



Assessing EU Policies toward the Southern Mediterranean

Impressions from the 2015 Annual Conference of the EuroMeSCo Network

November 2015

Some 100 representatives of approximately 75 leading think tanks and research centers from across the Middle East, North Africa and the European Union (EU) gathered on 8-9 October 2015 in Milano to review Euro-Mediterranean relations. Dr. Nimrod Goren participated on behalf of the Mitvim Institute.

The discussions took place as part of the 2015 Annual Conference of the [EuroMeSCo Network](#). Italian Foreign Minister Paolo Gentiloni was the keynote speaker of the conference, which was attended by four Israelis, alongside representatives from Egypt, Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey, Syria, Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria, Libya and the Gaza Strip.

In recent years, discussions at such regional conferences focused on assessing the developments in Arab countries in light of the Arab Spring. However, this year the emphasis was on taking stock and critically examining the European policies toward the Mediterranean just weeks before the unveiling of the EU's review of the European Neighborhood Policy, which pertains to the countries that border the Union.

The Syrian refugee crisis, as well as the internal conflicts in Libya, Egypt, Syria, Iraq and Yemen, are impacting Europe and require a reevaluation of EU policy. As one of the speakers observed, today Europe is enveloped by crises but it has not taken a leading role in any of them. The result is a highly unstable Mediterranean and a European policy toward the region that is increasingly shaped by domestic concerns.

A. What went wrong in EU-Mediterranean relations?

According to conference discussions, the European failure stems from the combination of a number of factors: the changing geopolitical reality, inaction amidst growing warning signs, an absence of a clear-cut policy and appropriate means, a difficulty to implement existing policy, and an erroneous approach to the countries of the region.

1. The Changing Geopolitical Reality

The problems of the Mediterranean are real. They are not the result of European weakness, but rather from wider political and societal processes, and there is no guarantee that an alternative policy would have resulted in a different outcome. The failure of the Arab Spring, the rise of the Islamic State, the growing power of the radical right in Europe and Russia's regional policies are all contributing to creating the complex reality that the EU must confront.

2. Inaction amidst Growing Warning Signs

The EU was wrong to focus only on the problems occurring in countries close to it and to neglect those of countries further afoot. The conflicts in Iraq and Yemen, for example, impact significantly upon the region and the EU has neglected to tend to them. The EU has also overlooked the Syrian refugee crisis in Jordan and Turkey for some time although the writing was on the wall. As one of the speakers said: "If you don't go to the problem, the problem comes to you." In this regard, some argued that the EU avoids acting in instances when it cannot guarantee the outcome of its actions. And yet, the Syrian refugee crisis indicates that inaction can also incur costs, which can sometimes be even greater than implementing a policy that ultimately fails.

3. Absence of Clear Policy and Appropriate Means

The Europeans had hoped that all would be well if the Arab world adopted the European recipe – the idea that economic liberalization would lead to political liberalization and that the creation of an active civil society would help build democracy. This was not to be and its failure calls for a paradigm shift. Europe lacked a clear policy or theory on which it based its actions and is accused of not having a deep enough understanding of the region. But Europe also lacked the means to bring its ideas into reality. The EU still lacks a unified foreign policy and its means are inadequate to address the new ongoing intra-national conflicts in some Arab countries. The financial and economic incentives it can offer these countries are also significantly more limited than those that China and Russia can put forward. Europe, which had tried to promote democracy and good governance, now finds itself in a need to focus on crisis management. It would be well advised if it did so in growing concert with other international actors and by learning from lessons learned from other conflict zones.

4. Difficulty to Implement Existing Policy

Europe's difficulty is also in its ability to implement its existing policy. The policies of EU member states are often not aligned with those of the EU. Furthermore, EU policies are unevenly implemented across its members and regions. Europe is also blamed by actors in the Arab world to not always being true to its word. They are critical of Europe in that it encouraged them to adopt democracy but

then failed to provide support in their hour of need. One senior British researcher posited that the EU's is de-facto primarily concerned with promoting regional stability (such as provided by the rule of President al-Sisi in Egypt) and to achieve that it is willing to distance itself from its values, to lose its moral compass and to avoid fully implementing its policies.

5. An Erroneous Attitude towards the Countries of the Region

European speakers claimed that the Euro-Mediterranean partnership, in which the EU has been taking pride, is not based upon an equal partnership. Rather, it is a European project that promotes European interests and sees Arab countries as clients rather than partners. Arab speakers echoed this sentiment as well, speaking out against European attempts to dictate certain conduct. "The Arab world does not want Europe to hand out marks, publish progress reports, and tell it what to do," summarized one speaker from Tunisia. Moreover, the EU was criticized for preferring to work the most with regional partners who are liberal and secular, and to treat the rise of political Islam as a mistake rather than as a legitimate societal development. It was this attitude that led Europe to miss the rise of the new elites in Mediterranean countries, notably Turkey and Tunisia.

B. What can be improved in EU-Mediterranean relations?

The Italian foreign minister claimed in his speech that the nuclear agreement with Iran proves that diplomacy and dialogue can bring results in the Middle East as well. And yet, according to participants, succeeding in the Mediterranean will require greater European political commitment, greater emphasis on policy implementation, more cooperation with additional actors in the international community, and creating partnerships with more diverse social groups in the countries of the region. Moreover, Europe must adopt new paradigms and policies. It must allow new, younger players room to operate and challenge the old establishment. In this regard, a number of recommendations were made:

1. Differentiating Between Neighbors

In the past Europe attempted to apply one type of neighborhood policy to all countries with which it shares borders. Today it is clear that such an approach is not feasible in light of the differences between the various countries and sub-regions. Europe should be cognizant of these differences and act appropriately, showing flexibility in the way it deals with different countries and looking at them as dynamic actors rather than deterministic. At the same time, Europe must not take its eye off the region as a whole. Many of the region's issues, including security and the refugee issue, require regional solutions, and demand that the EU also deal with the neighbors of its neighbors and not only with its immediate surroundings.

2. Building a Reciprocal Partnership

European policy must better reflect what the region's countries want and need based on greater familiarity with the area. The way in which EU conditionality regarding its neighbors had been implemented to date was not always successful. Europe must project a desire to work with the countries of the Mediterranean and not merely dictate terms and conditions while at the same time judging them, as has been the case under the current unequal arrangement. The EU must develop tailor-made processes with its different neighbors, taking into account the eventual type and scope of relationship each neighbor wants to have with the EU.

3. Emphasizing Security Issues

The Euro-Mediterranean relationship, conceived in the 1990s, was based originally on civil-political, economic and social issues. At the time, security issues were not seen as matters of joint concern and there was no unified European approach on how to deal with them. However, in the aftermath of the attacks of September 11, 2001, security has become a prominent issue and today it dominates the regional agenda. Furthermore, the EU has been making some progress toward a common foreign and security policy. Europe must put forward a clear response to recent security threats, which involves greater cooperation with this region. It must also deal with the civilian issues that were the bedrock from which the security problems developed.

4. Deepening Ties with Civil Society

Vibrant civil society organizations have sprung up across the Mediterranean in recent years. These include new organizations in Arab countries, whose new priorities differ from those of their countries' leadership and establishment. However, civil society organizations in the Arab world often suffer from governments' attempts to weaken and sideline them. Therefore, European assistance to empowering NGOs in the Arab world could not always make the desired impact. If Europe wishes to build a new relationship that takes into consideration the real needs of the peoples of the region it must endeavor to deepen ties with such groups in these countries. In so doing, it must avoid cooperating with only liberal, secular groups but also those who promote other views, represent fresh leadership, and enjoy broader popular support.

C. The EU and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict was hardly discussed throughout the conference, despite the rising tide of violence that occurred in Jerusalem at the time. The international community is currently focused on other issues whose impact is more broad and immediate. This is also due to a sense that progress toward Israeli-Palestinian conflict resolution does not seem likely in the near future. The

EU is dealing with the refugee crisis, the Arab countries are focused on their internal strife and the United States does not show signs that it will show greater interest to solve the conflict in the near future.

However, a number of European speakers called on Europe to be more involved in the issue. The Italian foreign minister, for example, stated that the Israelis and Palestinians should be encouraged to restart the peace process, with greater European involvement. Miguel Moratinos, the EU's former special envoy to the peace process, asserted that Europe should play a more leading role on this issue, that it should show courage and political will and put forth a political plan to resolve the conflict. According to Moratinos, this should be accomplished by working simultaneously on two parallel tracks: European recognition of a Palestinian state and recognition of Israel by all Arab and Muslim states.

But beyond the speeches, a change in European policy is unlikely. A senior European official said in private conversations that there is no new initiative on the horizon and that Israelis and Palestinians will have to find a way to get along on their own. This attitude seems to be an increasingly popular one among the international community.