

EU and the Muslim and the Arab countries: Challenges and Dilemmas

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I would like to thank the Institute of European Democrats and the European Party of Cyprus for organizing such an impressive conference at a key moment for two of the elements that are mentioned in the title.

In fact, both the European Union in itself and the Arab countries are in a deep transformation process, of different nature, but which are essential for these two entity. An other session later will discuss the “Arab spring” and the different components of it, but let me say from the start: this is not the right expression, and I would prefer to use, after several months from the start of these incredible succession of events, and after one international war in Libya close to be ended formally speaking, that we are in front of an “**Arab revolutionary momentum**” . After 10 months, we still don’t know how the situation will evolve in all these Arab countries.

This is surely why we have been asked to examine Challenges and Dilemmas because we still have to understand how these popular movements will result. Let me first make 3 preliminary remarks:

1. I am not at all a specialist of Muslim, and not an expert of Arab countries. I am only and simply an observer from Paris. And I don’t speak Arab, so my primary sources are in French, Italian and English.
2. I am not an academic by profession (sociologist, historian or politist), but I use to be at the junction of the academic world and the politicians (mainly in the world of the think tanks). So I use to look to the world, integrating various dimensions based on my previous professional experiences.
3. Finally, I am not speaking from any particular institution, after three years at the direction of the German Marshall Fund of the US, in Paris office which has been closed last July for budgetary constraints.

So why I am here with so many distinguished expert ? Maybe as member of the scientific committee of the IED, a European foundation sustained by the European parliament.

The title of the first session is also the title of the conference. Let me presume that the two following sessions will be focused, with some concrete data and facts, with experts from the countries, so it gives me the freedom to be more general. And to bring to the debate some considerations on what kind of relations between these two geographical regions of the world linked by a common sea are going to be, in function of what kind of elements.

The European continent and the Arab world have established specific relations in the last centuries and have built numerous exchanges and common grounds, which had positive aspects but some still negative persist. I will absolutely not enter in an archaeology of what has been done by such country or the other overseas and consider all the consequences of the colonialism but most of the European countries have still a responsibility and a common destiny with the Arab countries. Where we are going now? What has to be done in order to benefit each other from the possible collaborations?

My first part will consider the current situation in the European Union. Then I will have a look to the Arab world and then in a third part, I will mention some challenges and potential dilemmas between the two areas.

1. The State of the European Union: An existential crisis

It seems to me impossible to start our works and to understand what may happen (or what may not happen) in the near future if we don't explain what is the current agenda of the European leaders, and what is the state of the European Union.

1.1. Economy first

As you know, a European Council, the 27 head of state and governments, is taking place this Sunday and an other one will take place next Wednesday. This is something which is extraordinary to convene twice in four days 27 national leaders.

Yesterday President Obama, PM Cameron, Chancellor Merkel and President Sarkozy had a video conference, not just to congratulate briefly themselves each other concerning the death of Mohamar Gaddafi, but taking more time to try to find a solution to the Eurozone crisis, which may put at risk the European Union in itself. Such a European crisis would have impact on all the other part of the world, increasing, reinforcing the International financial and economics crisis already existing.

This International coordination is imperative in order to make sure that the G20 which will take place November 3 and 4th in France could put some stability in a very volatile economic context. The United States, the big emerged countries such as China, India, India, Brazil have all asked to Europe to put some order in their economic situations.

I don't want to insist on the different phases of this current situation, but to summarize very briefly, for the last months, we have assisted on a world stage at a battle between international markets and the politics in many places.

Everything start, at a low scale in Greece 18 months ago where the Greek government explained that the country was not able to reimburse public debts and loans. This sovereign debt aspect was the second step after an international bank quasi collapse started in the US and the sub-primes. From one incapacity to answer the markets, to other countries which had similar incapacity to tackle public deficits, this is the eurozone which is under attack.

The objective is now to consolidate, integrate more the European economies, starting because this is easier with the 17 countries sharing the same currency, the euro. Despite important difficulties in a certain number of countries in particular in Germany, solidarity between the members will prevail because otherwise the euro as a common currency will continue to be challenged by the markets and Europe may disappear as a key player from the global stage.

As the main European leaders have said, the Euro will survive because this a political project, a real and strong commitment for the countries which had decided to poll together some pieces of their sovereignty. Not enough. But coming back now would be impossible. So this political message has been sent to the markets, several times. But not enough quickly, not enough strongly, not enough clearly!

Mentioning this economic situation is not important uniquely for the mobilization of the leaders. It has a clear impact on the available resources. With an economic crisis, foreign aid, development, generous contributions low down, do not exist anymore. So the Arab world will be impacted by this economic situation of the European Union.

1.2. The Schengen alerts

Second important front, the European Union has been pushed in the spring by two countries close to the “Arab revolutionary momentum”, Italy and France, to engage a strong debate on one of the key freedom of the EU: the free movement of persons. The main concern was the immigration flux mainly from Tunisia and Libya to Lampedusa island. A silly game between the two countries and a border question put for few days in danger this key success of the EU. At the same time, Denmark was doing the same with Germany, closing its borders between them in order to prevent a flux of immigrants. Hopefully, the new PM, Helle Thorning Schmidt has changed this decision that last week.

But this is not the first time that the French President Nicolas Sarkozy put the immigration issue at the top of his agenda and at the European’s one. In September 2010, the exchanges with President Barroso, and the European Commissioner for Justice and Human rights, Viviane Reeding related to the Rom issue, and more precisely the articulation of national policies and the European level has been also a complicate time for the EU. Who was entitled to define, to decide the immigration policy within the Schengen space: still a member state or the EU according the common agreed rules?

After a lot of debates among all the stakeholders, the conclusions of the European Council last June 2011 reinsured the European Commission and the Member States to reinforce the political governance of the immigration policy. In addition, the MS agreed to prepare the common elements to build a common European asylum policy which was still missing.

Again a lack of trust between the countries, considering that each country of the Schengen space is responsible for the immigration of all the other members. But do we implement the same criteria? Could we continue to trust each other in all circumstances? What does it mean solidarity between Members States?

Important decisions have been made to reinforce and give more tools to Frontex, the European agency in charge of the control of the borders, and a clearer mandate to cooperate with the different MS. Obviously, the need to have in addition more specific bilateral partnerships between the EU and the Southern countries was mentioned as a tool to be used more systematically.

1.3. A political fragmentation, and a clear political orientation in the European countries

The third element to consider, both at national and European levels, is the evolution of our political systems. The democratic process is becoming more and more complex and in a certain manner, less efficient. Secondly, the political orientation of most of the European countries is obviously a concern, in particular for the design of some policies of the European Union.

First, we can observe a multiplication of coalitions in power. Germany, UK, Italy, Spain, Belgium, Denmark, Netherlands, etc. are countries where the decision making process is affected by the necessity for the coalitions in power to conciliate, negotiate their actions. Consequently, the decision making process is becoming slow in itself, fruit of long compromises and which sometimes impede to get clear solutions. We observe the difficulty for Chancellor Merkel to take quick decisions because of the weight of her coalition member, the FDP.

We could see the reluctance of the Italian PM Berlusconi to take some decisions, partly because of the political position assumed by Umberto Bossi, the leader of La Ligua, on the immigration policy or at the European level. And we could find a lot of other examples in the Member States of the European Union where the coalition in power is a permanent negotiation.

This first observation has to be considered also in the light of the complexity of the decision making process at the European Union. Since the EU is 27 Member States (and will continue to increase with the Balkans), the whole decision making process has been more complicate to manage. Despite Treaty changes and in particular the Lisbon Treaty, the European decision making is often described by the politicians themselves as slow and inefficient.

Let's take the example of the package which concerns the reform of the European Financial Stability Facility. Decided last July 21st, it has been finally approved by the last of the 27 MS last week. Three months between the decision agreed by the European council and the moment where it could be finally implemented. When you consider that the markets are working instantly, you can understand the inefficiency of the unanimity vote.

In a close future, this decision making model may evolve again in order to give the European political institutions the capacity to react more quickly if necessary. Some officials are already thinking of a new treaty arrangements to overcome these real difficulties to act.

This may also explain why some countries (France and Germany) are more and more often deciding in bilateral before proposing to the other European partners the agreement which has been reached. Not sure that is the best way to manage national susceptibilities and what the European Union is about.

Second element to be mentioned when you observe the political panorama in Europe, is the political colour of our governments! The blue is largely dominant. A majority of Prime ministers in exercise, elected, perfectly legitimized, are coming from the centre right or the conservative ranks. For these parties, very often, the immigration policy is one of the key point of their manifesto. And usually, in front of the globalization, to get more votes, they usually tend to propose first and then to implement policy solutions which are less inclusive than other parties. The economic situation and the unemployment rates everywhere on the European continent tend to put under stress European citizens which react being less generous.

At the European level, we can observe the same conservative trend (President of the European Council, President of the European Commission, President of the European Parliament, and the majority of the European commissioners).

Without being oversimplifying the panorama, one of the result of this general framework is that in our European countries, our Muslim community may be more often put on the spot in different ways. To get the national citizenship, to gain some electoral rights, to have access to the welfare state or to practice their religion, this may be more complicated.

2. The Arab world in a dynamic perspective: work in progress

We are in front of a huge historical transformation of the Arab world. A vast geographical zone which is surely the most complicated, complex, ambiguous, strategic region of the world, including the Maghreb (Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya), Mashreq (and in particular Egypt, Lebanon, Syria, Jordan) and then the Arabic Peninsula (Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Emirates, Oman, Qatar and Yemen).

Even if I am not going to develop more this point, this is necessary to keep in our mind the Israelo-palestinian conflict at the centre of all the tensions for more than 60 years, which is far to be resolved.

I mention in my introduction the expression **Arab revolutionary momentum** rather than Arab Spring. This is indeed a key step from authoritarian regimes to new regimes which are taking place in live in front of our eyes.

After Tunisia, and Egypt, Libya are out from long term dictatorship. Other countries from this region are still in a terrible democratic transition situation: Syria, and Yemen mostly, where we do not know how these popular revolts will end. And some other states which are still a question mark such as Iraq (where the American troops -39 000 soldiers- are withdrawing before the end of this year as Obama announced officially few days ago), Bahrain (where the Saudi Arabia is much more than “controlling” the process). This a whole region in big transformation.

The processes are profoundly different in all the countries, with specificities due to their history, the form of their institutions, the communities and the weight of the different religions. But what is remarkable, is that these revolutionary processes are the fruit of internal forces, this is mainly a transformation from inside.

Not against an external enemy such as the US, Israel or against a Western ideology. But the social movements are more focused against the way their societies were institutionally organized, the

bad economic development, the corruption of the system, the absence of justice and the poor political participation of the citizens.

At a first glance, the societies of the Arabic countries want to participate also to the dynamics of the globalization, to benefit the numerous aspect of the market economy, being more inclusive in the democratic process. The young generations want to see their societies modernize.

2.1. Could some European experiences be useful to understand these transformations?

Could we look in our own past to find potential comparison of revolution in order to understand how these social revolts will evolve? As a French citizen, my first idea will be to see if the French revolution could tell us something on this evolution. Not sure that we could compare the centuries and the circumstances, but we should keep in mind that revolutionary momentum could be very long, even in a very simple context like the French one at the end of the XVIIIeme. After 1789 and the nice principles of the Human Rights declaration, we had the terror period in 1793, before having other attempts to write and adopt a Constitution satisfying everybody. After the naïve period, the terror in a quest for absolute, we get also the Napoleon episode which despite all the superb reforms undertaken, was not considered as an example of democrat. The context seems so different in term of the economy, social composition of the society, institutional framework, and some issues which were partly resolved in France at this time, or almost less essential, such as the religious question.

Other revolutions such as the Russian in 1917, or even the more recent democratic transition took place in very different context (Spain, Greece) which does not help us more to imagine what could be the path for these Arab countries.

In comparison, even the Berlin wall fall and the end of the soviet communism seem so much "simple" in the interpretations, with less parameters to put in the democratic software that each country will have to find in this Arab region. In the East revolution, almost four major differences with what we are experimenting in the South could be mention: the first is one unified ideology in place which is rejected (communism), second a very similar institutional framework to be changed, thirdly an homogeneous culture and finally, a potential attractive political target (the accession to the European Union). Four strong parameters which are not applying for the Arab countries.

2.2. Value drivers?

So if do we have to consider the revolutionary processes in themselves, me may look for the key principles, the values which are behind the revolutions mentioned which seems to have been also behind what we are considering in the Arab countries.

Human rights

This is of course the first step, meaning that every single human being should have the equality of treatment, not only in the constitution, but also in practice. Not far from the conception of the Human rights, the human dignity. And this recognition is often the first request.

Along this first basic request, one crucial issue which will be at the top of the revolutionary momentum and which will need to be resolved is the rights of women. What will be the place of the women in the new emergent societies? In some Arabic countries, equality between men and women seem impossible. In some other, before the revolution such in Tunisia for ex., the women were not suffering specific discrimination. How this will evolve?

Even if we still have some progress to make in the European Union countries (not in term of rights but in practice), are we going to have a clear recognition that in 2011, in the world, men and women should be treated in the same way, should have the same rights. To vote, to work, to be elected, to decide at the same level than the men. Is it possible that one voice is one vote whatever the gender?

Freedom

Could we make sure that the citizens on a specific territory will be free to circulate, to express their say ? Could we guarantee by the law these rights? Could we make sure that the judiciary system will be free from political pressures? What about the freedom to express their political opinion? To organize themselves in political parties? And the right of the journalists?

Democratic institutions

The democratic institutions (government, organisation of the state and the administration) should be conceived and build in order to make sure that these universal principles are respected and inclusive. This is not obvious and this period of transformation is manly about that.

Take the Tunisian case with the Constituent assembly to be elected Oct.23 (Tomorrow). This is the first real free elections since the independence from France in 1956. Islamist-leaning Al Nahda (renaissance) party lead by a 70 years old leader Rachid Ghannouchi, coming from exile is quite popular in a liberal country in the Islam world. He presents his party as an Islamic party similar to the AKP in Turkey. 11 000 candidates in more than 100 political parties. 217 seats in a constituent assembly that will draw up a new constitution, and choose a new President. Tunisians outside the country have the possibility also to vote.

Democracy should have a better chance in this country than anywhere else in the Arab world: well-developed middle class, high literacy rate, civil society and relatively homogeneous population and laws protecting women' rights. Let's see how it will work.

Social Justice

Making sure that there is a equal treatment whatever your community, your ethnic origin. All the citizens should have the same opportunities and the same treatment in front of the institutions, the justice. The economic development should be also fairly redistributed.

Rule of law and the respect of the minorities

This is a major topic, in particular in countries where the number of communities is important. The risk of comnautarization is extremely high in different countries such as Syria. Or still in Lebanon the weight of the community is a key element in the society. Christians and Muslims together living in a peaceful manner in Egypt. This is not so obvious after more than 24 Christians died few days ago, after a rally. But the religion is one of the key element to understand the moves of the countries.

These principles, and many other are not new. But in the constitution drafting moment, all these parameters should be integrated in such a manner that no one has the impression to be less important than a community which is majoritarian or more important.

This is a key question: what kind of relation between the religions and the State? Any possibility to have rules where the faith could be accepted on the private dimension only? This will be a major challenge for these countries.

3. What are the main challenges for good relations between EU and the Arab countries are not able to establish?

Among so many challenges, this is maybe not the right order, but let's consider that they need to be done in a parallel way.

3.1. Economic dimension and some mutual interest

Again, difficult to put all the Arab countries in the same basket (what are the common characteristics between the economies of the Qatar and Tunisia). But these countries are already economic partners of the EU, with multiple bilateral or multilateral agreements. They are powerful markets for the European Union. In a region (Europe) where the economic growth is about 1.5%, it should be cleaver to facilitate the economic exchanges of all products as it will be good for the EU as it will help to develop countries still looking for new investments. Again Europe is not anymore the most competitive economic challenger (possible to compete with the Chinese), but some niches are obvious.

Let's take some elements from the example of Tunisia, where the elections are taking place tomorrow. The European union has announced a special contribution of 4 billions euro (loans and aids) in order to sustain and encourage the economic activity of the country between 2011 and 2013. The EU is also keen to renegotiate trade agreements of free exchanges which were based on the association agreement of 1998. But no agricultural products were included in these agreements because some of the European countries were afraid about the potential supposed unfair competition. These agreements were enough for the previous leaders but now, we have to imagine more dynamic and useful agreements.

3.2. Human dimension and in particular the immigration challenge

This is of mutual interest to establish common precise rules for a better circulation of people between the countries. Concrete agreements are important in order to control these movements for the good of everybody.

First because this is the right message to send to our Muslim community already living peacefully in our European countries. This community is a strong part of our European societies: 10% in France for instance, where Islam is the second religion of the country. With fair rules, we will send a clear message to our communities, showing that the EU is not a Christian club.

But secondly, because this is also essential for these young societies to keep the brains there in order to develop their economies and societies. The Arab world is a young population. We need to find the right movements, flux, between our societies.

As we have already mentioned, the populist mvts in Europe are extremely powerful, sometimes in power (Italy with the League, in Netherlands, in Sweden) and still able to put pressure on all the other democratic parties such as extreme right in France obliging President Sarkozy to consider their agenda as important to capture at the same time than the votes.

And the EU is the best tool for putting in place the best rules between the North and the South. The new EU southern partnership is one of the instrument that has been presented in the past weeks and should offer new common agreed decisions.

3.3. The security dimension: a destabilizing factor?

This is maybe where the Europeans were the more hypocrite in front of the previous regimes.

The stability of these old regimes in place was a kind of guarantee for the European countries. In order to be preserved from immigration or fundamentalism, the European countries were quite satisfied by the old, authoritarian powers in place. The deal was clear: we don't scrutinize too much your political system and what you're doing at the condition that you preserve our borders, and you guarantee us stability on your side, without fundamentalism.

Even the French Foreign Affairs minister Alain Juppé recognized that we were slow to understand the democratic demands, because our interest were clearly on a known and identified situation rather than instable one where you don't know what will be the consequences on your own territory.

But this situation could be understood if your look to the complexity of the zone and the risk at stake. More than the past, the region is at the centre of a international games, with a high porosity within the countries themselves: Syrie-Lebanon, Palestine-Syria-Iran, the role of the different organizations Hamas, Hezbollah, etc.

But also, the external influences, the international game is more and more in evidence with the Arab revolutions. The great game is here. The role of the US, China, Turkey, some new even small one such as Qatar.

3.3. The Green revolution and the ecological dimension

Let's be naïve. The sun, a resource? The Sea, a resource? As we are developing in the European countries a lot of new green technologies, some countries shifting from nuclear to renewable energies, we should be more proactive to propose massive investments also as a unique opportunity for these countries to use in a more appropriate way their geographical resources. If I have understood correctly, this is one of the strong impulse that is done now in Greece, in particular by the Germans who are one of the key world leader in the photovoltaic sector...

But I am sure that wind and water turbines could be also a possibility to develop some comparative advantages.

4. Concluding remarks

We have seen how many challenges and dilemmas are in both the EU and the Arab countries. There are not the same but both have to be in our minds to understand how the relationships will evolve in the coming years.

I did not speak about two initiatives, maybe because pushed initially by the French authorities: After these first changes, the G8 at Deauville in 2011 has decided to help more effectively the Arab countries with a certain number of financial commitments.

Then, few words on the important initiative launched during the EU French Presidency, the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM). This good initiative, badly presented and organized in the first moments in 2008, remains still a good tool that we could continue to use and to give a stronger role in the future. This is an institutional framework which exists where Northern and Southern countries are on the same level and where concrete projects on the multiple dimensions already decided should be promoted.

The political dimension is close to death after the Gaza's war. The second Summit of the Heads of States and governments planned to be held in Paris in November 2010 has been postponed and the first secretary general resigned. After 6 months, a new secretary general from Morocco has been chosen. With the "Arab revolutionary momentum", this institutional platform for cooperation will certainly be useful for all the partners.

Few final remarks, as we are in Cyprus. Cyprus will hold the European presidency next year. Ideally located, knowing the price of division, the Cyprus government will be well placed to promote all initiatives for a better coordination between the North and the South. The EU partnership policy will be at the centre of your government initiatives. As explained by the Foreign Affairs minister, upgrading Erasmus to these countries is also an easy tool to connect the two sides of the Mediterranean. Then, you should continue to benefit from the UfM initiatives and continue to promote concrete co-operations. This is a nice opportunity for your Island to bring the comparative advantage of your history, your geographical situation and your sensibility and a certain added value to the other 26 MS in a such crucial "Arab revolutionary momentum".

Thank you for your patience.

François Lafond