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Europe and its views on the main Arab
issues*

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Introduction*

After the defeat of the Nazi-fascist powers in World War II, a first 'wave' of Far-Right movements emerged in Europe -as well as elsewhere- in the 'long 1960s' and especially in the 1970s' as a challenge to both the 'New Cold War Order' and to the emergence of the Revolutionary Leftist Movements.

In his provocative book *Where Have All the Fascists Gone?*¹, Canadian scholar Tamir Bar-On retraces the trajectory of the *European New Right* (ENR) from its post-WW2 formative years, to the most important developments in the subsequent decades. Bar-On aptly identifies the turning pointing the 1968 protest movement, as the ENS would emerge in the 1970s as a reaction to the growth of the post-1968 Revolutionary Left, beginning with the birth of the *Front National* in France in 1972, by founder Jean-Marie Le Pen (born in 1928)². From the outset, this New Right insisted on certain key-topics, besides a 'reassessment' of Fascism, such as an almost obsessive reference to identity (versus Left's internationalism), anti-intellectualism, Euro-centrism, and, in general, a conservative view of the world. From France the ENR spread – to some extent- to other Western European countries, like Italy, Greece, West Germany and Britain, and in some contexts – like Italy and Germany for example- an even more radical far-Right will embrace terrorism – against the State and against Far-Left movements- in the 'long 1970s' and early 1980s.³

The almost simultaneous end of the Cold War and ascent of Neo-liberalism⁴reinvigorated the New Right, and also prompted the emergence of a *nouvelle vague* Right and far-Right

*I wish to thank Rossana Tufaro for her research assistance and comments.

¹ Tamir Bar-On, *Where Have All the Fascist Gone?* Routledge: London & New York, 2007.

² On the making of the FN, see also James Shields, *The extreme right in France: from Pétain to Le Pen* (Routledge: London & NY, 2007).

³K. von Beime, "Right-wing extremism in post-war Europe", *West European Politics*, (11) 1988, pp. 1-18.

⁴ The best critique of Neo-Liberalism from a leftist perspective is arguably David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2007.

movements, both in Western European countries and in the post-Socialist Eastern Europe. Suffice here to point at the Neo-Nazis in former East Germany and elsewhere.⁵

After this brief historical background, the article will focus on the contemporary politics and ideological tenets of the European New Right, with a special comparative focus on the trajectories of France's *Rassemblement National*(RN) and Italy's *Lega Nord* (LN, now more commonly Lega).

Is the European Union moving to the Right?

The May 2019 European Union (EU) elections represent a crucial test for the political balance within the EU Parliament. As a result of the wind of populism blowing in the 'Old Continent' in recent years, right and far right parties are arguably expected to see their electoral consensus rise significantly. According to a recent projection by ISPI/IAI⁶, the political coalition which should see the highest rise (+ 62,2%) is represented by the ENF (*Europe of Nations and Freedoms*) block.⁷ Founded and led by Marine Le Pen (*Rassemblement Nationale*) and Matteo Salvini (*Lega Nord*) in 2015,⁸ the alliance gathers together five other parties, i.e. *Alternative für Deutschland* (Germany), *Partijvoor de Vrijheid* (Netherlands), *KongresNowejPrawicy* (Poland), *VlaamsBelang* (Belgium), *Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs* (Austria), plus Janice Atkinson, an independent candidate from the United Kingdom.

Anyway, the RN and LN together hold about 70% of the block seats, as well as the ideological hegemony over the rest of the parties. This makes them a vantage point to look at possible scenarios, among other things, for the Euro-Mediterranean relations. And whilst, in spite of the rise in consensus of far-right parties, the overall composition of the

⁵ On the rise of the far-right in Eastern Europe, see Michael Minkenberg, "The Rise of the Radical Right in Eastern Europe: Between Mainstreaming and Radicalization", *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs* (Volume 18, No. 1), 2017, <https://www.georgetownjournalofinternationalaffairs.org/online-edition/2017/12/22/the-rise-of-the-radical-right-in-eastern-europe-between-mainstreaming-and-radicalization>

⁶ <https://www.ispionline.it/it/publicazione/infografica-elezioni-europee-2019-come-cambia-il-parlamento-22319>

⁷ <https://www.enfgroup-ep.eu/>

⁸ See *The Wall Street Journal*, 16/6/2015, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/marine-le-pen-and-geert-wilders-to-announce-far-right-bloc-1434440594>

EU parliament should not change substantially, the success that these parties are having at a national level will reasonably have an impact already in the short term.

In this respect, Italy and France are particularly relevant, as both countries represent key actors in the Euro-Mediterranean relations, with strong and historically rooted geopolitical and economic influences on the major countries of the Arab region, as well on the wider Middle East.

In Italy, Lega Nord, since its access to the executive -together with the populist *Movimento 5 Stelle*-in June 2018, has seen its consensus rise from 17% to 33%, according to recent estimates. Likewise, the party is expected to be the most voted in Italy at the coming European elections, and it is already having the lion's share at the ongoing regional elections.⁹RN is also registering a growing success in France and, after 33% of votes in the past presidential elections, and 24% in the past EU ones, is expected to be confirmed as France's most voted party at the EU upcoming elections. Furthermore, with a Macron and *macronisme* in crisis, the party could possibly score even better in the next national electoral round.

RN and LN: a short comparative overview

RN (*Front National* formerly) and LN (currently Lega) come from two different political traditions. In fact, RN remounts to FN, the party founded in 1972 by Marine Le Pen father's Jean-Marie, as an emanation of the neo-fascist extra-parliamentary movement *Ordre Nouveau*. FN represented a rather marginal actor in the French political scene until the mid-1980s, mostly focusing on an identity discourse and a political agenda rooted in the European neo-fascist tradition. After its entrance in the French party system, FN reframed its nationalistic, conservative and xenophobic discourse in a much more populist sense, in the attempt to move beyond and away from Fascism. Such a process of 'cleaning' was pushed forward with much greater success with the rise of Marine Le Pen at the leadership of the party in 2011. Reframing nationalism and the migration and 'Islamic' questions in

⁹See <https://sputniknews.com/analysis/201902261072766701-sardinia-election-lega-right/>

economic, anti-liberal and security terms, Marine succeeded in widening considerably the party constituency, turning the FN/RN into the most voted French party at the European level and herself into the second most voted candidate in the 2017 presidential election.

Regarding *Lega Nord*, the party was born under the leadership of the *Lega Lombarda* leader Umberto Bossi between 1989 and 1991, from the union of six already existing autonomist movements in Northern Italy. A 'permanent' member of the Italian Parliament since 1994, LN had the independence of Northern Italy as central core of its political programme, later 'softening' and transforming its main objective into the autonomy of the regions of the North, justified by both socio-economic and cultural reasons. LN's rise coincided with the collapse of the so-called First Republic political order as a result of a judicial enquiries ('Tangentopoli/Mani Pulite') which disrupted all the major existing political parties, hence opening the space for the entrance of new actors. Despite the centrality of the 'Northern question', Islamophobic and xenophobic stances are part of the party's discourse since the second half of the 1990s. As happened within RN after Marine's rise to the leadership, when Matteo Salvini became General Secretary of LN in late 2013, both issues were reframed in less cultural/racial and more economic/security terms. This happened in parallel with the metamorphosis of the party from a regionalist to a nationalist one, which opened the way for an irresistible ascent of LN, culminating with the rise of Salvini to the Italian Vice-Premiership and the 'conquest' of several regions of the Southern and Central Italy, along with its historical Northern feuds in 2018 general elections.

In particular, with the change in leadership, the two parties have moved towards an increasingly convergent far-right 'populist sovereignism'. This opened the path for the formation of a tighter transnational political alliance, sealed in 2014 with the foundation of *Movement for a Europe of Nations and Freedom* (MENF),¹⁰ and the satellite coalition ENF the following year.

¹⁰ <https://www.menleuropa.eu/>

The basic ideological assumptions of the two parties are summarized in the five programmatic keywords of MENF, namely: democracy, sovereignty, identity, specificity, and freedom.¹¹

Whilst the insertion of *democracy*, i.e. the «conformity with the democratic principles and the charter of fundamental rights», and the simultaneous rejection by its affiliates of «any past or present affiliation, connection or sympathy to any authoritarian or totalitarian project» is the best proof of the huge effort of the two parties to clean their image from the heavy burden of the past, the main axes of MENF ideology are to be found under the ‘sovereignty’ and ‘identity’ captions.

For the New Right, *sovereignty* means above all the firm pursuing of ‘closed-borders’ immigration policies, and the consequent emphasis on borders’ defense. At EU policy level, this has resulted in MENF’s firm opposition to the Global Compact for Immigration signed by the European leaders in Marrakech on December 2018.¹² At a national level, this has found its major translation in the “Security Decree” approved by the Italian government in 2018¹³, enforcing significant restrictions on the humanitarian protection and the asylum right, as well as the reinforcement of the Italian maritime borders¹⁴ and of the controversial collaboration with the Libyan coastguard to prevent migrants debarking on the Italian shores.¹⁵ The same principle has been evoked by both parties to push for a restrictive revision of the Schengen Treaty,¹⁶ as well as to redefine the space of maneuver of Italy and France vis-a-vis the EU and NATO foreign policy¹⁷, in favor of an approach to Putin’s Russia. At the economic level, emphasis on sovereignty is being translated into the support of protectionist/corporatist and production oriented economic policies, a firm opposition

¹¹ <https://www.menleuropa.eu/platform>

¹² <https://www.enfgroup-ep.eu/global-compact-for-immigration-bad-for-europe/>

¹³ https://www.repubblica.it/cronaca/2018/11/27/news/scheda_dl_sicurezza_stretta_su_immigrazione_e_mafia-212803810/

¹⁴ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-44668062>

¹⁵ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jul/23/mother-and-child-drown-after-being-abandoned-off-libya-says-ngo>

¹⁶ <https://www.thelocal.fr/20170412/le-pen-plans-to-ditch-schengen-deal-for-france>

¹⁷ <https://rassemblementnational.fr/communiqués/integration-toujours-plus-poussee-de-la-france-dans-lotan-independance-nationale-gravement-menacee/>

to free-trade supra-national agreements such as CETA and TTIP, and, above all, the adoption of so-called 'Euro-skeptical positions'.

Identity, complementing the principle of sovereignty, is the second ideological cornerstone of the alliance, which implies first and foremost «the right to control and regulate immigration». This notion of identity is deeply embedded in the far-right mythology of the white and Christian roots of the old continent, and is particularly important to shape and reiterate Islamophobic positions, so to legitimize both repressive security policies on the domestic front (higher securitization of the public spaces, higher controls on private citizens), and closed-borders policies on the international one. The centrality of Islamophobic discourses and practices for both LN and RN clearly emerges looking at the space that the 'Islamic question' occupies in their speeches and political programs. It is not a case that support for the parties has significantly risen in concomitance with the increase of immigration from the Arab Region in the aftermath of the Arab Revolutions.

The New Right and the Arab World.

a. The Arab- Israeli conflict.

Following the recent 'tradition' of pro-Israeli alignment embraced by most Italian parties, Matteo Salvini has generally been sympathetic towards the Jewish state. His public support to Israel, however, has become more explicit in parallel with his political ascent into government. As a matter of fact, whilst until 2016 LN's support has remained pretty on the margins of its foreign agenda, since his first visit to Israel in 2016, Salvini has done constant efforts to consolidate his party's relations with the Jewish state. During the first visit, Salvini openly praised Israel demographic and defense policies as "a model to follow for what concerns security, immigration and the war on terrorism".¹⁸ The same positions have been reiterated during his more recent visit (December 2018) as Ministry of Interior, since the consolidation of the relationship with Israel was also part of his electoral program

¹⁸http://www.ansa.it/sito/notizie/politica/2016/03/30/la-prima-di-salvini-in-israelee-modello-sicurezza-_f3692753-52e0-4445-b2f3-787586db10b1.html

in 2018, by virtue of the latter's 'relentless engagement shown in the war against Islamic fundamentalism'. Israel alleged anti-Islamist engagement is also being used by LN as a major justification to bridge the contradiction between its engagement in favor of the defense of the "sovereignty of nations and people" and its pro-Israel alignment vis-a-vis the Palestinian question. The position towards the Arab-Israeli conflict has been clarified during an ad-hoc Parliamentary Question of 2015, during which *Legha Nord* rejected any unilateral attempt to recognize Palestine as an independent nation State.¹⁹ According to LN, no resolution of the question can be achieved without the dialogue between Israel and Palestine. Furthermore, the peace process cannot be separated by a strong contrast of Hamas. The positioning of the party in favor of a two/single or no State solution is maintained deliberately ambiguous.

With regards to RN, the leadership of Marine has marked a sharp change in the party's stance vis-à-vis Israel. Under the leadership of Jean-Marie Le Pen, the party –maybe for its fascist anti-Semitic upbringing - was characterized by a marked anti-Zionist and pro-Palestinian position. On the contrary, Marine has deployed a great effort in favor of the normalization of the relations with the Jewish state. It must be noted that also for Le Pen junior such a process ran in parallel with her political ascent. A first approach occurred in 2014, when she ran for President for the first time, with several FN MPs explicitly recognizing for the first time the right of Israel to exist and defend itself.²⁰ A stronger endorsement was then given in 2017, at the time of Marine's second presidential bid, when the right of Israel to exist and to defend was remarked by herself in an interview to an Israeli TV. Here again, endorsement is justified evoking both the ghosts of the Islamic terrorism and the 'holy right' to border defense.²¹

¹⁹<https://www.leganord.org/notizie/le-news-2/13791-palestina-mozione-lega-no-stato-sovrano-senza-intesa-con-israele>

²⁰ <https://rassemblementnational.fr/terme/palestine/>

²¹<https://www.europe-israel.org/2017/02/marine-le-pen-reconnait-pour-la-premiere-fois-aux-israeliens-le-droit-de-defendre-leurs-interets-nationaux-comme-aux-americains-et-aux-francais/>

b. The Arab Uprisings and their aftermath.

The European New Right parties, coherently with their ideological linchpins, welcomed with worry the Arab Uprisings in 2010/11, especially when the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) won the elections in Egypt in 2011 and 2012, and after the rise of even more radical Islamist forces in other Arab Uprisings countries, such as Tunisia, Libya, Yemen and especially Syria.

Lega Nord and RN stances vis-à-vis Egypt are deeply convergent. Having expressed a deep concern after the victory of Mohammad Morsi in 2012, both parties have hailed with enthusiasm the coup of al-Sisi in July 2013, considering him as a crucial partner for the maintenance of the stability in the Mediterranean. Both Salvini (2018) and Le Pen (2015) have paid visit to the Egyptian president. In both cases, the evident contradiction between the support to al-Sisi's ultra-repressive regime and their formal rejection of any «connection or sympathy to any authoritarian or totalitarian project» is covered, by evoking Egypt's engagement against the 'Islamist threat',²² as well as its alleged containment in the control of migratory flows. As in the case of Israel, the improvement of the relations with Egypt was part of LN electoral programme in 2018, in spite of its lack of cooperation in the achievement of truth and justice for the murder of Italian doctoral student Giulio Regeni in Cairo in early 2016²³.

Unlike RN, Lega Nord is deeply interested in the evolution of the post-2011 Tunisian politics, as Tunisia represents a key area for the migratory routes towards Italy as well as a very important economic partner. This is why Salvini paid an official visit to Tunisia in September 2018, in order to consolidate economic, migratory and security cooperation.

²²https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2015/05/30/marine-le-pen-en-egypte-un-pays-arabe-anti-islamiste_4644003_3212.html

²³http://www.ansa.it/sito/notizie/cronaca/2018/07/18/regeni-salvini-da-egitto-risposte-certe-in-breve-tempo-_c1f93b9f-e329-4866-833a-574fbb0a2390.html

The visit came after a moment of diplomatic tension between the two countries, opened by a declaration of Salvini in June of the same year, accusing Tunisia to send to Italy 'not only gentlemen, but also felons', and to which Tunisia answered with an official complaint to the Italian ambassador in Tunisia.²⁴

As for Egypt, also with Syria and Libya, the positions of LN and RN are very close. Indeed, both parties have been pretty critical of the French-British military intervention of 2011,²⁵ which have both condemned as severe interference in the affairs of another sovereign state, originating the current chaos. In particular, both leaders blame the 'regime change' in Tripoli for having deprived the Mediterranean region of a 'stabilizing leader' (al-Qadhafi), crucial for the containment of both the Islamist threat and the migratory flows.²⁶ The question of the management of migrants in particular is central for the Italian government, which has opened and enhanced several partnerships and cooperation projects with the Libyan authorities, also with the previous government (under the Democratic Party) in Rome, regardless of the blatant disrespect of human rights registered in the Libyan migrant detention centers. This partnership has been further enhanced by Salvini after his appointment as Ministry of the Interior in 2018, which has been the object of a new ad hoc mission in the country on June 2018,²⁷ further perfected with the visit of the Libyan vice-premier Ahmad Maitiq to Italy two weeks later.²⁸ This has been followed by a series of maneuvers of rapprochement of the Italian government with General Haftar.²⁹ This politics of conciliation has been read by many observers as an attempt of Italy to re-gain terrain over France after the Macron-sponsored Conference of Paris on Libya held on May 2018, which has marked a first rapprochement between Sarraj and Haftar, and between France and Haftar, and to which Italy has responded with another conference held in Palermo in

²⁴http://www.ansa.it/sito/notizie/mondo/2018/06/04/tunisia-profondo-stupore-per-frasi-salvini_1b2fe07d-dd3a-4d5b-a868-650f7b5405b1.html

²⁵<https://rassemblementnational.fr/terme/libye/>; <https://www.lastampa.it/2011/03/18/italia/l-italia-pronta-ai-raid-sulla-libia-si-bipartisan-ma-la-lega-non-vota-jdIXmtUGSfKs2nhp2aaphN/pagina.html>

²⁶ <https://orientxxi.info/magazine/ce-que-pensent-emmanuel-macron-et-marine-le-pen,1843>

²⁷ https://www.agi.it/politica/migranti_salvini_libia-4069759/news/2018-06-25/

²⁸ https://www.repubblica.it/esteri/2018/06/25/news/salvini_libia_migranti_visita_tripoli-199990527/

²⁹http://www.ansa.it/sito/notizie/mondo/2018/12/05/ansa-haftar-a-roma-il-generale-libico-domani-vede-conte_0f690fff-5a64-42b9-8243-f5d5a2be9ff7.html

November, where both Libyan leaders did participate.³⁰ While endorsing Haftar, Marine Le Pen criticized Macron's initiative for Libya, which she saw as another 'interventionist' illegitimate maneuver, especially for what concerned the imposition of elections 'from above'.³¹

With regards to Syria, both leaders show support for Bashar al-Asad, which is seen here again as a major actor for the contrast to radical Islam, the protector of Christians in the Middle East and, at a broader level, as a legitimate interlocutor for the political future of the state.³² In both cases, the implicit support for an Assadist solution to the Syrian civil war is justified by the logic of the 'lesser evil'.³³ Both leaders have shown a firm opposition to the US bombings over Syria, echoing Putin's 'politics of suspicion' vis-a-vis the detention and use of chemical weapons by Asad, and have asserted the centrality of the involvement of Russia for the resolution of the conflict.³⁴ Moreover, since January 2019, the Italian government is been considering the re-opening of the Italian Embassy in Damascus, closed in 2012.

It is worth mentioning that the 'ghost of Islamism' evoked by RN/LN to promote both their repressive and 'sovereignist' domestic policies, and the support of authoritarian Arab regimes, is quickly 'forgotten' when more important geopolitical or economic interests are at stake. With regards to Italy, a case in point is represented by the changing attitude of Salvini towards Qatar after his rise to the executive branch. As much as Marine Le Pen, Matteo Salvini has historically assumed very critical positions vis-à-vis Gulf-monarchies, particularly Qatar and Saudi Arabia, accused to be the major funders of global Islamic terrorism and of Islamist propaganda. Until 2017, Salvini sharply criticized Qatar on several occasions, up to the point of asking for the suspension of the diplomatic relations of Italy with the country in the aftermath of the decision of Saudi Arabia, UA Emirates,

³⁰<https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2018/11/19/the-palermo-conference-on-libya-a-diplomatic-test-for-italys-new-government/>

³¹<https://www.secoloditalia.it/2018/12/libia-destabilizzata-da-francia-e-ue-haftar-e-in-italia-per-salvare-il-suo-paese/>

³² <https://orientxxi.info/magazine/ce-que-pensent-emmanuel-macron-et-marine-le-pen,1843>

³³ https://www.lepoint.fr/presidentielle/marine-le-pen-fait-un-parallele-entre-bachar-al-assad-et-staline-07-04-2017-2118123_3121.php

³⁴<https://www.bfmtv.com/politique/marine-le-pen-sur-la-syrie-on-nous-a-deja-fait-le-coup-avec-l-irak-1417899.html>

Egypt and Bahrein to break their relations with Qatar.³⁵ During an official visit to Doha in October 2018, though, Salvini did not hesitate to praise the emirate as an example of democracy 'where Islamic fundamentalism has no place'. Economic relations between Italy and Qatar have in fact intensified in recent years, so turning the Gulf country into a strategic partner.³⁶

With regards to Le Pen, she keeps a strong critical position towards Saudi Arabia and Qatar, whilst she praises the UAE as an 'example of moderate Islam actively engaged, as much as Egypt, in fighting global Islamic terrorism'.³⁷

To conclude, the two parties here considered are arguably important examples of the European New Right, and maybe can offer some lessons to reflect upon. Firstly, it is clear that they are ready to compromise on some ideological tenets to reach power, both domestically and at a foreign policy level.

Secondly, at the Euro-Mediterranean level, whilst the xenophobic and especially Islamophobic domestic and continental positions can help explaining the support for the Arab Counter-Revolutionary regimes such as Egypt, as allies in the 'common fight against terrorism', these stances are increasingly blatantly contradicted by the ongoing convergence with the Gulf States.

The picture given above, with the rise of New Right movements in Europe and their convergence with authoritarian forces in the Arab Region, may be certainly gloomy but resistance to these policies and alliances is also increasingly active, in the streets and elsewhere, in Europe³⁸ as well as in the Middle East and North Africa.

³⁵ <https://www.ilfattoquotidiano.it/2018/10/30/il-qatar-fiancheggia-i-terroristi-anzi-no-salvini-cambia-idea-ora-che-gli-serve/4731611/>

³⁶ <http://www.ilgiornale.it/news/politica/salvini-sdogana-qatar-investimenti-italia-e-sostegno-libia-1595284.html>

³⁷ <https://orientxxi.info/magazine/ce-que-pensent-emmanuel-macron-et-marine-le-pen,1843>

³⁸ <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/25/world/europe/pro-europe-letter.html>