

**A TRANSFORMING ARAB WORLD:
BETWEEN CONTINUITY AND CHANGE**

Report of the EuroMeSCo Annual Conference 2013

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Executive Summary

Almost three years after the start of the Arab uprisings, it is time to reflect on what has changed and what has not as a consequence of the recent developments in the Mediterranean. Some important steps forward have been taken, as reflected by the increasing weight of civil society organisations, the birth of independent media or the holding of free elections. However, it is still too early to draw firm conclusions on the outcomes of the transitional processes and remarkable challenges lay ahead for Southern Mediterranean countries. Economy, security and social and political polarisation are among the most pressing priorities.

The EuroMeSCo Annual Conference 2013, “A Transforming Arab World: Between Continuity and Change”¹, produced intense debates on the factors behind the current state of play in the Arab world and Euro-Mediterranean relations. Three parallel working sessions explored three levels affected by the



1. The EuroMeSCo Annual Conference was jointly organised by the European Institute of the Mediterranean (IEMed) and the European Union Institute of Security Studies (EUISS) in Paris on 3rd - 4th October 2013.



transitional processes: the State, the Region and Civil Society. The first session focused on the democratic and state reforms in the Southern Mediterranean countries, through the cases of Egypt and Tunisia. The second working session stressed the regional implications of national transitions and regional conflicts; while the third aimed at discussing the role of civil society and emerging social actors in political transitions, such as parties, think tanks and NGOs.

In addition, two plenary sessions explored, on the one hand, the elements of continuity and change in the region from an Arab perspective and, on the other, the role of the European Union (EU) in supporting democratic progress and development in Southern Mediterranean countries.

Opening Session

The opening session stressed that even if the popular uprisings in the Arab world came by surprise, the root causes were well known, even outside the region. A panel of experts from the EU institutions, as well as from think tanks and academic research centres, argued that foreign observers shifted from the euphoria and empathy towards young Arabs of 2011 to widespread pessimism.

According to the speakers, it is not appropriate to talk about the Arab democratic exception anymore. Southern Mediterranean countries have taken the path towards democracy like many other countries in Latin America and Southern and Eastern

Europe did during the last century. Two waves of democratisation have taken place in the EU neighbourhood, the so-called colour revolutions and the Arab Spring. Ten years later, expectations of both cases have not been fully met and, despite many setbacks, every country is struggling to find its own way to achieve democratisation.

The wide range of different situations in the region was also discussed. Such great plurality of contexts makes it difficult to establish categorisations, although it is possible to divide countries regarding the scale of reforms undertaken, from the deepest changes (Tunisia, Libya and perhaps Egypt), to gradual (Morocco, Jordan) or almost invisible reforms (Algeria). The opposite side of the ranking involves Syria and its bordering countries hit by the consequences of the Syrian conflict, such as Lebanon, Jordan or Iraq.

There was consensus among panellists on a number of factors which can be considered as steps forward to democracy, such as the organisation of elections in several countries or the birth of more independent and plural media. Among other elements, experts underlined the increasing weight of civil society and the progress in civil freedoms, even though they admitted that it is not a linear path and that full reform will take longer.

On the other hand, MENA countries still have to face important challenges in order to respond to the demands of the people and the participants enumerated some of



them. It is necessary to overcome the deep polarisation of social and political life, smoothing the divides between democrats and non-democrats, instead of focusing only on the controversy between Islamists and non-Islamists. New regimes also have to undertake reforms of the economic and security sectors, which are still very unstable. Even if external actors can provide their expertise to back the transitional processes, according to the panellists they will no longer play a key role in the region.

Plenary Session - What Has Changed and What Has Remained Unchanged in the Region Since 2011? A Perspective from the Arab Side

The first part of this plenary session analysed the role of cultural identity and new emerging concepts of the “self” and the “other”, best symbolised by the dichotomy between Islamist and secularist forces. Panellists debated new identity paradigms, with a special mention of the Egyptian case, where Islamists projected themselves as the key actor and a genuine group compared to the rest of society. Experts also evoked cleavages between urban and rural, poor and rich areas (and social classes), each stratum and area supporting either an Islamist or a secular view. This situation makes governing very difficult, since no societal consensus can be reached when different actors use identity politics to discredit “the other”. Reasons for the lack of support for the Muslim Brotherhood were also given, such as their failure to build a large alliance and their inability to reform the security apparatus.

Debates also focused on the highly aggressive discourses led by certain secular layers of society. Some experts deplored a sharp tendency to destroy the Muslim Brotherhood and brought attention to some divergences between academics from the region. It was argued that dialoguing partners do not even speak the same language, as reflected, for example, by the lexicon used to define the military takeover and the ousting of Morsi as a coup or otherwise. Moreover, the lack of consensus of what the term “nation” means and the role of religion within the state were also considered to be serious problems for stability.

The economic aspect of the Arab uprisings was also explored, as bread, freedom and social justice were at the roots of the protests. Participants mentioned that almost all economic indicators (debt, unemployment, inflation) have worsened during the last decade and continue to do so. Experts suggested that the region needs structural reforms. Today, employment is mostly still dependent on the public sector, subsidies continue to be a widespread policy tool, trade protection and crony capitalist tendencies prevail and the informal economic sector cannot give enough added value to the economy.

Panellists argued that in order to embark on structural reforms, a new social contract would be needed and focus has to shift from ideological aspects of reform to the economic interests of societal actors. They also acknowledged that current reforms are still not improving the living conditions among the population of Southern Mediterranean countries and that it is vital to gain the support of different layers of society internally, but also the support of external actors.

The Syrian crisis was at the centre of the last part of the session. Panellists agreed that Assad's strategy from the beginning was to internationalise the conflict and to "geo-politicise" an internal uprising by bringing in cultural and identity elements. Due to the complexity and plurality of the actors engaged, it was argued that the Syrian strife cannot be qualified as an Islamist revolution. However, it was considered crucial to implement security measures to protect communities and regions, as well as administrative and instrumental agreements, but panellists deplored the lack of external support for these democratic forces.

Regarding future scenarios, security issues, stability and rule



of law and institutional arrangements for the different regions within Syria must be addressed in order to avoid a failed state. According to the speakers, if an Islamist regime was to come to power, Syria would fall apart. Experts added that a federal solution never worked in the region and would not be suitable for Syria either. Whatever the model, speakers considered that it cannot count on the presence of Bashar al-Assad.

Working Session 1 - The State: Absorbing the Shocks of Change

The first working session analysed the role of the state in Southern Mediterranean countries and how it absorbs the shocks of change. Panellists referred to the fact that, in opposition to the “Transitology School”, which sees transitions as linear movements from autocracy to democracy, political change in the Mediterranean does not have a predictable ending point. Today, state-building processes embody different interpretations of electoral and consensual legitimacies, while distrust among the main political actors defines the political scene in many countries. At the same time, the state is unable to deliver structural reforms such as the dismantling of its deep state or the provision of basic socioeconomic services, while a fair balance between state and society is yet to be found.



The concept of revolution, according to the panellists, is itself an act against the state, tackling change in multiple domains, including the political system and culture. In this regard, experts debated the example of Egypt, where market actors did not threaten the control of the state in previous processes of political change in the 1990s. Change occurred in the 2000s, when businesspeople and market actors threatened the dominant elite and the state reacted by pushing back market actors, banning workers' strikes and engaging in ultranationalist discourses.

Participants asserted that even well-organised groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood are unable to fight the battle for the state. As Morsi was ousted, a security absence became apparent, the provision of basic state services ceased, oil and gas became scarce, and a weakening level of a regime resulted in mounting ungovernability. Since then, Egypt has been witnessing a strong comeback of the state, embodied in a lack of consensual culture of nation building.

The case of Tunisia was also explored. Experts agreed that the country is experiencing turmoil and deep political division. A breakdown in communications occurred between the two major political groups (the Troika-structured coalition government and the Tunisian Salvation Front) since the assassination of Mohamed Brahmi, a member of the Tunisian Constituent Assembly. Participants emphasised that there are several signs of mistrust. For instance, the drafting of the Constitution is taking longer than expected, while economic and social structures are in disarray. Furthermore, panellists stated that an obsession with the state in Tunisia has largely prevented the country from adopting durable solutions and a new paradigm for the long term.

Panellists also reviewed the role of external actors, who are experiencing a crisis of confidence due to the lack of positive effects of their intervention in the region. The major objective for Europe has been to support political and economic reforms rather than to review its neighbourhood policy. The EU has to identify

crucial pressure points to find out what its leverage on political and economic reforms is and how democracy can be delivered. Participants also pointed out that Europe has to rethink its conditionality approach, as Arab countries have other means of acquiring capital, for example through the Gulf countries, which are showing increasing levels of engagement in the region.

Working Session 2 - The Region: More Fragmentation or More Cohesion?

Fragmentation is not a recent phenomenon in the Mediterranean region. The second workshop of the EuroMeSCo Annual Conference started with this premise, with speakers arguing that today there are overlapping divides apart from the traditional ones, which often relate to Arab vs. non Arab, Shia vs. Sunni or Pro US vs. Against US. New fragmentations have emerged as a consequence of the Syrian conflict, the Egyptian coup and the policy towards the Muslim Brotherhood, bringing a more complex overlay on already existing coalitions.

Experts opted to define the region as fragmented, more than polarised, as a result of the new political cycle beginning in 2011, which saw the emergence of new actors and different forms of political activism. The impact of the protests varies greatly from one country to another, helping to shape a multipolar environment, instead of fostering regional integration.

It was stressed that it is necessary to rethink the concept of the “Arab world” and the idea of “Arab people” as a standardised mass with the same objectives. According to the panellists, the Southern Mediterranean region is more a collection of nation-states, forming ad-hoc coalitions on certain issues. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is decreasing in relevance, but it could be the last issue on which the Arab world unites.

Participants established parallels between the 1950s and today’s situation. While in that period, monarchies saw Nasser as a mild security threat, now they are



frightened by internal divides in their countries and a dangerous merging of domestic and regional issues. The main difference between the two periods is that nowadays external powers no longer play a pivotal role in the region. With Western actors taking a back seat, the Gulf, Turkey or Egypt could have benefited from the situation and taken the lead, but they have not done so fully.

Participants also explored the situation in the Maghreb as an example of regional fragmentation, with Moroccan-Algerian relations suffering from less cohesion than in the years preceding the Arab uprisings. Participants stressed that the Arab Spring could have been an excellent opportunity for Algeria to be more active and try to play a leading role in the region but, due to domestic political problems, decided to disappear instead.

Panellists also analysed the example of Libya as a destabilising factor for regional integration. Libya has become a theatre for external actors and Jihadist movements have taken charge over the national security agencies, while corruption and youth unemployment are still very present. In the eastern part of the territory, armed groups are the arbiters of power.

Experts also agreed that the proposal of a new regional framework for political cooperation should necessarily include Iran and Saudi Arabia. The EU should use its leverage to act as a catalyser and foster regional integration, with security not being the only area where cooperation is required. There is an increasing need to enforce democratic accountability, but also to implement more participatory policies. However, the combination of both a democratic and economic crisis in Europe, according to the experts, raises questions for the Arab world about committing to the EU's model of democratic development.

Working Session 3 - Society: Between New Actors and Old Demands

The third working session aimed to analyse the role of society in supporting democratic reforms. Debates among participants focused mainly on the transformation of civil society organisations and their relationships with the old political actors in Egypt, Morocco and Tunisia.

The Egyptian political landscape has been transformed with the emergence of new political parties, partly in opposition to the Muslim Brotherhood, such as The Constitution Party, or with an Islamist background, such as The Strong Egypt Party. New political coalitions have been formed, such as the Egyptian Popular Current, and other movements, such as Tamarod. The identity issue caused polarisation between Islamist and secularist actors and served the small parties that do not have a real agenda. In contrast, panellists agreed that the media landscape has not fundamentally changed since the revolution.

In Morocco, there is a difference between civil society and associations. According to the panellists, while civil society organisations have played a role in the reform of family and anti-corruption laws, they have not been active in the democratisation process. The main reason for this is that they are depoliticised and depend on the state. Moroccan civil society is therefore not independent and cannot counterweight the power of the state. Thus, it concentrates on public policy subjects and only 2% of it works on democracy issues. Because of this, new and extra-constitutional forms of protest like the movement of the 20th February have emerged.

The movement is composed of young, well-informed Moroccans and has three main characteristics: (1) it is a heterogeneous movement, which can be seen in its slogan “dignity, liberty, social justice”, appealing to different ideological movements (Islamists, leftists and human rights activists); (2) its demands have no limits and (3) it has a decentralised organisation. Although these characteristics can be seen as an advantage, they are also its weaknesses as

they make it difficult for the movement to adopt a clear political position, for example concerning constitutional reform.

Several participants agreed that there are similarities between civil society organisations in Morocco and Egypt, such as the depoliticisation of civil society in both countries before the revolution. In Morocco, as in Tunisia, civil society associations did not explicitly tackle political issues but, in the long term, they nevertheless contributed to political change. The role of the donors is also a case in point, often forcing civil society organisations to adapt their priorities to the availability of funding.

Trade unions had a very important impact in Tunisia before and after the revolution. Participants argued that a lot of trade unions have been founded since the revolution, but that they may have lost their political space when they have become politicised or cannot act unanimously in negotiations with the government. In Egypt, there has been a similar development from the monopolisation to the fragmentation of trade unions.

During the discussion, experts also debated why young people who started the revolution are nevertheless underrepresented in post-revolutionary politics.

Participants considered that although youngsters led the revolution and developed campaigns, they did not create political parties or institutions, thus suggesting a lack of institutionalisation among the new generations.



Plenary Session - What Implications for Euro-Mediterranean Relations?

The context of crisis on both sides of the Mediterranean is offering a good opportunity to

undergo reforms and renew the partnership and long-term commitment between Northern and Southern Mediterranean countries.

From a northern point of view, EU policies in the Mediterranean did not fail in their theory but in practice. Before the Arab Spring, the EU was not engaged in a dialogue with political Islam and based its approach on the false dichotomy between security and democracy. Participants suggested that in order to respond to the current circumstances, it is necessary to focus first on socioeconomic reforms, secondly on law and order and rule of law, and thirdly on support for freedom of media and speech.

The main challenge that the EU has to face is not delivery of policies but the lack of a strategic vision among the 28 member states, whose interests towards the Mediterranean area are very different. The difficulty in reaching a consensus partly explains why the outcome of European intervention is not yet visible, despite the efforts in civil society support and economic and regional cooperation. The suspicions of local organisations towards foreign funding also limit the EU's capacity to deliver support, while the increasing influence of other external actors such as Qatar, Iran or Russia, to name a few, decreases the EU's leverage.

In order to support civil society, more should be invested in capacity-building activities, departing from the idea that democracy cannot be imported and must



be built from within. Furthermore, the EU needs to engage with the reform of political frameworks in Southern Mediterranean countries to make sure that the new laws permit the inclusion and participation of civil society organisations.

Finally, participants suggested that building constructive relations between the EU and its neighbourhoods is not just the work of the European External Action Service. It is, rather, a transversal task to be included in every European policy, including the multilateral pillar of Euro-Mediterranean relations embodied by the Union for the Mediterranean.

This report was written by Tiziana Trotta based on the input provided by the European Institute for Security Studies. It was coordinated at the EuroMeSCo Academic Secretariat by Pol Morillas.