint action towards the Middle East decided by the European Council (Brussels, December 1993) contemplates the establishment of a regional cooperation framework to deal with economic development, arms control and security among priority support areas.

Regional cooperation should indeed be encouraged, even if the present picture of fragmentation in the Mediterranean and the fragility of the existing process tends to make bilateral agreements more feasible.

EU external action in the Mediterranean and its constraints

For the time being, the EU remains a provider of 'soft security', acting chiefly through economic instruments. Enlargement to EFTA neutrals will in principle reinforce this trend and strengthen the argument that it should so remain. That was the logic of the Five+Five, from which 'hard security', i.e. security issues proper, were excluded. The Libyan problem, partly as a result of which the Five+Five process has been frozen, should count as an example of why a discussion of security issues such as proliferation of armaments should not be absent from the EU/Mediterranean debate, why issues such as confidence-building and transparency will have to be addressed if any cooperation process in the Mediterranean is to succeed.

AVasconcelos

The problem is that there can be no real 'comprehensive policy' that does not integrate security, including military issues. In order to be coherently 'comprehensive', this means that while in the Middle East the economic dimension should be further emphasised, in the Western Mediterranean the security dimension should not be avoided.

Irrespective of their soundness, economic arguments later coupled with economic sanctions, were proven insufficient to deter and least to stop Serbian aggression in the former Yugoslavia. On the other hand, the circumstance of being the major actor – economically – in the region has not prevented the EU from being largely marginal to the Middle East peace process.[8] And again today its political role is not commensurate either with its interests, its geographical proximity or even the sizeable programme towards the Palestinians.

The preponderance of the 'civilian power' approach and the search for stability mainly through market integration will naturally prompt attentions to focus increasingly on the east and centre European democracies, looked upon as natural candidate members and potentially sizeable markets, especially by Germany. The difficulties of ongoing political processes in the Balkans, North Africa and the Middle East call for a predominantly political project, capable of going beyond basic selfishness, priorities dictated by market interests alone, i.e. a broader vision of self-interest if nothing more. The gradual expansion of the EEA towards central and eastern Europe and Turkey will in time create a free-trade area of some 800 million, and may constitute an equally vast opportunity for the economies of the southern

shore, provided they are willing and able, to become a part of that market.

Integrating the countries of North Africa would be by and large a political gesture, one that can only be accomplished by a political Europe, one that moreover sees itself as an outward-looking, multi-cultural, multi-religious area; a Europe of values, with a universalist project set on the basis of the very diversity between present of future member states. Should it remain essentially a big market, and lack a truly political dimension, the south of the Mediterranean, together with the Balkans and part of eastern Europe will increasingly tend to be regarded as sources of conflict which should be contained within their geographical space, within a 'cordon sanitaire', lest they be allowed to contaminated the EU equilibrium. This was the general attitude towards the conflict in the former Yugoslavia, the same attitude of those who say that the triumph of radical Islam in Algeria, or in Egypt, would be terrible for their own citizens, but not a problem for Europe since it will only improbably generate a global threat to its security.

A political Europe?

Although the situation in the Mediterranean will almost certainly not develop into a global military threat to European security (the same cannot be said of the Balkans and eastern Europe, where that risk cannot be totally discarded), it does however command from the EU a predominantly political vision and action in a foreign policy, security and even defence capacity. It remains to be seen whether this will actually happen, and much debate is

to be expected on the issue, particularly in the context of the 1996 IGC.

A politically-driven EU will tend to balance opening up to centre and east Europe with a reinforcement of initiatives towards the South, the Mediterranean south in particular. That the South should be counted in European priorities is a precondition of maintaining the European equilibrium itself. Bonn is indeed satisfied that this is so, as the Franco-German proposal (October 1991) to the IGC on political union, defining the Mediterranean within the priority areas for joint action, seems to indicate. North Africa and the Middle East were again formally included, with central and eastern Europe, among top priority areas for joint action in June 1992, as mentioned above.

While a political Europe will tend to privilege the Mediterranean, a 'civilian' Europe will increasingly concentrate on an expanding European economic area, and the European Union could soon become a vast free-trade area and little else. Enlargement to EFTA neutrals will facilitate such a development, if nothing is done to counter it.

Common foreign and security policy – which is intergovernmental – and what it will be able to achieve depend strictly on the combined political will of member states. It would unarguably be in the interest of at least certain member states, France, Italy, Spain and Portugal among them, to propose a policy 'package' for the Mediterranean, aimed at countering radical Islamism, and finding the mechanisms for cooperation between the EU and the Mediterranean countries that would enable them to develop some kind of common security culture.[9] In the

present context, policies should be aimed at different constellations, both of countries and of issues. Both policies and initiatives should follow other criteria than a rigid geographical divide between eastern and western Mediterranean. Even if the Western Mediterranean does make some sense as a region, especially if the Arab Maghreb Union is brought back into existence and if it comes to correspond to a free-trade area, including at least Morocco, Tunisia and Algeria, this should not hinder the development of initiatives such as Egypt's proposal of a Mediterranean Forum, including eastern and western Mediterranean countries (narrower in scope than the CSCM project but wider than the Five+Five), aiming at strengthening relations with the EU through a CSCM-type approach, or an initiative towards a core group of countries in the Middle East directly interested in the successful outcome of the peace process.

It would be to the benefit of all that such a policy package should be coordinated with the EU's North African neighbours. This should aim at bringing about their integration in the world economy, seek to foster increased political convergency and would have the additional effect of making the WEU an interlocuteur of the countries of the southern shore of the Mediterranean in terms of security, in such relevant issues as arms control, proliferation and confidence-building, which might best be described as mutual trust.

Such a comprehensive or integrated Mediterranean policy should be seen as an effort to 're-launch' the external political dimension of an outward-looking European Union. And should therefore be discussed also in the context of

future enlargements, so that these will not make the Union drift farther apart from its Mediterranean shores.

---

1. Edgar Morin, "Nationalismes – La déseurope", Le Monde, 2 février 1994.

2. Jacques Delors, speech on "Questions Concerning European Security" given at the IISS Annual Conference, Brussels, 10 September 1993.

3. Roberto Toscano, paper on "Prospects for Cooperation in the Mediterranean" given to the WEU/IISS seminar on Security and Cooperation in the Western Mediterranean, Madrid, 29-31 October 1992.

4. For a discussion of policy instruments towards the Mediterranean, in particular the renewed Mediterranean policy, see Alejandro V. Lorca, "Double échec économique du passé, espoirs pour l'avenir", in Álvaro Vasconcelos (ed.), Européens et Maghrébins – Une solidarité obligée (Paris, Karthala, 1993), pp. 137-161.

5. Banque Mondiale, Rapport Annuel 1993, pp. 159.

6. Roberto Aliboni, "The Mediterranean: A European View", paper given at the IAI international conference on The Mediterranean: Risks and Challenges, Rome, 27-28 November 1992.

7. For an analysis of the partnership agreement, see Fathallah Oualalou, Le Maroc, la Méditerranée et l'Europe (miméo), 1993.

8. See Paul Clairet, "Relations Communauté/Moyen Orient au regard du processus de paix et de la politique méditerranéenne rénovée", paper given at the CEPS seminar on Europe and the Mediterranean, Brussels, 21-22 January 1993.

9. Reinhardt Rummel, "West European Cooperation in Foreign and Security Policy: Optimizing International Influence", in The Annals of The American Academy of Political and Social Science (Philadelphia, January 1994).