

If Europe is to preserve influence in the Middle East and North Africa, it must move on from technocratic policies towards more flexible cooperation.

by Blog Admin

*The combination of the eurozone crisis and the Arab Spring mean that Europe can no longer count on a technocratic multilateral strategy to maintain influence in the Mediterranean, argues **Kristina Kausch**. Europe must now move towards more nuanced and flexible schemes incorporating greater bilateral and sectoral cooperation to fit the emerging political and economic geometries of the Middle East and North Africa.*



The EU's economic and governance crisis is widely regarded as harming Euro-Mediterranean relations precisely at a time of unprecedented opportunity. The EU has less money for aid, while European investment and tourism to the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) have slumped as political unrest stemming from the Arab Spring has curbed both investors' and travelers' confidence. Bilateralism and geo-economic zero-sum behaviour among EU member states have been on the rise. Inward-looking policy making on both shores of the Mediterranean has increased populism, decreased strategic foresight in foreign relations and lessened policymakers' preparedness to invest in long-term cooperation schemes. At a time when increasing political pluralism at home leads Arab governments to demand a more balanced, reciprocal relationship with their European partners, the crisis in Europe makes meaningful progress on some of the most delicate Euro-Med dossiers (including trade and visa liberalisation) highly unlikely. Paired with increasing competition by non-Western actors in the region, the ensuing deadlock is slowly but steadily eroding the viability of conditionality based policies.

If the EU is to preserve its influence in the MENA over the coming decade, it must come up with something qualitatively new. Beyond patching up existing policy frameworks, EU policymakers need to question the validity of the basic assumptions on which EU policies were built, the feasibility of the EU's proclaimed goals in the region, and the appropriateness of its current instruments and institutions. Yet, at a moment of uncertainty for both Mediterranean shores, political momentum to launch grand new strategies is arguably low. The crisis offers an opportunity for recasting Euro-Mediterranean relations in ways that seek to make virtue out of necessity.



President of the European Council Herman Van Rompuy and Tunisian Prime Minister, Hamadi Jebali, Credit: President of the European Council (Creative Commons BY NC ND)

voiding it of politically contentious

issues – the creation of the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM) – also failed.

The birth pains of the UfM exposed a recurrent flaw of EU foreign policy: creating institutional structures in the hope that a technocratic network will in time generate the necessary political drive. This is a misinterpretation of the successful genesis of the European project masterminded by Jean Monnet, in which institutions in fact served to implement a larger political narrative, not to create it. Like the building of the EU as a peace-making project, any

holistic Euro-Mediterranean integration policy needs to start from shared political ambitions. But over the past decade EU-Med policies have been littering the region with institutional structures and instruments with insufficient political backing for their lofty mandates.

Today the EU's idea of a homogeneous 'neighbourhood' is increasingly losing traction as the region becomes more diverse and less politically malleable to neatly fit Brussels' policy patterns. It is time for the EU to adopt a more nuanced take on the merits of institutionalized integration with its Southern neighbours. Both European and Arab governments increasingly seem to favour bilateral relationships and ad hoc multinational alliances over rigid multilateral frameworks under the umbrella of the EU. The electorates in the crisis-ridden North and the revolution-ridden South demand quick delivery from their governments. In this context, the tandem of the bilateral [European Neighbourhood Policy](#) (ENP) and the multilateral Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP, turned UfM) as the main vehicle of EU policy looks like a technocratic straightjacket.

This is not to argue that the two main institutional pillars of the EU's MENA policy should be abolished. The UfM can add value in fostering multilateral sectoral cooperation projects, performing as a kind of Euro-Mediterranean development agency. Similarly, the ENP should continue doing a solid job promoting systematic integration with those countries that still regard the cost-benefit balance of this deal as beneficial, such as Morocco or Tunisia. However, wherever it cannot deliver, the ENP-EMP tandem should be complemented by more flexible cooperation schemes to tackle shared interests.

Initiatives to complement the EU's heavy regulatory approach with a more nimble and effective multinational cooperation could take various forms. In terms of immediate security threats, ad hoc coalitions of key EU member states and institutions, Arab partner states and relevant extraregional players have already proven useful to help master the fast, co-ordinated response required in such cases (the international collective that formed the Libya Contact Group to support the Libyan Transitional Council being a major example). Sectoral cooperation in priority areas (such as employment, energy, migration, trade, investment and transport) could gain greater political impetus via regular but non-institutionalised inter-governmental conferences or dialogues. The recent boost to the 5+5 dialogue and its thematic expansion from security to a set of tangible economic and social concerns are a step in the right direction. Cooperation at variable geometry across the Mediterranean that can fit a net of targeted partnerships to the priorities and capacities of the parties would also multiply the opportunities to leverage EU member states' considerable connections and comparative advantages. Germany's role in promoting renewable energy via the Euro-Mediterranean Solar Plan sets a positive example.

While there is a need for agility, a degree of unity and coordination at the EU level must be preserved. Centrifugal dynamics must be prevented by establishing a number of safeguards, including the requirement to consult among all member states, report to the EU Foreign Affairs Council and involve EU bodies in all initiatives. Rather than weakening the role of the Brussels institutions, such agile partnerships would benefit from member states' political clout while involving EU actors at all stages and levels. In short, the EU must be more cohesive inside and more agile abroad.

Javier Solana was right in pointing out that the Union's 'unipolar moment of the 1990s has come to an end'. Turkey's creeping estrangement from the Union should offer valuable lessons for the EU to frame its relations with Arab neighbours more strategically. Other actors, both traditional and emerging ones, are more selective and pragmatic in their foreign policy ambitions. The EU's challenge now lies in transitioning from a Europe-centred perspective to a more balanced vision of interdependence in which Europe can preserve influence based on its economic strength and normative appeal.

An extended version of this article was published by FRIDE in November 2012 under the title '[Can the Crisis unlock Euro-Mediterranean Relations?](#)', with the support of the European Commission FP7 project GRE:EN: Re-ordering: Evolution through European Networks.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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