

European issues

n°601

22nd June 2021

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From the Barcelona Process to the Programme for the Mediterranean, a fragile partnership with the European Union

In Barcelona in 1995, the European Union and its southern partners^[1] committed to making the Mediterranean basin an area of dialogue, exchange and cooperation, ensuring “*peace, stability and prosperity*.” Twenty-five years later, the southern shore of the Mediterranean faces immense challenges: governance, corruption, migration, terrorism, security, environment and climate, in addition to conflicts, geopolitical competition and external interference. This is the bitter assessment of the Commission and the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Vice-President of the European Commission^[2] in their Communication on a [new programme for the Mediterranean](#).

The civil wars in Algeria, Lebanon, Syria and Libya cannot, of course, be used to describe the EU's policy since 1995 as a failure. This would imply that the EU's policy has played a role that was not possible given the underlying forces at play in these regions. However, this policy has not lived up to the hopes it first raised. The Union has taken a succession of initiatives over the past twenty-five years, but the 'partnerships', 'privileged status' and other 'strategic agreements' have not been able to mask the shortcomings and lack of financial resources. Will the new programme, presented as 'ambitious and innovative', be able to respond to the challenges set?

FROM THE BARCELONA PROCESS TO THE NEIGHBOURHOOD POLICY

The end of the Cold War and the Oslo Agreement between Israel and the Palestinian Authority in 1993 brought a wind of optimism that carried [Euro-Mediterranean partnership of 1995 forward](#). It was

based on bilateral association agreements, as well as regional cooperation. These agreements created asymmetric free trade areas for manufactured goods, with concessions on agricultural products. They were concluded with Tunisia (1995), Jordan (1997), Morocco and Israel (2000), Lebanon and Algeria (2002), Egypt (2004). An interim agreement was signed with Palestine in 1997. Negotiations with Libya were never concluded however. The simple cooperation agreement with Syria was suspended in 2011. Supplemented by agricultural and fisheries protocols, these agreements have so far governed trade relations with the EU.

By opening its markets to manufactured goods, these agreements have favoured many industries, for example clothing in Tunisia. However, the political and investment climate has not allowed the partners to take full advantage of the agreements, at a time when Central Europe was aligning itself with European legislation and the movement of relocations to Asia was increasing. In addition, the EU's system of agricultural protection has hampered trade, especially after accession by Spain and Portugal.

At the same time, fertility rates have declined only slowly, leading to a dramatic increase in population: from 20 million in Morocco in 1981 to 34 million in 2014, from 12 million in Algeria in 1966 to 43 million in 2019, from 37 million in Egypt in 1976 to 100 million in 2020. Morocco and Tunisia have fertility rates of 2.38 and 2.17 respectively. But in Algeria it is still above 3 and in Egypt one million jobs need to be created every year. The economy could not keep up. The average GNP per capita is less than one eighth of that of the EU. Demography is winning the war, “[hence the increasing frustration that is leading to emigration](#).” This led the

^[1] Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Jordan, Palestine, Israel, Lebanon, Syria.

^[2] Hereafter quoted as HR/VP.

Egyptian president to say that "overpopulation is, along with terrorism, one of the two real threats to Egypt".

Economic complementarity should have led to regional integration, which creates jobs. This is what the Arab Maghreb Union envisaged in 1989 (Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, Libya and Mauritania). The plan of becoming an economic union of free trade remained at the symbolic stage, with the Western Sahara conflict between Morocco and Algeria being the main obstacle. In 2004 to circumvent the latter, Morocco, Tunisia, Jordan and Egypt signed the [Agadir Convention](#), which Lebanon and Palestine joined in 2020. A free trade and standards harmonisation agreement, to be integrated into the Euro-Mediterranean zone where accumulation of origin of products was introduced in 2011, its implementation falls far short of expectations. As a result, interregional trade, which represents only 5.9% of exports, is the lowest in the world. At the same time, the failure of the Oslo process has obviously compromised the Barcelona process on regional cooperation.

The 1995 partnership could have been renewed. Instead, in 2004, the EU replaced it with the Neighbourhood Policy, which was invented for its eastern partners after the 5th enlargement, under pressure from its Mediterranean Member States. This policy ignored economic, social and cultural differences, with standard action plans without the financial means to implement them. To add to the confusion, the [Union for the Mediterranean](#) (UfM) was launched in Paris in 2008 on the initiative of President Sarkozy. Europeanised under pressure from Chancellor Merkel, this initiative aimed to launch major cooperation projects such as the depollution of the sea and a solar energy plan. There have been many obstacles, starting with the lack of financial means. The Neighbourhood Policy could have been extended to these areas without creating a new body. The UfM is still looking for its role.

The Neighbourhood Policy referred to 'shared values', which became less so the more authoritarian the governments became in Tunis and Cairo, flouting human rights and ignoring growing inequalities. A climate of mistrust was created by the civil war in Algeria, by the 9/11 attacks on New York and under the pressure of Islamist movements in most countries. Wasn't it Hosni

Mubarak who once said of the Islamists: "it's them or us"? The Union chose stability over democracy. The awakening was all the more painful in 2011.

THE SURPRISE OF THE "ARAB SPRINGS"

'Bread, freedom and social justice', chanted the demonstrators in Cairo's Tahrir Square on 25 January 2011, and 'enough is enough', bidding to Hosni Mubarak to leave power, as Ben Ali had just done in Tunis on 14. He left on 11 February. The Muslim Brotherhood (MB) won the Egyptian legislative and presidential elections, which brought Mohamed Morsi to power. Massively contested a few months later for his authoritarian excesses and his desire to promote his 'Brothers', he was deposed by the 'revolution' of 30 June 2013. [How could freedom have triumphed](#) while the opposition was fragmented, the Muslim Brotherhood was taking over and the army had no intention of opening a democratic transition? The new president, Abdel Fattah al-Sissi, amended the constitution in 2019 to make the army the guardian of 'democracy and the country's cohesion' and to allow him to run for a third term in 2024.

The region learned two things from this:

1 - The Muslim Brotherhood, which had its chance, demonstrated its inability to govern and above all it showed its true face. They have 'taken over the political field to re-Islamise society from above', as Gilles Kepel points out. The Egyptian president justified the '30 June revolution' by the need to exercise 'freedom in a responsible manner to avoid destructive chaos'. But the prisons are full and not only of Muslim brothers. The Egyptian lesson has been heard throughout the Arab world, notably in Tunis. The lesson is being pondered in Algiers, as the Hirak protest movement continues, although the civil war of the 1980s should be a powerful deterrent against the return of the Islamists.

2 - President al-Sissi can reign unchallenged, in a singular return to 'them or us', and foreign chancelleries can breathe easy. This raises the question of the delicate balance between stability and democracy for the EU. To refuse 'realpolitik' would be as naive as it would be risky for the regional balance and the Union's

interests with countries like Egypt. Of course, we must cooperate with regimes that are not what we would like them to be. But the Union then finds itself at odds with values it brandishes to the world. There is even a form of cynicism in the Council's outsourcing of democracy and human rights to the HR/VP, both in Moscow and in Cairo, while Member States continue with their bilateral affairs, as [Marc Franco writes](#). Mitigating the contradiction by defining red lines would be welcome for the credibility of the Union.

In view of these upheavals, the Commission and the HR/VP urgently adopted "[a new strategy for a changing neighbourhood](#)" on 25th May 2011. The shift was notable in that the strategy emphasised democratic reforms (elections, police, justice); strong support for civil society; reduction of inequalities; and a dialogue on human mobility. And there was a shift from shared values to universal values. Aid was conditioned according to reforms and the principle of "*more assistance for more reforms*". A year later, aid to Tunisia was doubled on this basis and a European Democracy Fund for NGOs was granted €26 million. The Commission was given a mandate to negotiate *Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreements* (DCFTAs) to boost investment, similar to those then being negotiated with Eastern Partnership States[3], together with "mobility partnerships" on visas and migration.

"TAKING INTO ACCOUNT POLITICAL AND SOCIAL REALITY"

In 2015, the Commission and the HR/VP initiated a "[review of the neighbourhood policy](#)." Country differentiation, flexibility and mutual ownership of objectives were promoted. Above all, the admission that "*democratic transition will take time and that the social and political reality of local communities must be taken into account*" was welcomed! Emphasis was placed on stabilisation, security and the interests of the Union, anticipating what the "[European Security Strategy](#)" put forward a year later. It is true that civil wars were raging in Syria and Libya, causing an unprecedented wave of migration and that attacks were plunging both sides of the Mediterranean into deadly chaos. The future of mobility partnerships was therefore uncertain. Negotiating visa

facilitation against a readmission agreement for illegal migrants, including third-country nationals who have transited there, was indeed becoming difficult. Morocco and Tunisia have so far refused this third-country clause, while accepting the return of nationals. As for the DCFTA, negotiations with [Morocco and Tunisia in 2013](#) were quickly interrupted. The business community feared that their industries would be absorbed by the more competitive EU industries. Is it realistic to ask Tunisia and Morocco to transpose nearly a hundred EU directives, as Ukraine is doing? Negotiations never got off the ground with Jordan. As for Egypt, how could it accept a DCFTA whilst 50% of its businesses are controlled by the [military Nomenclatura](#)?

Many important reforms have been undertaken based on partnerships priorities: governance and rule of law, security, economy, social cohesion, environment, etc. Their funding was guaranteed by [the European Neighbourhood Instrument](#) for the period 2014-2020, for example: Morocco received €1.4 billion, Egypt €756 million and Jordan €765 million. As for Tunisia, it has received €1.6 billion since the launch of its reforms in 2011. Moreover, according to the Commission, the new Investment Platform has enabled the mobilisation of private investments and concessional loans to the tune of €7 billion for Egypt, €11.5 billion for Morocco and €2.3 billion for Tunisia. The Commission's quick response in reallocating more than €2 billion to help countries cope with the Covid-19 pandemic should be highlighted. Aid for migrants and refugees is another strong point of European solidarity with more than €7 billion committed so far (Morocco, Tunisia, Libya, Jordan and Lebanon). The emphasis placed on training and university exchanges through the Erasmus programmes is to the credit of this policy. More than 44,000 students have benefited from these programmes in the period 2015 to 2019.

WHERE IS THE 'GEOPOLITICAL UNION'?

The region's problems limit the effectiveness of reforms and restrict economic potential. This is especially so as the sorcerer's apprentices engaged under the banner of political Islam are undermining societies and are an obstacle to foreign investment in an environment of

[3] The DCFTA aim to extend the association agreements to the following areas: services, competition, public procurement, intellectual property rights, investments including the harmonisation of legislation and standards.

conflicts from which these movements benefit, or even provoke. The region has thus been a theatre of war for the past thirty years, from the Western Sahara to Syria.

The Western Sahara conflict remains an obstacle to relations between Morocco and Algeria and to regional integration. And it disrupted Morocco's relations with the EU regarding the fisheries agreement until 2019. Donald Trump's recognition of Morocco's sovereignty over Western Sahara in 2020 - in exchange for the restoration of diplomatic relations between Rabat and Tel Aviv - will not change the situation in the short term. But Algiers' acceptance of "*unconditional dialogue*" proposed in June 2021 by Rabat is a sign of openness.

In the Libyan civil war, the Union has been largely absent, and has even displayed its divisions, with France supporting Marshal Haftar and Italy supporting the Tripoli government. Above all, Turkey, an EU candidate country and NATO member, intervened in favour of Tripoli with Syrian auxiliaries of its army, while Russia supported Marshal Haftar with its private militias. In return for its intervention, Ankara obtained the signature by Tripoli of an agreement on maritime waters in its favour, contrary to the law of the sea. This agreement has taken on its full meaning following the discovery of gas deposits there. The delimitation of exclusive economic zones (EEZs) is certainly complex in the Eastern Mediterranean. But instead of dialogue and compromise, Turkey has preferred tension and the *fait accompli*, to "overturn" the 1920 Sèvres Treaty, as the Turkish President said when signing the agreement. The EU has settled for sanctions on Turkish drilling companies. Incidents could arise since the EU deployed a UN-mandated arms embargo monitoring mission to Libya in the Mediterranean in March 2020: [operation IRINI](#). This is one of the features of the [Berlin process](#) to stabilise Libya, committing to democratic transition and reviving the economy. The Council has also extended the border security mission, [EUBAM Libya](#), until June 2023. The situation there remains fragile and the UNHCR has counted 45,000 refugees.

As for Syria, the EU had no control over the civil war, the consequences of which it has merely suffered through massive immigration. The [strategy adopted](#) by the

Council has mainly remained unimplemented due to the force of events. The EU is co-chairing a conference with the UN on "*assistance for the future of Syria and the countries in the region*". [The 5th was held in Brussels in March 2021](#). The EU is the largest donor of humanitarian and stabilisation aid in the region, with over €20 billion committed since 2011. It is also the largest donor to Palestine. While it is to be welcomed that essential aid is being provided to vulnerable populations, it is regrettable that an EU that claims to be geopolitical can only intervene through donor conferences and the provision of aid.

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is even more devastating for the Union's credibility. Israel has failed to comply with UN resolutions since 1967 and continues the uncontrolled colonisation of occupied territories. Settlers destroy schools funded by the EU and Member States[4]. The latter's ambassadors report on "systematic legal discrimination" made against Palestinians[5]. The EU regrets and condemns. But no sanctions have ever been taken, while Israel benefits from the best association agreement and takes advantage of European research programmes. This raises the question of the Union's different reactions to the non-respect of international law and human rights in other situations.

Is it not the heavy legacy of the secular anti-Semitism of European societies and States, and that of the Shoah that paralyses the Union? Nevertheless, its powerlessness deprives it of being able to play a role. And it is a disservice to Israel to let the country sink into the impasse to which extremist policies are leading it. It is true that even if it were determined, the Union would be very much on its own, whereas Washington committed itself in 2016 to providing €38 billion in military aid over ten years. And the [Abraham Accords agreements](#) signed on 15 September 2020 between Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates and Israel have changed the regional landscape. Without resolving the conflict. Especially since Hamas, financed by Qatar and armed by Iran, maintains its deadly ideology and its indiscriminate strikes.

However, the situation seems to be changing. First, the conflict has become local with the Abraham Accords, a

[4] In 2018-2019, 197 buildings were demolished or seized, and their Palestinian occupants evicted, of which 26 were funded by the EU and Member States.

[5] Piotr Smolnar, *Le Monde* 2.02. 2019

process now encouraged by the Biden administration. Moreover, very conservative regimes even see Israel as the defender of "Judeo-Christian civilisation". Secondly, the two paths to a possible peace are deadlocked. The two-State solution seems defunct because a Palestinian State would no longer be viable, given the territorial fragmentation. But that [of a Single State](#) is rejected by Israel and the Arabs. Finally, the recent incidents between Arabs and Jews in Israel call for an internal solution. The support of Mansour Abbas, leader of the Islamist party *Raam*, to Naftali Bennett's new Israeli government, on June 13, 2021, goes in this direction. The future will tell whether this was primarily about ousting Benjamin Netanyahu or whether it is a hopeful change.

GEOPOLITICS DOES NOT LIKE A VACUUM

A dynamic Euro-Mediterranean dialogue has never been successful, and the Neighbourhood Policy has fallen far short of expectations and needs. Other powers are therefore naturally offering their services. Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States have constantly interfered in the region. It is especially Qatar that finances the Muslim Brotherhood, in an implicit alliance with Turkey. Libya is their favourite target, which raises fears for Tunisia. The return of Turkey and Russia marks the re-emergence of empires. One dreams of reconstituting the Ottoman Empire and the other of regaining the external influence once enjoyed by the USSR. Both seem to favour actions that harm the Union. Moscow never abandoned Syria where it has retained its naval base in Tartus. Its army is now firmly established there. Russia is returning to Algeria, where it supplied 90% of military equipment in the 1970s. Its exports have increased fortyfold since 2000. It has also made its return to Egypt with military supplies, the nuclear power station of El Daaba and imports of agricultural products. Notably, it was Moscow that Egypt asked for mediation with Ethiopia on the Renaissance Dam, whose consequences on the flow of the Nile it fears. Moscow also approached Rabat for cooperation against terrorism, as well as in agriculture and fish farming.

It is the meteoric [rise of China's investments](#) that is impressive, especially in the context of the One Belt,

One Road Initiative that most countries have signed. The figures speak for themselves with Beijing's three target countries: Morocco, China's 3rd largest export destination, Egypt which imports 15% of its goods from there and Algeria, 18% (France 9.3%) in 2019. President Xi Jinping and King Mohammed VI signed a strategic partnership in 2016 for hospitals, highways, solar parks, technopoles and Confucius centres. China's neutrality in the Western Sahara conflict is appreciated.

A partnership was also concluded with Algeria in 2006 with emblematic constructions: Algiers Grand Mosque, opera, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, residences. China has sold and built for some \$70 billion in twenty years. Algiers is China's third largest arms buyer and the largest in Africa. Mao recognised the provisional government in 1958 and Nasser recognised the PRC in 1956. Egypt is essential on the Maritime Silk Road because of the Suez Canal. China invested \$7 billion in 2019 and lent \$3 billion to build the new administrative city. President al-Sissi has made six trips there to date. Two ports will be managed by Chinese companies, Alexandria and El Dekheila. The aid provided during the Covid-19 pandemic earned China the projection of its flag on the main monuments of Cairo and the Nile Valley. No doubt the god Amun Re shuddered in his temple at Karnak!

In Lebanon in 2018, the [Paris Conference](#) promised aid on condition that reforms be made together with an effort to counter corruption which is blighting the economy. In the absence of reforms, funds have not been mobilised. Faced with pressing needs, the leader of Hezbollah, Hassan Nasrallah, has just launched an appeal to Beijing to finance infrastructure. China remains neutral, does not interfere in national politics, and does not demand reforms or the respect of rights. China also points out that it was itself colonised by the West and praises its development model. It can only appeal to strong regimes and failed or failing states.

Yet it is with Israel that China has the most prominent relationship, focused on high technology. Many Israeli companies are established in China. Conversely, large Chinese groups have research centres in Israel, such as Lenovo, Haier and Huawei. Israeli exports of integrated circuits total 25% and they are contributing to the

modernisation of the Chinese army. China is Israel's third largest customer and its second largest supplier, after the United States. It is likely that Israel will have to rein in its cooperation with Beijing however if Sino-American relations deteriorate. For the time being, China is to build the new ports of Haifa and Ashdod. More surprisingly, an agreement allows Israel to import Chinese workers as an alternative to Palestinians!

THE NEW AGENDA, AN EXCELLENT CATALOGUE OF NECESSARY ACTIONS ...

One can only agree with the declaration of intent for the new Mediterranean programme: "*which offers opportunities for new partnerships on the strategic priorities of the dual ecological and digital transition and is based on the conviction that prosperity and resilience can only be built in the framework of a strong partnership between the two shores of the Mediterranean*". It aims to "*generate a green, digital, resilient and fair recovery, guided by the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the Paris Agreement and the Green Deal for Europe*".

It is broken down into five main areas of action: human development, good governance and the rule of law; building resilience and prosperity and harnessing the digital transition; peace and security; migration and mobility; and the ecological transition: climate change resilience, energy and the environment.

For each area, actions are matched by a list of flagship initiatives to be funded in the proposed investment plan. The first area puts forward, among the list of actions, the promotion of human rights, gender equality, civil society and the rule of law. Two flagship initiatives are listed: support for the social sectors, education and vocational training, and health. Josep Borrell has insisted on helping "*young people to realise their hopes, enjoy their rights and build a safe, democratic, green and prosperous environment*". The second area promotes, among other things, the improvement of the business and investment environment, support for SMEs and transport infrastructures and regulatory convergence in several sectors. The ecosystemic approach drawn up as part of the [Union's industrial](#)

[strategy](#) has been mentioned as a possible means to achieve economic diversification under the restructuring of world chains of value. One of the corresponding flagship initiatives focuses on digital transformation, research and innovation, including through participation in EU programmes. Ecological transition, the fifth area, highlights flagship initiatives on green growth; energy transition and security; resource management, including water; sustainable food systems, agriculture and rural development.

The sensitive area of 'peace and security' naturally proposes to strengthen, among other things, the fight against terrorism, organised crime, hybrid threats and radicalisation, including with the help of EU agencies such as Europol and Frontex. 'Migration and mobility', the fourth area, calls for joint efforts to combat criminal networks trafficking in migrants. It also suggests greater South-South cooperation, notably as part of the [Action Plan adopted in Valletta](#) in 2015. Three specific actions are encouraged: supporting partners' capacity to manage their borders, migration and asylum; providing targeted socio-economic assistance to prevent migration; and intensifying cooperation on effective return and readmission. The partners' recurrent demand to "*develop legal channels of access to Europe*" is "*in full respect of the competences of the Member States*".

... BUT THIS RENEWED PARTNERSHIP DOES NOT HAVE THE MEANS TO ACHIEVE ITS AMBITIONS

The EU's financial framework for 2021-2027 has earmarked €7 billion for the economic and investment plan for this programme. The Communication stresses that this budgetary support should be able to mobilise private and public investment of up to €30 billion. This is only an approximation. The European Parliament has questioned this leverage effect. On the positive side, a link will be made between financing and reforms. But the initial budget falls far short of the hopes raised by this renewed partnership and, consequently, for regional stability. By comparison, €14 billion is earmarked for the Western Balkans, with a total population of some 20 million, yet this is less than what is needed in view of the

attractiveness of other powers. Bulgaria receives some €8 billion from the EU's Structural and Investment Funds!

There are certainly innovative measures such as the initiative for co-financing between the Union and the European Investment Bank (EIB), the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD), the German Development Bank (KfW) and the French Development Agency (Afd), for micro-credit, support to SMEs and guarantee funds. But the €150 million budgetary contribution to the €1.5 billion from the banks remains very modest. Under these conditions, how could the southern Mediterranean countries resist the sirens of Doha, Ankara, Moscow and Beijing? As [Hakim El Karoui](#), stressed "*the Maghreb countries need massive budgetary support. It would be a serious strategic mistake not to see this, or to wait too long to provide it.*"

The question will arise in particular with regard to migration. Inspired by the EU's funding of Turkey to settle migrants on its territory, partner countries will demand similar compensation to carry out the actions included in the new programme. Morocco has already shown the way with Spain. Subcontracting this issue has a cost that will have to be financed. It could also be financed by improving the partners' access to the EU market. The new programme is silent in this respect. It only advocates the DCFTA, which has no chance of being accepted as it stands. However, no initiative has been proposed in this privileged area of the European Commission's competences, while the association agreements no longer correspond to trade requirements.

.... AND IT FAILS TO MENTION OTHER VEXING ISSUES

The first is the fact that many of the region's challenges are "*the consequences of global trends*". These cannot be underestimated. But the Communication would have gained credibility if it had reversed the order of causes. The majority of the challenges are firstly internal: socio-economic, poor governance, corruption, which citizens experience on a daily basis. And the highest level of inequality worldwide, [according to Thomas Piketty](#).

Then, the balance between economic growth and demography is dealt with in one sentence, without any call for the latter to be controlled. This is certainly a conflictual subject with the Islamist movements, but one where a dialogue should be opened. The same applies to regional and sub-regional cooperation in which "*the Union will be ready to study the possibility of strengthening*". We would have liked an initiative, as this issue is crucial, and the Union has an obvious credit to put forward.

There is one country whose "spring" and reforms have been regularly praised by the EU, its Member States and their media, and that is Tunisia. However, it is in a serious economic and social crisis in which "*the vacuum of the state has been joined by the vacuum of the future*". It has suffered more than others from terrorist attacks, a slump in tourism and the relocation of companies, and it needs to restructure its debt. The Union promoted this with Central Europe in the 1990s. The Communication makes no mention of this. And the visit of President Kaïs Saïed to Brussels on 4 June 2021 seems only to have "*confirmed the commitment of both parties to deepen their strategic and privileged partnership*". Tunisian youth will appreciate this, as a representative recently said on a European radio station: "*We are a generation without hope, our only chance is to take to the sea.*"

Even more surprising is the Communication's silence regarding the ongoing conflicts. This is certainly not an area in which solutions can be outlined. But it only "*encourages strategic partners to double up on their joint efforts to resolve conflicts*". How can we ignore the role of Turkey - a candidate country - in Libya and the Eastern Mediterranean? There are guilty silences justified by the pretext of maintaining good relations. When a country takes into account the strength of the reactions - like Turkey - ignoring the problem simply weakens the Union. Nothing is said about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, in which the Union has no common position beyond "*supporting a two-State solution*", which now seems impossible. Nothing is said either about the latent conflict between communities in Lebanon, as the country sinks into crisis.

How can we ignore one of the great evils from which the entire southern shore of the Mediterranean suffers – discrimination – which is a source of tension and generates violence. Discrimination against ethnic minorities and black African migrants. Religious discrimination against Coptic Christians. Discrimination against Muslims who refuse to let religion govern their private lives. Discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation. And yet, not only do the public authorities tolerate them, but they often strengthen them via a justice system that is quick to impose the rule of the mosques on society. And [by using the imams to impose the respect of anti-Covid19 measures](#), governments have become more dependent on religion. The wind of modernity that blew from Tunis to Cairo and from Beirut to Damascus in the 1950s and 1960s is long gone. The Communication does not say how to build the inclusive societies it advocates, in the face of the religious fundamentalism and messianism that have won the battle of ideas, even in Jerusalem.

IN QUEST OF A "SINGLE MESSAGE"

There is some question about the target audience of this Communication. It is certainly a 'framework' and concerns the whole region. But it is difficult to see how it could be applied to Syria, which is still at war, to Lebanon, where citizens are struggling to survive, and to Libya, where resilience is the only immediate objective. It is also difficult to see how it could be applied to Algeria, where the government is sitting on the ruins of a betrayed 'revolution', and to the Egyptian 'militarchy'. That leaves Morocco, Tunisia and Jordan, where we would have liked to see more courageous proposals.

A Tunisian journalist, Fathi B'Chir suggested in 2013 that "*the Union gives the impression that it is sailing blind*". The Neighbourhood Policy was too paternalistic and Euro-centric. The Union lacks ambition, a strategic vision and the means to achieve it. To quote [Jean-Dominique Giuliani](#), "*the Commission itself holds back from audacity to avoid opposition from Member States*". Yet it is boldness that this partnership needs. Is it not first of all because it does not have a common external policy? From Finland on the border with Russia to Lampedusa so close to the Tunisian coast, there is indeed a wide discrepancy in the perception of threats and the understanding of interests which makes strong consensual action difficult, as was recently underlined by [Josep Borrell](#). Developing a "common strategic culture" would be highly desirable, as President Macron has requested.

The Communication calls for a "*renewed commitment to unity and solidarity among EU Member States*". Isn't it unusual to use an external communication to stigmatise an internal problem? It is true that when it comes to Libya and Turkey, the Union has exposed its disagreements. As Josep Borrell says, "*We do not need a single voice but a single message (...) But the Union cannot be geopolitical if it is not first and foremost political*", i.e. capable of reaching a consensus on the major external issues. At present, it has failed to do so, which undermines the partnership that this new programme seeks to renew.

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