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The Future of Multilateral Security Dialogue in the Mediterranean: Lessons Learnt, Opportunities and Choices

by Eduard Soler i Lecha

ABSTRACT

The Mediterranean is currently facing a number of challenges, ranging from political instability and intra-state conflicts to economic and social disparities and uncontrolled pockets of criminality. Although the conceptualisation of the Mediterranean as a region is often disputed, this is a space where initiatives for dialogue, cooperation and integration have proliferated in the last two decades as an attempt to tackle some of those challenges either regionally or multilaterally in cooperation with external partners. This paper overviews the existing initiatives, analyses why some previous attempts have failed and examines the elements of the new context that could favour or hinder further attempts to revive regional dialogue and integration, by identifying potential goals and relevant actors to be involved.

Mediterranean | Security | Regional relations

keywords

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by Eduard Soler i Lecha*

Introduction

The Mediterranean is a space facing multiple challenges: political and social frustration, economic and territorial disparities, decades-long regional conflicts, uncontrolled and ungoverned spaces and strengthening and diversification of networks of illicit traffic to name just a few. Although not everyone agrees that the Mediterranean is in fact a region, this is a space where regional initiatives for dialogue, cooperation and integration have proliferated in the last two decades as an attempt to tackle some of those challenges collectively. This paper overviews the existing initiatives, analyses why some previous attempts have failed and examines the elements of the new context that could favour or harm further attempts to revive regional dialogue and integration. The paper identifies some of the choices that are to be made when promoting regional dialogues and integration initiatives in this area, shedding light on how to make the best use of the platforms that already exist and whether there is room for new initiatives, what their goals should be and which actors they should involve.

1. A catalogue of existing initiatives

The EU and its Mediterranean neighbours have been engaged in all sorts of regional cooperation initiatives, which sometimes overlap while in other cases complement each other. Some are focused on security while others include security as one among other topics on the agenda.

The classical example of Euro-Mediterranean cooperation is the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP). In 1995 the 27 countries that signed the Barcelona Declaration

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included a chapter devoted to security and political cooperation. The whole Euro-Mediterranean Partnership and even more so this political chapter have since that time been hostage to the ups and down in the Middle East Peace Process. In 2008, the creation of the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM) substantially altered the functioning of this partnership in an attempt to promote functional cooperation and increase the ownership of the Mediterranean partners. In parallel, new institutions were created such as the Anna Lindh Foundation for the dialogue between cultures, the Euro-Mediterranean Regional and Local Assembly (ARLEM) and a Parliamentary Assembly. Today, this framework brings together 42 countries (Syria decided to withdraw) and security cooperation is no longer at the centre of the agenda.

The same can be argued about the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP). This is a gradualist, pragmatic and largely bilateral policy that attempts to promote reforms, harmonizing the neighbours' rules and practices with those of the EU. Although regional security and conflict-resolution is not the priority of the ENP, its 2006 report highlighted that "if the ENP cannot contribute to addressing the conflicts in the region, it will have failed to address one of its key purposes".¹ Partly as a result of the Ukraine crisis, there is much debate in EU circles on whether it is time to conduct a serious revision of the ENP once the new Commission is appointed. This could imply reconsidering whether a single policy for both neighbourhoods (South and East) is appropriate, if there is room for even greater differentiation and also how these bilateral relations should correlate with multilateral and regional integration efforts. The idea of "more for more" is part of this approach but differentiation goes beyond reinforced conditionality. Differentiation means offering different things to different partners.

In contrast, the 5+5 initiative has security and defence as a priority and has been less affected by political turbulence. This sub-regional dialogue is an informal platform that brings together representatives from ten countries of the Western Mediterranean Basin (Morocco, Mauritania, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, Portugal, Spain, France, Italy and Malta). The first attempts to set up this framework date back to the 1980s but the first meeting took place in Rome in 1990. Some political obstacles, including Libya's international ostracism and Morocco-Algeria rivalry, made it difficult to move this initiative forward. Yet, coinciding with the slowing down of Pan-Mediterranean cooperation in the early 2000s, as a result of the Second Intifada, this forum gained momentum. Since then, this initiative has combined high-level political dialogues (including summits and ministerial meetings) with an increasing diversified agenda (defence, interior, economy, infrastructures, tourism, parliamentarian dialogue, etc.). Thus, this is one of the rare initiatives where multilateral cooperation in the field of security has taken place. The fact of tackling functional and often very technical aspects of this cooperation, the low visibility and publicity of these actions and the absence of the Arab-Israeli conflict

¹ European Commission, *Strengthening the European Neighbourhood Policy* (COM(2006)726), 4 December 2006, <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/en/TXT/?uri=celex:52006DC0726>.

in the agenda are some of the ingredients for this success.

In the area of security we should also mention NATO's Mediterranean dialogue. It was launched in 1994 and aimed at strengthening political dialogue, fighting terrorism, modernising the armed forces and improving the interoperability between the forces of different countries. Not all Mediterranean countries participate in this initiative: Egypt, Israel, Mauritania, Morocco and Tunisia are founding members, Jordan joined in 1995 and Algeria in 2000. This dialogue combines a bilateral cooperation scheme (NATO + 1) and some regional initiatives (NATO + 7).

The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) also established a Mediterranean initiative with a strong security component. The Helsinki process had already highlighted the linkages between Mediterranean and European security and, as a result, established a framework for cooperation with a number of Mediterranean countries: Algeria, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Morocco and Tunisia. Through this cooperation, the OSCE invites these six countries to participate in specific activities and fora, and organises annual seminars. Since 2011 the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) has provided support, assistance and expertise to the Tunisian authorities in the transition process. In parallel, the OSCE is developing relations with the League of Arab States (LAS) in an attempt to be a hub for regional and bi-regional cooperation.

This brings us to one of the oldest cooperation frameworks: the EU-League of Arab States dialogue. In 2008 the Euro-Arab dialogue was revamped with the organisation in Malta of a ministerial meeting between the members of the EU and the LAS and their respective institutions. Since then a small unit has been created to promote these relations (ECLASLO, whose headquarters are in Malta), some practical initiatives have been launched (in the field of electoral observation, crisis management or women's empowerment) and this bi-regional political dialogue has found a new life.

2. Failed attempts: lessons learnt

This exceptional dynamism in promoting regional cooperation has been confronted with many crises. Too often and for many different reasons pertinent initiatives were not able to deliver, or good ideas never saw the light. Yet, we can collectively learn from those failures on issues such as timing, ambition and leadership.

The first big failure was the deadlock in the Euro-Arab dialogue. This cooperation between the then EEC and the LAS, started in 1973 and it first collapsed in 1979 due to intra-Arab tensions, with the expulsion of Egypt from the LAS. But even earlier, this dialogue suffered from the fact that there was a mismatch of priorities. From an Arab perspective, the priority was to bring the European position closer to theirs regarding the Palestinian issue while, for the EU, the main goal was to develop economic relations and preserve energy security. In 1989 France tried to

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revive this dialogue but it failed again due to a new crisis in the Arab League (1990-1991 Gulf war). From this experience we can extract two lessons. The first is that divisions among Arab countries can damage EU-Arab cooperation as much as or even more than differences inside the EU. The second is that when the parties have too different priorities, cooperation is not only difficult, it can also create additional frustration.

The second failure was the attempt, by Spain and Italy, to launch in 1990 a Conference for Security and Cooperation in the Mediterranean (CSCM). This idea was modelled after the Helsinki Process at a moment when the Cold War was coming to an end. Promoters put forward the idea that it was necessary to avoid new dividing lines in the Mediterranean and that it was worth trying to establish a platform for dialogue and cooperation that could pave the way to solve old conflicts and prevent new ones. However, this initiative did not get enough support from key players such as France, the US and the then USSR and therefore remained a nice idea that never got implemented. Yet, arguably the ideas behind this initiative did influence the design of the Barcelona Process. The first lesson to be drawn is that good ideas need not only good timing but also the support of key players. The second is that even failed and unborn projects can leave behind a positive legacy.

In 2000, France called for the adoption of a Mediterranean Charter for Peace and Stability. In the framework of the first chapter of the Barcelona Process, the members of this partnership started working on disarmament and confidence-building measures, and even attempted to agree on this Charter. In other words, this was not only a French idea, it was already recognised as a long-term goal of the Barcelona Process. Nevertheless, the deterioration of the situation in the Middle East watered down the initial expectations and, following the Second Intifada, Euro-Mediterranean countries proved unable to agree on the aforementioned charter. This led the security basket of the Barcelona Process to a considerable paralysis and obliged the participants in this process to explore new possibilities for cooperation in the security field, mainly turning the attention to bilateral cooperation and a soft-security agenda (civil protection). A general lesson can be drawn from this failed attempt: missing out on stages can burn an initiative. It also confirmed that no matter how good an initiative is, tension in the Middle East can make it impossible to proceed.

Despite this failure, the EU tried to substantiate a Mediterranean dimension of the European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP). It was seen as the continuation of the previous Western European Union Mediterranean Dialogue and started in 2002 with Valencia's Action Plan, when the members of the Barcelona Process agreed to develop an 'effective dialogue on political and security matters, including on the ESDP'. Following that statement, the EU approved a document defining the aims and the mechanisms of this dialogue including meetings between the Political and Security Committee (PSC), Troika and the Heads of Mission of the Mediterranean Partners. Moreover, this document foresaw, in the mid-term and on a case-by-case basis, offering the possibility to observe or take part in ESDP missions, to appoint an officer as point of contact accredited to the EU Military Staff and to participate

in EU training courses. Very little has been achieved and only some countries (Morocco and to a lesser extent Jordan) have profited from some bilateral channels. Its multilateral dimension never came to life. One element that can explain this limited success is that the EU is not seen as the most relevant actor with whom to engage in a security dialogue.

Finally, we should mention the failed attempts to hold the second summit of the Union for the Mediterranean. In 2010 Spain tried on two occasions to gather the heads of state and government of the UfM in Barcelona. Why did the Spaniards fail while Sarkozy succeeded in bringing together almost all the leaders in the kick-off summit? The easy answer is that the Paris summit took place before the Cast-Lead operation in Gaza. Another interpretation is that for the Paris summit the leading force was a president (Sarkozy) while in 2010 it was a minister (Moratinos). Equally important, no vital decision was to be agreed in this summit. In other words, declining participation had little cost for Mediterranean partners while participation could have been controversial due to the presence of Israel. The main conclusion is that there is a summit fatigue in the Mediterranean; attempts to re-launch Euro-Mediterranean relations via summits will need the right timing, strong leadership and the impression that something important is going to be decided, meaning that an absence could have a political or material cost. If these conditions are not met, it is better to develop political dialogue in more informal set-ups both at a governmental level (Gymnich-type meetings) and through civil-society initiatives and track 2 diplomacy.

3. A new context, a new momentum?

The regional context will continue to determine the possibilities for success of any attempt to promote dialogue and regional cooperation; it will also determine the issues to be dealt with and the actors to be involved. At least the following twelve trends should be taken into account.

First, although political transitions in Arab countries have followed different trajectories, they share a common trend: new leaders tend to focus on domestic politics rather than regional or international issues. Some attempts to play a greater role (Marzouki's failed attempt to convene a summit of the Maghreb Union and Morsi's willingness to play a critical role in the Syrian crisis) have suffered from the lack of domestic and regional support and/or the need to concentrate efforts in national politics. Transitions will be long and difficult and, most likely, leaders will continue to prioritise domestic issues rather than regional and international politics. This is particularly relevant regarding the role of Egypt, which has been a key factor in the previous attempts to set up regional cooperation frameworks.

Second, citizens speak loudly but their voice is not listened to. As a result of the 2011 massive protest movements, citizens from Arab countries are increasingly active. Yet, with few exceptions (Tunisia) civil society organisations are not leading

the political process. This is even more accentuated in the field of foreign policy as civil society organisations are focusing mainly on domestic issues. Civil society organisations will not lead regional integration endeavours and governments will retain control over international relations. Yet, think-tanks and like-minded organisations can contribute to create awareness on the opportunities for regional cooperation and, even more so, the costs of the *status quo*.

Third, the Arab-Israeli conflict still undermines regional cooperation. In recent times the focus of attention has shifted from the stagnant Arab-Israeli conflict to other issues: domestic politics, the human tragedy in Syria, risk of state-failure in Iraq, etc. Somehow, the Israeli operation "Protective Edge" in Gaza has moved this issue back to the top of the international and regional agenda, reminding us that the evolution of this conflict is a key factor for any initiative intending to bring together Arabs and Israelis.

Fourth, the rise of the Islamic State (IS) can alter regional dynamics and force rivals to cooperate. Violence and sectarian dynamics in both Syria and Iraq, together with geographic characteristics and cross-border linkages, have created a fertile ground for the Islamic State (former Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, ISIL) to become a growing threat to regional security. Arguably, Bashar al-Assad has contributed to the strengthening of this group. Firstly, the brutal repression against Syrian civilians enabled ISIL to attract fighters and financial support. Secondly, until recently al-Assad's military strategy sought to defeat other Sunni opposition groups and militias but not to enter in direct confrontation against ISIL. This was linked to a strategy in which the IS threat would force those who wanted to topple the regime to re-evaluate their preferences. Similarly, al-Maliki's sectarian policies have given oxygen to this group and, indirectly, have also empowered the Kurds as an indispensable regional player. Although some regional actors may have tolerated or even provided indirect support to ISIL, now the threat has become too big and could spill over the borders of these two countries to affect also Jordan and other neighbours. What remains to be seen is whether this can provide the necessary incentives to regional powers, in cooperation with global actors, to create a broad coalition against the IS, given that the costs and risks for non-cooperation are likely to be high for all.

Fifth, there is growing concern over ungoverned spaces in North Africa. This has become evident in Libya and the Sahel but other incidents such as the In Amenas attack in Algeria in January 2013 and the clashes in the Chaambi Mountains in Tunisia in July 2014 show that there is an "insecurity continuum" in North Africa. Sharing intelligence and joint-actions against groups that operate in border areas is needed to deal with these threats effectively. In other words, cooperation with the neighbours and international partners is a must; this could be an incentive for regional cooperation. Informal and closed-door coordination may work better than heavy institutionalised and highly visible initiatives if ongoing regional rivalries (mainly Algeria-Morocco) persist.

Sixth, there is an open competition for regional hegemony. The Middle East is a

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region where multiple fault-lines converge and overlap. Rather than blocks, axes or alliances, the new regional order results from ad hoc and fuzzy coalitions. Among the key players there are three non-Mediterranean countries – Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Iran – but also a Mediterranean non-Arab country: Turkey. Arguably, the inward-looking attitude of Egypt under Mubarak rule left a vacuum that other players tried to fill. Syria and Iraq have become the main but not the only battlegrounds for this quest for regional hegemony, which most players see as a zero-sum game. What is more, these powers interfere regularly in the domestic politics of several Mediterranean countries, politically or financially supporting specific groups or communities. Thus, any attempt to launch a meaningful political dialogue on the future of the Middle East should take into account, at least, the views of Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Iran and Turkey. If Europeans are not ready to engage with these countries it is better to keep the focus on North Africa and assume that Europeans have no role to play in Middle Eastern politics.

Seventh, the EU crisis has prevented the EU from playing a more active and constructive role in this region. It has kept European leaders busy and only in very extreme situations have they found the time to discuss Middle East events and how to respond to them. It has also made it more difficult to mobilise additional resources. Should the EU recover from its multiple crises and should European leaders (including the new High Representative) decide to be proactive rather than reactive in Middle East affairs, there is room for a constructive EU role. In fact, one could argue that the EU could be a stabilising element in the aforementioned regional rivalry if it was able to create conditions for dialogue among these powers with the aim of promoting regional de-escalation.

Eight, Russia is back in the Middle East. After a parenthesis of ten or twenty years, Russia has rediscovered the Middle East as an area of influence and as a scenario for projecting power globally. Russia is a key diplomatic player in the Iranian nuclear dossier and has been extremely active in Syria as a supporter of the Assad regime and in the negotiations to dismantle the chemical weapons arsenal. More recently, it has also intensified cooperation with the new Egyptian authorities. The nature and intensity of the effects in the Middle East of the ongoing Russian-Western confrontation on Ukraine are yet to be seen. Engaging with Russia in regional dialogues could have an added value but it is also a very sensitive issue in many EU and some Middle Eastern capitals. The key question is how to decouple the tension in Ukraine from the need to join forces to avoid conflict escalation in the Middle East.

Ninth, the United States has not withdrawn from the region but refuses further involvement in Middle Eastern affairs. The American “pivot to Asia” is often mentioned when analysing the US policy towards the Middle East as there is the assumption that the US has no interest in putting more efforts into solving Middle East problems, particularly as it is less dependent on energy supplies from this part of the world. In this context, some of its traditional allies, namely Israel and Saudi Arabia, consider that they can rely less and less on US security guarantees and that the US could be tempted to go for a grand bargain with Iran. Precisely because the

US is not in a position to be the region's *gendarme*, Washington could welcome attempts by the European and Middle Eastern actors to de-escalate regional conflict and explicitly or implicitly support regional dialogue platforms as long as they are not perceived as challenging the US interests in the region.

Tenth, China, India, Brazil and the other emerging powers are likely to act as free-riders. Their presence and interests in the region are growing but they show little appetite to interfere in regional politics. China is dependent on oil imports from the Middle East but does not invest in regional security, which many qualify as "free-rider behaviour." In that sense, Brazil-Turkey diplomatic efforts on the Iranian nuclear dossier in 2010 or India's commitment to maritime security in the horn of Africa are the exceptions, not evidence of a new activism of emerging powers in Middle East security and politics. Although emerging powers do not play a leading role in promoting regional dialogues or cooperation initiatives, they benefit from efforts to de-escalate regional tension and, consequently, could back the efforts of other actors who proceed in that direction.

Eleventh, the Iran-West détente could be a regional game-changer. Since Rohani's election in June 2013, concluding a stable agreement on Iranian nuclear dossier has become a real possibility. It remains to be seen whether this can have further repercussions in terms of opening new avenues for cooperation between Iran and the West, a prospect which triggers anxiety in Israel and Saudi Arabia. If, as a result of the nuclear deal, Iran and the West rather than co-existing start cooperating, this could alter regional dynamics and shake up the existing regional order.

Twelfth, the region is particularly vulnerable to environmental degradation that could also have social and political destabilisation effects. Issues include shortage of water, global warming, natural disasters and food insecurity. The countries of the Mediterranean have to choose: either they compete against each other for scarce resources and resign themselves to being irrelevant in the global arena where these issues are being discussed; or they leave aside their differences and short-term interests to share resources and technologies that could increase efficiency and resilience to environmental degradation, at the same time forging coalitions, both inside and outside the region, to be more influential in international fora.

4. Dilemmas and choices

If the EU or other organisations such as the OSCE decide to give a new chance to cooperation in this particular region, they will be confronted with several dilemmas. In some cases there is room for hybrid solutions, but in others, a choice has to be made. The first question to be answered is a classical one: what to do? To start with, they will need to clarify whether the goal of cooperation is dialogue, or whether they want to go further, envisaging some sort of regional integration. A decision on this will determine the optimal level of institutionalisation and also the membership.

As regards institutionalisation, the guiding principle should be not putting the cart before the horse. Institutionalisation, particularly if members of an organisation or participants in a dialogue platform have open conflicts among them, should be the result of a successful and substantive regional dialogue. As regards membership, the classical dilemma is between a pan-Mediterranean approach and the sub-regional one that gives priority to areas (the Maghreb or the Gulf countries) in which the Arab-Israeli conflict is less present in the agenda. Another option is to revive the Euro-Arab dialogue, although this corresponds to a bi-regional dialogue rather than a regional integration perspective.

This might mean having to choose between building up a brand new initiative or reviving (even reinventing) an old one. The first option gives more room for innovation and there are no inherited burdens but, at the same time, a new initiative requires a stronger political investment and there is the risk of overlapping with what already exists. Proponents of new or renewed initiatives will certainly be confronted with the classical dilemma between bilateralism and multilateralism. There is no clear answer and, most likely, this will depend on the content of the cooperation. Moreover, this is one of the dilemmas in which previous cooperation attempts tell us that there is room for hybrid solutions. In 1995, the Barcelona Process created a multi-bilateral framework for cooperation. Since then, most initiatives have combined both forms and, more recently, some like the UfM have even introduced the idea of variable geometry in implementing specific projects.

5. Opportunities for constructive and collaborative action

The opening of a new political cycle in the EU, with a new Parliament, a new Commission and a new High Representative taking office, can create a favourable context for substantial review of existing policies towards the Mediterranean and the Middle East and for exploring new avenues of cooperation with other international organisations and regional actors.

The first step may be reviewing the European Neighbourhood Policy. Most likely the idea of having a single financial package for all neighbours will not be challenged. Yet, this policy review could further differentiate the strategy towards the South and the East and establish further differentiation mechanisms on a country-by-country base. Euro-Mediterranean relations are likely to remain the framework for strengthening economic and social links between the two shores of the Mediterranean. The idea of transforming the UfM into some sort of OECD of the Mediterranean should be explored. That said, the success of cooperation initiatives that include Israel will remain conditional on the ups and downs in the Middle East Peace Process. Thus, the key is how to make Euro-Mediterranean cooperation more resilient to crisis episodes in the Middle East. As for political dialogue, the EU could engage with all or specific Mediterranean partners in more informal and discreet formats, which would bear greater resemblance to Gymnich (informal)

meetings than to Euro-Mediterranean ministerial conferences.

This might also be an opportunity to explore synergies with other international actors such as the OSCE or the League of Arab States. The added value of the OSCE is that it has a long record in confidence-building measures and that key actors such as Russia and the US are members of the organisation. In parallel, political dialogue with the Arab countries in the framework of a revamped Euro-Arab dialogue, can be offered a second chance. For it to be successful this will require more cohesion among the Arab countries and the empowerment of the LAS secretariat by key regional players.

Cooperation among North African countries (including the Sahel) should be encouraged and assistance should be provided to fight shared security threats. It is often said that there is a need for a success story in the democratisation process and that, consequently, Tunisia needs further support. Similarly, one could argue that there is a need for a success story in regional integration and, with all its difficulties, promoting integration among Maghreb countries seems more feasible than in the Middle East. Stabilisation of Libya rather than contention of threats coming from that country should also be a shared regional priority.

Finally, Europeans should decide if they want to play a role in Middle Eastern affairs. If the answer is a positive one, the first step should be to promote a meaningful dialogue with and among regional players (Iran, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Egypt, Qatar and Israel) as a preliminary effort to identify if there are windows of opportunity to de-escalate regional tensions via diplomacy, dialogue and cooperation. The rise of the Islamic State and the need to put an end to the carnage in Syria are two of the issues that could push all or some of these actors to articulate responses to regional threats.

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