



Euro-Mediterranean relations: What went wrong?

Towards a long-term relation and the role of think tanks in this process

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This intervention focuses on tackling the methodology of the Euro-Med relations process rather than discussing particular events and incidents.

First, I can describe the approach to this issue as problematic since it is based on a short-term view built on risk and interest assessment and measured mainly on trade balances. With the US/Russia current hegemony, like in the case of the current crisis in Syria, wise relations should target the long term and be based on opportunities and challenges' assessments and measured on the capacity of cooperation and conducting dialogue between different stakeholders (not risk and interest). Measuring this indicator is a difficult job, but I think that the role of a place where regional think tanks are gathered like Euromesco is to work on such indicators that can lead us to a kind of evaluation that can reflect the horizon of the future more than current limited effects.

For instance, the Arab uprisings in the last few years have proved that the economic models supported by the EU have failed to achieve real developments and actually led to a retreat of socio-economic rights for average Arab citizens. Despite that, we have seen after the revolutions the Deauville partnership that supported and repeated the same models based on more measures towards free markets, privatization and foreign investments and of course austerity measures to cover budget deficits.

The afore-mentioned short-term view and the root changes on the ground throughout the last four years have led to a kind of inconsistency on the part of the EU on the levels of objectives

¹ An intervention in the EuroMeSCo Annual Conference, Milano, October 7th 2015

and interventions, such as the declared economic policies and the human right policies related to socio-economic rights, the commercial agreements, and the human rights requests. This period also witnessed the emergence of a north-south conflict on interests in the euro-med region.

EU interventions are among the most important external influences on public policy in the Arab world, especially on policies affecting social justice, such as economic policies of agriculture, commerce, industry, and employment policies. Arab-European ties take different shapes such as direct, bilateral relations between particular European countries and Arab countries, neighborly relationship between the European Union as a whole and an Arab country, European investments, or political and business relations. The European Union remains the Arab States' most important partner and that is why the European Union handles several responsibilities. First, EU economic and trade policies and relations with the Arab world should not undermine local industries and the shift towards industrialization or obstruct the growth of Arab economies, which remain fragile. Arab peoples are hopeful that the European Union would play a role in supporting development of the region, without deviation or political intervention and while involving conditionality in economic relations. They also hope that European interventions shall be characterized by honesty and clarity. In other words, if they really aim at serving the interests of Arab states, their policies should be tailored towards that end, but if the European Union's interventions are driven by the economic interests of European countries, they should not claim they are interfering in favor of Arabs.

Therefore, the most important thing to pay attention to is lack of consistency in European interventions, where there is a clash of European policies and targets. For example, there is an obvious contradiction between EU policies that support human rights and its plan to promote right-wing-market policies. It is possible that this inconsistency stems from an important conflict between the interests of European Union countries and those of southern Mediterranean countries, i.e. countries in the Arab world. Thus, the first and most important recommendation is that the European Union should re-examine their policies, taking into consideration consistency and clarity of objectives.²

Another EU strategy that is always hear from the EU politicians, concerning what is happening in the southern Mediterranean was the "Wait and See" method as a means of

² Heba Khalil, "Policy recommendation to the European Union: Towards a positive role to achieve social justice in the Arab world," Arab Forum for Alternatives, 2014, <http://goo.gl/z068JB>

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dealing with the fast changes taking place in that region. We have to admit that the process guarantees the results and not the results that create the process, and the waiting strategy rendered this relation controlled by reactions more than effective actions. This idea applies to the frequently-cited objective of stabilizing the south, yet we have to take into consideration that if this stability is not based on a real process of change that has legitimacy and fulfills the demands of the people of the south, it will not really be stability, but just a state of stagnation that will only last until a bigger explosion happens in the region.

In this regard, think tanks can play a role in creating a process of change and lobbying around it. It is worth noting here that EU and international institutions played a controversial role in the previous period where they acted as the backdoor through which corrupted and incompetent policies and politicians could return to the south under new names and brilliant titles. We thought first that it is an exit door, but after a while we found them returning to the stage to spoil the process of change under EU and international titles, and I hope that think tanks would at least avoid playing such a role.

If we go back to the balance between economics and politics, it was clear that the economic perspective of Euro-Med relations and the promotion of the global integration of the south were more dominant than the promotion of transparency and anti-corruption values for example. Striking a balance between such components is part of the role of think tanks and of course Euromesco can play.

Moving forward to another point concerning what went wrong, the word “relations” in the title was not very accurate since most of the process should be entitled “the role of the EU in the south of the Mediterranean.” The process and most of related discussions were EU-centered. For example, it was said that the EU is the entity that suffers most as a result of the Syrian crisis whereas any reasonable analysis would see that the most affected are the Syrians themselves as well as Lebanon or Jordan that have been receiving large numbers of refugees that are not proportionate with their limited resources.

A place like Euromesco should play a role in changing the channels of cooperation and coordinating between European countries and the south of the region countries by making it in a dual direction and not to repeat the same that is happening on politicians’ level, with the south demanding and the north enlarging its role.

We move now to civil society, which was really affected by this methodology that is mainly EU-centered and based on a short-term perspective, especially EU institutions that deal mostly with civil society organizations created in the south to play this role. A lot of independent and active civil society organizations in the south find real difficulties to reach these institutions despite the different tracks created by the EU through the neighborhood policy. Only few NGOs are able to reach decision makers in the EU. Meanwhile, the old figures of southern regimes are still dominating this space despite strong relations between independent civil society organizations in the south and their northern counterparts. EU institutions are still captured by the non-independent organizations in the south, which renders their agenda more conservative in the sense that it does not cater to the demands of the south which widens the gap between northern and southern societies. The Syrian refugee problem offers an example of the marginalization of civil society organizations in the south and how the issue is treated as a unidimensional problem. Civil society organizations and their networks should play an essential role to change this agenda and the figures representing it and provide alternatives that can help in a positive change that bridges the gap between societies of this region.

We are now near declaring new policies from the EU that I cannot see it except another trial in the same direction. We have to review these policies to see how we can interact with them to avoid the previous drawbacks and to benefit from the opportunities that they can provide. And here starts the role of think tanks of this region and CSOs.