

THE EU AND THE MIDDLE EAST: AN EGYPTIAN VIEW

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Despite its vital interests in the Middle East and the link between European and Middle East security, Europe has once more, now that the consequences of the oil crisis of the 1970s have long since receded, ceded the 'management' of Middle Eastern affairs to the US. The European Union (EU) has accepted the well-worn statement that Washington holds most of the cards in its own hands. This tendency has been reinforced by the EU's lack of a clear, common policy on foreign policy and security issues for most of the past two decades. The EU has continued to refine its experiment in regional cooperation in economic and social issues, or what is termed 'low politics', but has not given serious consideration to the issues of 'high politics', first and foremost foreign policy and security.

The European Community's role in the peace process, which began with the Madrid Peace Conference in October 1991, revealed the degree to which it had retreated from political involvement in regional affairs, even as it was on its way to becoming the EU. Europe did not participate in the direct bilateral negotiations that discussed the issue of occupied Arab lands, the heart of the conflict, but limited its activities to attending the signing ceremonies arranged by Washington for agreements reached by Israel and other Arab parties in direct bilateral negotiations. This was the case with the Oslo Agreement signing ceremony, held in the White House gardens on September 13, 1992, and with the signing ceremony that accompanied the Jordanian-Israeli peace treaty on 14 October, 1994. Europe did provide economic and technical assistance to the parties directly involved to strengthen the peace agreements and increase their chances for success, but the countries of the EU played no tangible role in the bilateral negotiations that led to those treaties.

On the other hand, the countries of the EU have played a tangible role in regional multilateral negotiations, hosting several meetings and overseeing talks on its five primary issues of concern: water, refugees, the environment, economic cooperation, and arms control. Although European efforts had tangible, largely positive outcomes, particularly in the fields of refugees,

environment, and water, the Arab parties involved have not necessarily viewed them positively, for the following reasons:

1. Arabs have tended to see multilateral regional negotiations as an attempt to undermine the Arab boycott of Israel and inaugurate a state of normalization. Arabs have thus linked progress on the multilateral front with progress in direct bilateral negotiations that deal with the heart of the conflict: the Israeli occupation of Arab lands. In turn, Europe's focus on multilateral negotiations has created the impression among Arab parties that it is seeking to separate these two paths of negotiations. In other words, Arab parties have viewed Europe's role as a contributing factor in regional divisions over negotiations, not a priority among Arab states.

2. Arab nations believe that the EU could use its relations with Israel and the US to play a political role in direct bilateral negotiations. Nevertheless, the nations of the EU have made no real effort to involve themselves in these negotiations, leaving them completely to the supervision of the US.

3. The EU has preferred to completely distance itself from any political role in the Middle East, using Israel's rejection of a European role in the peace process as a pretext. Europe has repeatedly stated that if it is to play a role in the peace process, it must be accepted by all parties to the conflict, a remote possibility given Israel's continued rejection of any role save that of the US. With time, it has become clear that the EU will limit its involvement to the economic sphere. Besides attending signing ceremonies, the most the EU can do to contribute to a political settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict is to pump in various forms of economic aid to the concerned parties and supervise multilateral regional talks. Europe's surrender in this regard dovetails perfectly with US and Israeli policies, but it conflicts with the Arab stance, which would like to see an active European role given the continent's substantial interests in the region and the strong ties between security in Europe and the Middle East.

Failings of the Barcelona Process

Although the Barcelona Process has been extremely important in cementing ties between the EU and Mediterranean Arab nations, it faces a major problem in the EU's one-sided approach to the process. Despite its substantial interests in the region, its place as the main source of aid to the countries of the region, and the objective links between the two regions' security, the

EU has maintained an extremely narrow vision in its dealings with the area. In short, it has consistently sought to preserve its interests and guarantee its security by trying to avert dangers that may originate in the south, such as an armed conflict or a regional war, a serious economic crisis, political instability, illegal immigration, or fundamentalist activity. Its vision has not yet evolved to include the possibility of achieving these same objectives through cooperative means, by adopting shared Mediterranean policies that can preserve the interests of both parties to the relationship.

Just as Mediterranean Arab countries have a number of criticisms of the political role of the EU in the Arab-Israeli conflict, they are also critical of the Barcelona Process. Their criticisms can be summarized as follows:

1. The primary motive behind the EU's proposal of the Barcelona Process was its desire to minimize sources of instability coming from the south and head off any potentially damaging consequences for Europe. That is, the EU has seeking to avoid problems rather than reap the fruits of joint cooperation. Security and political concerns dominate the dealings of the EU with the countries of the southern Mediterranean. Through the Barcelona Agreement, the EU has been striving to achieve a number of security and political objectives that will minimize its exposure to crises stemming from southern rim Mediterranean countries. The primary objective is not to help the countries of the south overcome their problems, but to help them in crisis management, thus containing problems within a confined geographic area and preventing their export northwards. In this context, EU aid, grants, and the partnership initiative itself are economic means used to achieve political and security ends.

- 2 The EU has thus far controlled the course of interactions between southern and northern Mediterranean countries. Despite the various terms used to describe the relationship -- cooperative, participatory, or partnership -- in fact the EU has the upper hand. The EU approaches the relationship as one, united party, yet it wants to deal with nations of the southern rim on an individual basis. Although the EU is not responsible for the lack of any cooperative regional framework among southern Mediterranean countries -- at least between the Arab states of North Africa -- since the inauguration of the Euro-Arab Dialogue, Europe has undermined any framework for joint action by southern rim countries. It continues to believe that it can achieve its interests only by dealing with these nations individually. Even when the EU began to impress on its southern peers the need to forge some sort of regional cooperation framework, the proposal was used to justify its own tendency to deal with these

nations on a unilateral basis. Moreover, latent in the European proposal was the EU's desire to stimulate the process of normalization between Arab nations and Israel.

3. The EU is undoubtedly the stronger, wealthier, and more developed party in the relationship. It has thus sought to maintain the unidirectional nature of its interaction with the south: economic aid, ideas, and even theoretical frameworks flow only from the north to the south. Thus far, the EU has maintained this policy without opening the relationship to true interaction, and without taking into consideration the economic, social, and cultural differences between the two sides. The EU members, most of them advanced industrialized nations and long-standing democracies, tend to deal with the countries of the southern Mediterranean as if they were backwards nations that need to accustom themselves to playing the role of recipient, whether it is of financial aid, ideas, or theoretical frameworks.

4. In general, the EU presents its own experiences and theories to southern rim nations as a package deal, without bothering too much with the local conditions or the significant cultural differences between the north and south. This vision has created difficulties on a number of issues, including, for example, that of human rights. While there is no disagreement over the general issue, the south has taken issue with various details in the West's human rights agenda, for example, the issue of homosexual relationships and gay rights, as well as certain aspects of male-female relations. Although these are details about which there are no major disagreements in practice, the lack of consideration for cultural or civilizational differences creates problems, and these can be used to exert pressure on governments and public opinion in the south. Thus, the EU must reconsider the package it offers to southern rim nations, respecting the cultural particularities of these societies. This cannot happen until Europe sees the relationship as one between true partners, rather than that between donor and recipient.

5. In its relations, the EU does not distinguish between European nations aspiring to join the EU and other nations that only wish to forge partnerships or cooperative relations. Neither the EU nor southern rim nation -- Arab countries to be precise -- want southern Mediterranean countries to join the EU. Nevertheless, Europe has not made clear distinctions between candidates for the EU and other nations. While the political, economic, and cultural packages offered by the EU to each set of nations does differ, the nature of the relationship between the EU and southern Mediterranean countries needs to be further clarified and the distinction, at least in the cultural sphere, must be acknowledged. This aforementioned lack of distinction is clearly illustrated in a number of ideas proposed by the EU to the countries of the southern

Mediterranean rim -- for example, the European suggestion that Middle Eastern nations create a body similar to the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe. This idea was proposed at an early stage in the peace process, without stopping to consider the differences between Europe and the Middle East, the requirements for creating such an organization, or the general nature of relations in the region. Latent in this proposal is one of the most criticized aspects of Europe's view of regional security issues: Europe focuses on preventing conflict rather than giving the priority to resolving already existing conflicts. Europe believes it is necessary to implement defined projects to prevent conflicts and resolve them in the early stages; this is not doubt important, but it is even more important from the Arab point of view to reach a comprehensive settlement to the Arab-Israeli conflict. As long as this conflict is not resolved, it is impossible to imagine initiating any other program for conflict avoidance, since the Arab-Israeli conflict is itself the source of other regional conflicts. Moreover, conflict prevention of the European sort necessitates creating an organizational body that cooperates fully in political, security, military, and intelligence affairs, none of which is possible until a comprehensive, just settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict has been reached.

The sum of these shortcomings was crystallized in Europe's inability to play any effective role—despite its good will—in putting a stop to the rapid deterioration of the situation in the occupied Palestinian territories since late 2000. As the situation deteriorates, not only between Palestinians and Israelis but also between Israel and all its Arab neighbors, including those with which it has signed peace agreements -- Egypt in particular -- the EU has taken no noteworthy steps to defuse the situation. Nor has it demanded that Israel abide by its international agreements. The EU is still a prisoner of US policy in the region.

Future horizons

A close examination of trans-Mediterranean relations indicates that neither side is pleased with the policies of the other. The northern Mediterranean – Europe -- believes that the nations of the southern rim have not taken the necessary steps to strengthen relations and have not yet implemented the required economic, political, and social reforms. The EU complains of the slow pace of reform and the south's absorption with the Arab-Israeli conflict, unaccompanied by any similar interest in the idea of conflict prevention. As for the south, the Arabs in particular believe that the EU has not tried to understand the peoples of the region, and that its proposals are predicated on Western, European ideas that are at times inappropriate in the regional context. The slow pace of reform is for southern rim nations a

result of existing domestic social conditions. The south also feels that the EU has not played an active role in resolving the Arab-Israeli conflict, and it views EU policies in this regard as completely consistent with the US agenda. As a result, the EU is not considered an independent actor in an issue that has come to threaten regional stability.

Both sides' criticisms have some merit, but it is important to note that the EU comes to the relationship as an internationally powerful regional bloc, while nations of the southern rim deal with the EU on an individual basis. The nations of the south are further divided by differences in opinions, policies, and even by outright conflicts. Relations between Arab Mediterranean countries are not free of competition, with each aspiring to obtain special privileges from the EU, even if they come at the expense of neighboring countries.

Although past relations between the northern and southern Mediterranean have been characterized by shortcomings and reservations on both sides, the future offers many opportunities to correct and further develop relations. At the same time, it holds dangers that may lead to a deterioration of relations. The future course of the relationship will be defined by a number of considerations, outlined as follows:

1. Nature of developments within the EU

The EU is one of the most successful experiments with regional cooperation in the 20th century. The nations of Western Europe embarked on the experiment in the mid-1950s, initially focusing on limited economic cooperation before moving on to thornier issues of political and security cooperation. Steps were taken to include the entire continent by setting up a program that could absorb all European nations. Although efforts to expand the EU started in the early phases of European cooperation, the end of the Cold War and the elimination of the borders separating west from east paved the way for a greater expansion of the union that would include all nations on the continent. On one hand, the expansion process is, in and of itself, a measure of the union's success. On the other hand, expansion also gave the EU greater human and economic resources, as well as increased political cachet. At the same time, however, the process of expansion carries certain dangers that may affect the future of the EU and its ability to continue cooperative efforts in the fields of foreign policy and security. By extension, this may have an impact on EU policies in its relations with southern Mediterranean rim countries. The first phase of expansion will bring in six new nations to the EU—Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Poland, and Slovenia. The

population of the EU will thus jump by 100 million, or approximately 25 per cent of its current population. Gross national product (GNP), however, will increase by only five per cent. If the expansion process continues, 13 more countries will be added to the EU, bringing the total membership to 27, which will undoubtedly hinder the ability of the EU to coordinate its policies with the interests and opinions of all member nations. After its final expansion, the EU will include a diverse group of nations with different abilities, interests, aspirations, and concerns, as well as a different set of foreign relations. The union will include large nations who are members of the UN Security Council, like France and Britain; other large nations with a fascist legacy, such as Germany, Italy, and Spain; and a group of small nations like Estonia, Malta, and Cyprus with limited abilities and interests. In addition, the borders of the EU will expand to Russia, the Ukraine, and Belarus, and the EU will contain hundreds of thousands of Russians who live in Estonia and Latvia. The question is: how will the EU be able to formulate foreign and security policies for a region that extends from Portugal to Estonia, and from Sweden to Cyprus? Moreover, a number of nations that will join the EU have strong relations with the US, which Washington may exploit to manage its relations with the EU as a whole.

Historically, the Mediterranean policy of the EC, and later the EU, grew out of the interest of European Mediterranean countries like France, Spain, Greece, and Italy. As the EU expands to include all nations on the continent, the weight of these Mediterranean nations will decline even as new non-Mediterranean countries join. With the exception of Cyprus and Malta, these nations bring with them a different agenda. The current candidates for the EU are all Eastern European nations that are only partially developed. That is, they will need aid from the wealthier members of the union, which will entail a redistribution of the EU budget and perhaps a reduction in the funds allocated to foreign aid, particularly Mediterranean countries. Moreover, the nations that will join the EU are likely to focus on strictly European issues, which may limit the union's involvement in non-European issues, particularly those of the southern Mediterranean.

The current slate of candidates set to join the EU are known for their strong relations with the US, which is expected to give America greater influence over European policies, particularly when it comes to the Middle East. This issue is of prime concern for students of the EU, who have come to believe that the expansion of the EU will ultimately reduce its ability to act independently in international affairs due to the difficulty it will face in formulating common

foreign and security policies for a region that stretches from Portugal to Estonia, and from Cyprus to Sweden. This difficulty will be particularly prominent as regards EU policies towards the Middle East and the southern Mediterranean region. Most of the nations joining the EU have interests elsewhere, and several of them enjoy good relations with the US. They may thus resist efforts to form a European policy that is at odds with the general outlines of American policy towards the region, particularly given the deadlock in the Middle East peace process and the continuation of the Arab-Israeli conflict.

Thus, the evolution of the European experience with union will have a tangible impact on the EU's relations with southern Mediterranean countries, particularly Arab countries. This does not necessarily mean that all developments will be negative, but it is likely. The degree and pitch of differences will depend on developments within the southern Mediterranean region itself, which leads us to a discussion of the second dimension of trans-Mediterranean relations.

2. Nature of developments in the southern Mediterranean

To a certain degree, developments in the southern Mediterranean appear to be moving in the opposite direction of developments on the European continent. In addition to being a part of the Third World, southern rim nations have yet to see any real regional cooperation. Thus, we are talking about the relations between a bloc of advanced countries -- the EU -- and individual countries like Egypt, Tunisia, and Morocco. In addition, there are enormous differences between the north and south, which put limits to future cooperation and also restricts the ability of any southern Mediterranean nation to act autonomously in its relations with the EU. In this context, the primary determinants of relations in the southern Mediterranean can be stated as follows:

1. Continued economic, political, and social crises in the southern Mediterranean: All Arab countries of the southern Mediterranean rim are recipients of foreign aid, and all are in the midst of an economic transformation. In addition, these countries suffer from political and social crises, which restrict their ability to take act as equals in their dialogue with the EU. Although many of these nations, such as Egypt, enjoy great advantages in their negotiations with the EU as a result of their geographic location and regional position, this favored position is likely to be eroded as a result of regional political and economic considerations.

2. Absence of regional framework among southern Mediterranean countries: While the EU is expanding to include all nations on the continent, Arab countries in general, and particularly those of the southern Mediterranean rim, have failed to institute any sort of regional framework for joint action. Previous experiments with bilateral, trilateral, and multilateral arrangements have all ended in failure. Instead, we find mutually antagonistic, and occasionally hostile policies holding sway. Some attempts at regional cooperation, like the Arab Cooperation Council, have not tended to last for very long, while others, like the North African Union, have simply sunk into inaction, forfeiting any real role. The EU often responds to criticisms from Arab nations by saying that the latter are losing much by not laying the foundations for joint regional action.

Going further, the EU has begun to impress on southern Mediterranean countries the necessity of forging some sort of regional cooperative framework so that the EU is able to deal with them more effectively. The demand for a regional southern framework, then, is coming from the European side. Yet Arab Mediterranean countries' previous experiments with regional cooperation reveal a lack of the theoretical experience necessary to embark on such a project. All previous experiments were set in motion by decisions from above, and they have usually ended badly, resulting occasionally in a rupture of political relations. While there are several objective obstacles to regional cooperation, politics is the overriding concern, which tends to doom the projects to even before they have begun. Thus, regional cooperation between Arab Mediterranean countries is extremely difficult, since the process of planning and implementation goes against the grain of all previous experience.

In all successful experiments with regional cooperation, work begins from the bottom up and politics is not a determining factor of the nature of cooperation, which begins gradually with economic issues. After the experience takes root, the framework can be expanded to include wider-ranging economic issues and, later, foreign policy and security issues. In the case of Arab nations, however, the general tendency has been to pursue all-out unity or something similar, usually as an outgrowth of political considerations, without allowing specialists any say in the matter. Attempts at unity thus begin with higher political interests in mind, and they end with a rupture or deadlock.

To be fair, however, there are Arab experiments with regional cooperation, such as the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) that are motivated by purely economic considerations and do attempt to achieve common interests. Having been set in motion only after extensive study,

they have continued, though at a slow pace with a limited vision of regional cooperation. Certainly politics are not entirely absent from the GCC, but there are other, non-political bases for joint action.

3. Continuation of the Arab-Israeli conflict: The majority of European and American proposals for Mideast regional cooperation entail Arab-Israeli cooperation, while others are predicated on the collapse of the Arab boycott of Israel. In general, Arab countries reject all such proposals. The stance towards the Arab-Israeli conflict is one of the most prominent points of disagreement between the EU and Arab nations, and Europe's refusal to appreciate the Arab point of view is a major stumbling block to the evolution of Arab-European relations.

Europe and Arab nations have different views about the nature of a settlement to the conflict and about the relationship between a settlement and normalization of relations. In general, Arab nations believe that they cannot embark on any regional cooperation plans with Israel until the latter withdraws from all Arab lands occupied by military force in June 1967. For Arabs, normalization is a trump card to be used to negotiate a comprehensive political settlement to the conflict. The EU, on the other hand, feels that normalization and regional cooperation will help build trust between the two sides and will encourage Israel to withdraw from occupied Arab territory. This difference of opinion is the reason for the negative stance that Arab countries take towards European proposals for regional cooperation. While Europe has proposed the establishment of a regional cooperative security organization in the Middle East, along the lines of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, Arab nations feel that the EU is ignoring the objective differences between the European and Middle Eastern experiences. These differences explain why Arabs reject out of hand European proposals that involve separating multilateral negotiations with Israel from bilateral negotiations, as well as other issues like settlement and normalization, the establishment of a Mideast regional security organization, and the attempt to prioritize conflict prevention at the expense of conflict resolution.

On the whole, Arab nations feel that EU pursues initiatives that are closer to the American and Israeli point of views, while at the same time refusing to play an effective, independent role in the resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict, even if it is simply condemning aggressive Israeli policies. The continued failure to reach a political settlement to the Arab-Israeli

conflict not only hinders regional cooperation in the Middle East, it casts a dark shadow on EU-Arab relations.

Conclusion

The history of EC and EU relations with Mediterranean Arab countries reveals several negative dimensions, largely stemming from the nature of the motives that prompted Europe to pursue cooperative efforts. Despite close ties and substantial common interests, Europe did not begin to crystallize any policy towards the southern Mediterranean until the oil crisis hit the West with the 1973 October war, whereupon it began to pursue a more positive policy towards the region. When the oil embargo was lifted, the nations of the EC reverted to their former policy, which is sympathetic to Israeli claims and treats the region as the sole province of US influence.

When the EC, and later the EU, began to establish a framework for trans-Mediterranean cooperation, its objective was not so much to build positive cooperative relations through long-term programs in the interests of both parties, as much as it was to confront and contain the threats emanating from the south. While European aid does help southern rim nations overcome their problems, it must be reiterated that the primary European objective is to directly offset the negative consequences of crises originating in the south, such as illegal immigration, the drug trade, organized crime, and Islamist extremism. Thus do specialists in European-Arab affairs say that the EU approaches relations with the southern Mediterranean on the basis of negative incentives. That is, it seeks to avert the danger from itself without thinking of cooperative ventures that could solve the root of the problem. The same can be said of the Barcelona Process. Europe proceeds from a position that does not take into account the particularity of southern Mediterranean societies, and it does not have a refined understanding of the other side's point of view.

The future of Mediterranean relations will largely be determined by the EU's tilt towards the north and the south's persistence in pursuing relations on an individual basis. The continuation of the Arab-Israeli conflict also represents a major obstacle to the south's ability to create its own regional cooperation network or bring its own agenda or vision to the Euromed dialogue. It is nevertheless clear that the responsibility for the deterioration in relations between the north and south largely lies with the latter: despite the many shared interests that unite southern rim nations, they have not been able thus far to create a

framework for regional cooperation. As a result, they continue to deal on an individual basis with a bloc of advanced, industrialized nations. It is therefore logical that the European north would dictate its own agenda to the Arab south.

Any discussion about redressing the shortcomings in relations, and in turn, reforming the European role in the region, must begin with the Arabs. That is, Mediterranean Arab nations must take the initiative by proving their ability to cooperate amongst themselves and forgetting negative past experiences. By undertaking a careful, deliberate study of the European experiment in regional cooperation, Arab countries can devise their own framework to eliminate the shortcomings of previous experiments. They can open a new page in history with a fruitful venture that serves the interests of the peoples and nations of the south while also correcting the shortcomings in relations between the both sides of the Mediterranean.