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NEW CHALLENGES FOR THE EU COUNTRIES BORDERING THE MEDITERRANEAN

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ISTITUTO AFFARI INTERNAZIONALI

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by Roberto Aliboni

In the first part of the 1990s, Southern European governments, especially those of Italy and Spain, have insisted on the risks and threats emanating from the Mediterranean and the consequent need for the EU and NATO to face them with adequate collective security policies. In addition to the ongoing Arab-Israeli negotiations, Western and European alliances have responded to this demand by setting out iniatitives like the dialogues established by both the WEU and NATO with groups of selected Mediterranean countries and the recent launching of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership at the November 1995 ministerial conference in Barcelona. Meanwhile, in 1994, the southern members of the EU established a Forum for Mediterranean Dialogue and Cooperation which includes an important group of Southern Mediterranean countries and Turkey.

These institutional responses, in particular the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership, reflect and take advantage of more than five years of intensive international debates and analyses on the political and cultural evolution in the Mediterranean and the Middle East. Nevertheless, they will be put to the test and require further elaboration in a situation that continues to undergo dramatic changes. In between experiences from the past and changes to come, this article takes into consideration challenges to the EU related to its broad security (i.e. non-military) in the Mediterranean as they appear today. Although these challenges are mostly advanced by Southern European countries, the article will argue that they constitute EU-wide concerns and must be integrated in the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) of the Union, tracing the decisions made at the June 1995 European Council in Cannes.

Socio-economic difficulties

Instability in the Mediterranean areas stems from many causes. Two of them, however, may be indicated as primary sources from which the varying trends and factors at work spring: (a) first, the political standstill arising from the inability of many Arab regimes to broaden their bases by creating the grassroots consensus which would legitimize their regimes and integrate Islamism within national polities; (b) second, the economic underdevelopment and the large income and social inequalities due principally to regimes' strong reluctance to eliminate or attenuate the symbiotic and mutually supportive power relationship between public and private sector, i.e. the persistence and pervasiveness of clientelism as a model shaping social as well as political and economic relations. Let's begin with the latter.

A recent report issued by the World Bank[1] in October 1995 on the occasion of the Amman Economic Summit reveals that the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region has fallen from second-highest performance in income growth in 1960-85 to last in the past decade. According to the report, "real per capita incomes have fallen by 2% a year - the largest decline in any developing region". Two main factors have produced the crisis: the fall of oil prices and a 0.2% annual decline in productivity. As a consequence, most countries in the region achieve about half the output per unit of investment of East Asian countries and their international competitiveness is dramatically dwindling.

The report says that the MENA region has the potential for restoring growth and indicates the policies for doing so. It stresses very aptly the need to promote non-oil exports, make the private sector more efficient and give privatisation strong priority as to attract foreign investment, because "the huge investment in state-owned enterprises and human

skills unsuited to today's marketplace are the nub of the adjustment problem facing most MENA economies".

What is preventing the Mediterranean countries from adopting the right policies and putting their potential to work? There are strong vested interests in the survival of state-run and -owned economies because the Arab ruling classes use the state as an instrument of power and wealth: the access to resources -including foreign markets - is controlled by the regimes and allotted to private bodies or individuals according to sectarian, ethnic or political allegiances. Consequently, privatisation lags behind because there is a potent social and political constraint on it. For this constraint to be alleviated or eliminated, a social and political transformation would be necessary.

Although a report from the World Bank could not enter into a discussion of the social and political factors constraining growth in the MENA region, political and social change as a condition for economic and social development is clearly indicated and anticipated in the policy adopted by the Barcelona Declaration, the document which lays the foundation for the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership. In the new EU Mediterranean policy, the attempt at opening up the Arab markets and increasing growth and productivity is linked to the implementation of some degree of democratisation, pluralism and, perhaps most important, the strengthening of civil societies and cultural ties.

Whatever the merit of Western and European policy responses, socio-economic challenges from the adjoining Mediterranean area have important political and social implications for the Union. Two implications deserve to be mentioned. First, the adverse social and economic trends -including demographic trends - that prevail in Southern Mediterranean regions strongly contribute to fostering political radicalism and, in particular, political Islam. Second, if the Mediterranean and Middle Eastern countries prove unable to restore growth, today's 9 million unemployed in the region could rise - still according to the World Bank report- to 15 million and give way to an even stronger migration to the Union than expected.

Political crisis

As mentioned before, the other major challenge comes from the political standstill and the consequent violence which has increased in the Mediterranean since the end of the Cold War has brought about international changes that contribute to weakening nationalist regimes in power and strengthening political radicalism.

Although the political crisis of the more or less authoritarian regimes in power almost everywhere in the Arab countries does not stem from Islamism alone, this crisis is largely reflected by the relentless development of Islamism, a trend which is now confirmed by the success of the Turkish Islamists in the legislative election held at the end of December 1995. There is no doubt that Islamism is the most significant element of the picture and, for this reason, the argument which follows is referred to it.

In the West, due to the Iranian experience, the rise of Islamism is regarded principally as a factor of international instability and anti-Western hostility. Islamism brings with it important international aspects and consequences, but in order for it to be better understood, it should be regarded rather as a factor of domestic politics in the countries concerned. In the last years, this is the conclusion Western governments have come to by broadly adopting a more relaxed attitude towards Islamism. The fundamental change which took place in Western governments' policies towards Islamism is that its eventual association to power is not to be necessarily ruled out, provided they abstain from violence.

As a matter of fact, Western governments have yielded to reality. It can be easily anticipated that, as a domestic factor, Islamism will obtain at least some of the political and

social adjustments it is seeking. Involvement or participation in power, however, will never be as absolute as it was in Iran. For another important difference with respect to Iran is that in the Arab Mediterranean countries both governments and the military have learnt the Iranian lesson and are well prepared and extremely determined to resist more or less violent Islamist bids for power. The November 1995 presidential election in Algeria almost annihilated the political capital apparently accumulated by the Islamists' armed struggle and made clear that the latter will have to accept a compromise (in which the military will maintain the upper hand). In other words, what the West and the EU may anticipate is a Southern Mediterranean world in which diverse forms of compromise will make the association to power of Islamists possible. At the same time, however, ultimate power will be maintained by governments held by military or other social forces interested in keeping the basic nationalist Arab heritage. These forces will yield on social and cultural ground but will retain the lead in international affairs, macro-economic management, defence, etc.

In this development will be more pluralistic than democratic in its character. Arab regimes will be similar to "controlled democracies", not unlike Tunisia, Jordan or Morocco today, or "consociative democracies", along the line of Cold-War Italy (where communist opposition could not take over by definition but was allowed to share power all over the country in many and significant ways). It will not be exactly what the EU countries would like, but it will be acceptable if more stability is attained.

In this compromise-dominated scenario, North-South cultural and political tensions across the Mediterranean will not necessarily diminish. International relations in the area will tend to be correct and even good at the government level but cold and assertive at the level of societies. This development would make Mediterranean relations somewhat schizophrenic, not unlike the relations between the US and Saudi Arab, predicated on very close intergovernmental cooperation, but segregated from a societal and cultural point of view. Cultural segregation, would not, however, be as easy to manage in the Mediterranean because of proximity, intensive personal contacts, tourism and historical and cultural links. Consequently, the tendency towards normalization in the governmental sphere and separation in cultural relations will not help to decrease tensions and could even create further ones.

This scenario of trans-Mediterranean cold relations and creeping tensions might be eased by the successful conclusion of the Arab-Israeli peace process, the triggering of positive prospects for regional economic cooperation and growth and a successful NATO mission in Bosnia or, more broadly speaking, a reversal in the Arab countries' perception of anti-Muslim sentiments in relation to Western alliances' crisis management goals and practices.

In conclusion, Europe may be able to get out of the nasty alternative: either supporting authoritarian regimes, so as to keep anti-Western Islamists at bay, or dealing with Islamist regimes definitely ready to sell oil but also to conduct conflictive international relations. The policy framework launched by the Barcelona Declaration, with its emphasis on cultural and economic cooperation is on the right track, provided the Union will be able to manage it with flexibility of vision and effectiveness.

Immigration and EU's cohesion
Once again, however, regardless of the merit of Western and EU policy responses, the challenge remains of a situation of deep political crisis fostering conflict and instability. This crisis weakens important export markets, increases risks related to environment and energy supplies, and reinforces political incentives to rearmament and proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. But perhaps the most difficult challenge deriving from Southern Mediterranean political stability is once again related to migration. In fact, even if the Euro-

Mediterranean Partnership succeeds in bringing about a more or less cold normalization in the Mediterranean, by the time it does so, migration will have increased anyway, and it will be largely affected by the level of tension prevailing in the Mediterranean scenario. If developments were to allow for decreasing cultural tension, integration and management of immigrants by the EU would be facilitated. This in turn would result in a positive feedback on international Mediterranean relations and trigger a virtuous circle. Otherwise, managing migration in the EU members will remain difficult and conflictive, both in intra-EU and Mediterranean relations, and tension will remain.

Immigration into the Union emerges as a most important implication of both Mediterranean socio-economic and political challenges. What makes immigration particularly difficult to manage is that it reflects inside Europe itself conflicts and tensions otherwise external to the Union. Furthermore, people immigrating to Europe from Muslim countries are unwilling to accept cultural integration and cannot, therefore, be easily integrated anyway. Generally speaking, their attitude is different from people immigrating to the EU from the European East, who quite naturally accept European values and mores. On the other hand, European countries are hardly prepared to become multi-cultural societies and hold very different approaches towards this issue. One has to point out that the Barcelona Declaration includes migration to only a very limited extent. This reflects the fact that for the time being the EU is unable to set out common policies on migration and all the complex issues related to it. This hardly contributes to the effectiveness of both the new EU Mediterranean policy and the emerging Mediterranean dimension of the CFSP.

Among the various Mediterranean challenges affecting EU security, immigration is not only important in itself but is also notable because it illustrates that these challenges affect EU members independently of their geographic proximity to Southern areas: immigration is more important for Germany than for Italy. The June 1995 decisions made by the European Council in Cannes to strengthen the Mediterranean policy and modify the distribution of EU aid between Southern Mediterranean and Eastern European countries have very aptly recognized the indivisibility of EU security and reasserted EU cohesion.

In conclusion, the Southern European members of the Union have Mediterranean interests and face challenges not fundamentally different from those of the whole Union. Where their specificity lies, however, is in the role and the responsibility they are expected to take on in the interest of the whole of the Union within the framework of the more cohesive external policy established in Cannes. In this sense, it can be said that the success of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership will depend mostly on the dedication and leadership the Southern members of the Union will be able to provide and the extent to which they will contribute to meeting the new challenges emanating from the Southern Mediterranean regions.

Notes

(1) World Bank, *Claiming the Future. Choosing Prosperity in the Middle East and North Africa*, Washington DC, October 1995.