

Katarzyna Górak-Sosnowska

Intra-regional cooperation in the Southern Dimension of the ENP: challenges and opportunities*

Abstract: A short glimpse on the Southern Dimension of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) is enough to understand that several contingencies beset the prospect of intra-regional cooperation in the Southern Mediterranean (SEM). Historically-determined challenges to cooperation prevail over the opportunities that exist, while the legacy of the Arab Spring and the emergence of ISIS, efficiently obscure any hopes for collaboration. The objective of this paper is to explore this issue.

Keywords: Southern Mediterranean, EU, Arab Spring, ISIS

Introduction

A short glimpse on the Southern Dimension of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) is enough to understand that there cannot be much intra-regional cooperation among the countries included in that dimension of the ENP. For instance, how could one imagine collaboration between Israel and Syria, if the latter does not even formally recognise the former? In other words, there are far more challenges than opportunities when it comes to intra-regional cooperation among countries involved in the Southern Dimension of the ENP. While some

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of these challenges – just like the Israeli-Syrian animosity – have been present for many years, several new challenges have emerged only recently. Most of these new challenges are related to the legacy of the political and social processes of 2011, frequently referred to as the Arab Spring. Moreover, a new kind of challenges stems from and is related to the emergence of the so-called Islamic State¹ and its operation on the territory of Iraq and Syria.

In other words, the intra-regional cooperation in the Southern Mediterranean (SEM) has always been beset by a great number of challenges. The so called Arab Spring as well as the phenomenon of the ISIS have added a qualitatively new dimension to that issue. The objective of this paper is to dwell on it. To this end, in the first section, the state of the art till the eve of the Arab Spring is presented. In the next step, the sources of the old and new challenges and opportunities in the SEM are discussed briefly so that their implications for intra-regional cooperation in the region can be examined.

1. The clash of interests and the Arab Spring legacy

● It may be trivial to say that the Middle East has always been a scene where interests of different external powers – both global and regional – clashed. This is the case of almost every part of the world, except perhaps for some sparsely inhabited remote areas, which have nothing that could lure external actors and make them care and compete over their influence in those areas. However, the impact of different foreign powers on the SEM has always been tremendous. Henry and Springborg argue that it was not Islam that was the predominant force shaping the region, but the tradition of foreign involvement.²

By the end of the 18th century, different parts of the Middle East got under the influence of different Western colonial powers, which

- 1 There is so far only a handful of books on this new phenomenon, written rather by journalists than academics, see e.g. A. Atwan, *Islamic State: The Digital Caliphate*, University of California Press, 2015; J.-P. Filiu, *From Deep State to Islamic State*, Oxford University Press, 2015.
- 2 C. Henry, R. Springborg, *Globalization and the Politics of Development, Development in the Middle East*, Cambridge 2001, p. 8.

not only installed a completely new social order, but also competed against each other. The process of de-colonisation not only reinforced the existing divides but also brought new ones into existence. Whether presidents or kings, the Arab rulers were eager to prove their legitimacy, which was frequently based solely on what they gained from the external powers. It is not a coincidence, therefore, that the Middle East has been viewed as one of the most authoritarian regions of the world. The Arab Spring and its aftermath serve as another proof of external involvement. Although at the very beginning, external powers (especially the EU and the US) did not interfere, soon they became involved in the developments shaping the region.³ Nevertheless, it seems that none of these actors could have ever foreseen how the Arab Spring would unfold and what its implications for the region as a whole would be.

There are 10 countries which are included in the Southern dimension of the ENP: Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya – as countries belonging to the Maghreb – Egypt, Israel and the Palestinian Authority, which is so far only formally recognised as a country by one EU member-state, namely Sweden, and Mashreq countries: Lebanon, Jordan and Syria. Currently, only countries of the Maghreb – though excluding Libya – appear stable and secure. Lebanon and Jordan are threatened and affected by the developments across their borders with Iraq and Syria. The latter two countries are in a state of decay or perhaps even disintegration. In Syria, a civil war has been going on for over three years. Starting from mid-2013, vast territories of Syria and Iraq were claimed by the Islamic State of Iraq and Greater Syria (or: Levant) (ISIS). The emergence of ISIS and its rapid growth and expansion were largely unexpected by the observers. Therefore, both countries, i.e. Syria and Iraq, easily qualify as failed states and it will take years for them to recover.

Libya is another country that has been torn apart by a civil war in which the regime of Mu'ammār al-Qadhafi was overthrown. Libya has never recovered from the chaos that emerged following the collapse of the regime created after al-Qadhafi's fall. In 2014,

3 T. Börzel, A. Dandashly, T. Risse, *Responses to the 'Arabelions': The EU in Comparative Perspective – Introduction*, "Journal of European Integration", vol. 37, no. 1.

two parallel governments operated in Libya. However, there was no legal police or military force, both serving as evidence of a failed state. Egypt seems to be recovering from the economic turmoil which resulted from the prolonged period of instability. The iron grip of the military over the domestic scene gives the Egyptians a feeling of security, but it has nothing to do with democracy. A military *coup d'état* – in which the first democratically elected Egyptian president Muhammad Mursi was overthrown – can hardly be regarded as acceptable according to our Western standards.⁴ The military regime is unable to consolidate its political power, because the suppression of the Muslim Brotherhood creates a major split in the society. Since the Second World War, the Muslim Brotherhood has played the role of an active political opposition in Egypt. At the moment it is supported by the majority of Egyptians. Last but not least, peace has not been restored between Israel and the Palestinian Authority, after the summer Israeli invasion on Gaza. The situation is tense on both sides, especially in Jerusalem. On both sides the extremist attitudes seem to prevail: in Israel the right wing Likud and in Palestine the extremist HAMAS.

This short overview highlights the weakness of the foundations for any type of intra-regional collaboration in the SEM region. The majority of the countries in the region remain vulnerable, unstable and insecure, focused on their internal domestic problems rather than on regional outreach. This is despite several factors which could – at least in theory – bring the countries of the region together in view of a form of enhanced cooperation. These factors will be discussed in the following sections. To this end, the cultural dimension, economic and political dimensions of prospective cooperation are elaborated briefly.

4 As ironically as it may sound, by the end of November 2014 the overthrown president Hosni Mubarak and his security commanders were cleared of any charges of murder. On the other hand, those who incited the protests in early 2011 – including the leaders of the 6 April movement – are currently imprisoned. The same applies to the first democratically elected president Muhammad Mursi and hundreds of his supporters. It seems that the history of Egypt has just turned full circle.

2. Rethinking the cultural dimension of cooperation: the pan-Arab heritage⁵

The State of Israel is recognised by two countries in the region, i.e. Egypt and Jordan, as well as – paradoxically as it may sound in this context – by the Palestinian Authority. The lack of formal recognition translates into a lack of any possibility of collaboration. From a different angle, even if the Arab countries officially recognise each other, their cooperation remains limited despite strong cultural foundations that link them all.

Pan-Arabism as an ideology aimed at the unification of the Arab countries in the late 19th century as a reaction to a similar movement beyond the Western flank of the Arab world, i.e. in Turkey.⁶ However, some observers claim that pan-Arabism emerged right after the First World War and was inspired by German Romantic nationalism.⁷ Not only was the Arab world supposed to become one state, but also the Arabs were to advance to the role of the leading power in the Islamic world. There are many historical factors which could actually produce a pan-Arab state – common history framed in the Arabisation process, which occurred as Islam spread beyond the Arab Peninsula to the wider Middle East and later North Africa in the 7th century. Due to this process, Arabic (*fusha*) became the official language not only in Mashreq, but also in Maghreb. Despite these claims there has never been an Arab nation, even if the adherents of Pan-Arabism claim there is one and they only aim at its rebirth.⁸

However, individual interests of local rulers proved to be stronger and only maintained the regional order introduced forcefully by Western colonial powers. There is not a single Arab country which had not built a strong national identity opposed to all other Arab states. The Western divisions introduced artificially only at the beginning of the 20th century are perpetuated and developed. Divided

5 The argument in this section focuses solely on the case of Israel and the Arabic countries of the SEM covered by the ENP. This means that member countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) as well as Iraq and Yemen are left out from the analysis.

6 A. Schölch, *Der arabische Osten im neunzehnten Jahrhundert 1800-1914*, [in:] U. Haarmann (ed.), *Geschichte der Arabischen Welt*, C.H. Beck, München 2001, p. 425.

7 A. Dawisha, *Arab Nationalism in the Twentieth Century. From Triumph to Despair*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 2002.

8 J. Danecki, *Arabowie*, PIW, Warszawa 2001, p. 379.

by the French into the Republic of Syria and the Republic of Lebanon, the Syrian region of the Ottoman Empire will never be united. On the other hand, one could expect that internal divisions – ethnic and religious as those in Iraq or Syria again, should lead to disintegration of these countries. Nothing of that sort happened: the idea of particular nationalisms as opposed to pan-Arabism, prevailed. These nationalisms strengthen the Arab regimes and prevent them from any type of cooperation. The Arab countries prefer to cooperate with the Western world instead of developing inter-Arab cooperation. The regimes mistrust each other, and would rather build fences than remove them. Even though there were some attempts of unification, carried out mostly by the socialist Arab states where Nasserism or Baathism ruled, they soon proved to be a failure.⁹ Paradoxically as it may sound, currently it is the Islamic State organisation which strives to overcome the disastrous outcomes of the Sykes-Picot agreement of 1916.

Despite the cultural and historical heritage, the pan-Arab unity functions only on a symbolic level. This is how one can describe most of the activities of the League of Arab States established in 1945. The only issue that brings the Arab world together was usually the question of Palestine (even though also only on a symbolic level of popular support, since the attitude to Palestinian refugees is much more diverse). Still, support of the Palestinians is mostly combined with political and economic interests. Thus, the Arab world remains disintegrated both economically and politically, and this disintegration is constantly growing. It might seem exceptional if compared with other regions of the world, as most other countries rather seek to create or join regional unions in order to strengthen their competitive advantage and security. This certainly is not the case of the Arab world.

9 These attempts were: Egypt and Syria established the United Arab Republic in 1958-61; in 1958 the Arab Federation was created by Iraq and Jordan; in 1971 – Federation of Arab Republics, established by Egypt, Libya and Syria, and in 1984 – Arab-African Union of Morocco and Libya.

3. Rethinking the economic dimension of cooperation

The Arab world shares strong cultural ties. It has also got sizeable economic potential that would be conducive to intra-regional collaboration. Nevertheless, that potential remains under-utilised. This is despite the internal diversity of the economies of the SEM region. Theoretically, that diversity should lead to intensive economic exchange.¹⁰ In fact, only a handful of researchers claim that the intra-regional trade is relatively high.¹¹ The devil is in the detail, or as in this case – in the perspective. A significant part of the assumed economic potential inherent in the SEM region fades away if the political perspective is added to the equation. That is, lack of stability and security as well as the question of the political economy of the SEM region exert an adverse impact on the prospect of economic collaboration in the region. As Halim Barakat puts it:

“Arab countries are separately and independently integrated into the world capitalist system. The links are comprehensive, involving economic, political, social, and cultural spheres of activity. The comprehensive but fragmented nature of linkage to the world capitalist system has rendered the Arab world peripheral and powerless. Interlocked in a network of dependent relations, the Arab world seems to have lost control over its own resources and destiny. The rich and more powerful countries conduct themselves as regional powers, imposing a system of local dependency on the poorer and weaker countries. Hence there exists a dual or even triple dependency system, which weighs heavily on the weak and impoverished countries”.¹²

Halim Barakat’s argument can be easily justified by statistical data. Regardless if one takes the whole region of the Middle East and North Africa,¹³ or only the SEM states, the intra-regional trade volume is one

10 K. Dervis, P. Boccock, J. Devlin, *Intraregional Trade among Arab Countries: Building a Competitive Economic Neighborhood*, paper presented at Middle Eastern Institute 52nd Annual Conference, Washington, 17th October 1998, p. 3.

11 E.g. P. Petri, *Trade Strategies for the Southern Mediterranean*, OECD Development Centre, Working paper no. 127, December 1997, p. 15.

12 H. Barakat, *The Arab World. Society, Culture and the State*, University of California Press, Berkeley 1993, p. 78.

13 That means including the oil-rich Gulf Cooperation Countries. Their export could potentially easily distort the picture by making the intra-regional trade volume even lower.

of the lowest comparing to other regions. As for 2009, the total intra-regional trade between the SEM countries was barely 15 billion Euro.¹⁴ The SEM countries' export is designated mostly to Europe (49%), while the intra-regional export comprises only 5% – less than the export to the United States or to the Gulf Cooperation Countries.¹⁵ With the humble exception of the Palestinian Authority, the EU is the main trading partner for all SEM countries. At the same time, while trade agreements with the EU have had a positive impact on the export from the EU to the Maghreb countries, they did not significantly improve the export volume to the EU.¹⁶

Again, on the declarative level, hopes and political willingness of mutual economic integration remain high. When it comes to attempts and initiatives, no region produced more than the SEM countries.¹⁷ In 1957, the Council of Arab Economic Unity was established with an aim of economic integration among its 18 members (including all Arab SEM countries). In 1997 they signed PAFTA, a Pan-Arab Free Trade Agreement, aimed at removal of tariffs in regional trade as well as improving customs clearance procedures; it seems that some countries in the region have already benefited from the tariff removal part of the agreement.¹⁸ Other intra-regional trade agreements include the Agadir agreement (signed by Egypt, Jordan and Morocco and suspended since the establishment of PAFTA) and the Arab Maghreb Union (signed by Algeria, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco and Tunisia, which suspended its activity anyway due to political burden), and a free trade agreement between Jordan and Israel.

Over a decade ago, the first “Arab Human Development Report” of 2002 identified several obstacles for effective intra-regional economic integration in the region including: incoherent political systems, focusing on declarations rather than practicalities, limited actual power of pan-Arab economic organisations, and incoherent infrastructure.¹⁹ It seems that these circumstances have not changed significantly. One

14 *Euro-Mediterranean Partnership*, European Commission, <http://ec.europa.eu/trade/policy/countries-and-regions/regions/euro-mediterranean-partnership/>

15 P. Petri, *Trade Strategies for the Southern Mediterranean*, p. 30.

16 *Economic Integration in the Maghreb*, The World Bank, Washington, October 2010, p. 16.

17 P. Petri, *Trade Strategies for the Southern Mediterranean*, p. 30.

18 *Economic Integration in the Maghreb*, p. 16.

19 *Arab Human Development Report 2002*, UNDP 2002, p. 77 and 128-129.

can only add new obstacles, especially the aforementioned strong isolationism, lack of political stability and political animosities, which force the SEM countries to seek for more stable and secure partners from outside of the region.

It is the Mashreq countries which are most interested in intraregional trade. In a wider perspective, that is taking into account other Arab countries of the Middle East and North Africa, it was Jordan, Lebanon and Syria which had the highest share of intraregional export in their total export volume (ranging between 22 and 36%). On the other hand, Maghreb countries are hardly interested in exporting to other Arab countries (the respective share is from 2 to 7%).²⁰ This might be explained by the fact that Algeria is one of the world's biggest gas exporters, while Tunisia and Morocco have strong historical ties to Europe. However, there is a significant potentiality in regional cooperation, which is completely neglected. It seems then to be in the interest of the European Union to strengthen the local exchange and cooperation, thus creating a stronger and larger market.

4. Rethinking the political dimension of cooperation

● The problems which the SEM countries face go far beyond the lack of intraregional cooperation. The main challenge is the political future of the region. With so many hot spots on the regional map, including states about to fail (Syria, Libya, Iraq), states torn by serious social conflicts (Egypt, Israel/Palestinian Authority), or by refugee crisis (Lebanon, Jordan), or radical Islamic movements (Egypt, Libya, Syria, Iraq), economic opportunities seem secondary. Thus the most rational strategy for survival in this unstable regional environment is to seek partners from outside of the region. For the SEM countries there are at least two such forces: the West (the EU and the United States) and countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)

The role of the West in the region is ambiguous. On the economic level, the EU countries provide a backbone for most of the regional

20 A. Bolbol, A. Fatheldin, *Intra-Arab Exports and Direct Investment: an Empirical Analysis*, AMF Economic Papers, no. 12, Abu Dhabi, June 2005, p. 23.

trade as the main export and import partner. European tourists are still eager to travel to the not so distant and not too expensive tourist destinations in the Arab region. The chances for development are enormous, since the tourist sector has not yet recovered from the turbulences of the so called Arab Spring. On the other hand, the bulk of third country nationals in the EU originate from the SEM states. Moroccans rank among top five most numerous migrant groups in Belgium, France, Italy, the Netherlands and Spain, Algerians and Tunisians in France, and Iraqis in Sweden and Denmark.²¹ Egyptians, the Lebanese and Jordanians prefer Canada and the United States as their migration destination. The migration process is also significant from the perspective of the SEM countries: the expatriation rate to OECD countries (the vast majority of which goes to the EU) for Lebanon is around 15%, for Morocco – 8%, for Tunisia – 6%, for Algeria – 5% and for Jordan, Palestinian Authority and Iraq – 4%.²² Even if the bulk of migrants stemming from the SEM region are unskilled, they account for more than half of the remittances' outflow from the EU to the third countries with Morocco being the biggest remittances' recipient.²³ Current shifts in national legislation aimed at reducing the number of immigrants in some EU member states are unlikely to reverse this trend.

In socio-political terms, the influence of the West on the SEM countries reflects the West's political interests. The West, especially the EU countries, is reluctant to absorb economic migrants and refugees fleeing from the war torn region.²⁴ It conducts airstrikes on the Islamic State in order to support Iraqi and Kurdish forces, which only results in a growing number of refugees in the region, mainly in Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan. No one seems eager to help the re-

21 *Migration and migrant population statistics*, Eurostat, May 2014, http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/statistics_explained/index.php/Migration_and_migrant_population_statistics

22 F. Gubert, C. Nordman, *Migration from MENA to OECD Countries: Trends, Determinants, and Prospects*, [in:] J. Gubert, L. Flore (eds.), *Shaping the Future. A Long-Term Perspective of People and Job Mobility for the Middle East and North Africa*, The World Bank, Washington 2006, p. 9.

23 *Second EU survey on workers' remittances from the EU to third countries*, EC Directorate General. Economic and Financial Affairs, ECFIND4 (2006) REP/-EN, Brussels, 2.10.2006, p. 14-15.

24 According to the estimates of the International Organization for Migration (IOM), comparing to 2013, more than four times more people died while trying to cross the Mediterranean Sea in order to get to Europe. Since 2013 Syria has been the country which the most asylum seekers to the EU come from – see: *Graphics: Europe's asylum seekers*, BBC 30.09.2014, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-24636868>

recipient countries, the West remains reluctant to participate in help, and refuses to perform the most obvious move: to strike a deal with the Syrian president, Bashar Al-Asad. The reasons are of course strategic: dealing with the Syrian regime would mean supporting Russia and Iran, moreover would require stopping any support for the so-called Syrian opposition. The price of such an attitude is high: the instability grows, millions of civilians are suffering, but the expenses are not paid by the Western world. It is the Middle Eastern population that is blamed for the resulting chaos.

There are, however, parts of the Middle East which benefit from the chaos. For instance, the GCC countries seem to benefit in economic terms from the instability in the SEM countries. Since the 9/11 World Trade Center attacks of 2001 there has been a gradual shift of the Western world's interest from the local Arab markets to the Gulf countries.²⁵ The countries of Maghreb and Mashreq remained interesting in terms of investment (FDI) and tourism for the Gulf region. For instance, in 1999, Arab tourists constituted barely 22.4% of all tourists in MENA countries, while in 2003, their proportion almost doubled to 41%.²⁶ The SEM countries benefit from the GCC labour market. While Maghreb countries have been traditionally exporting cheap labour force to the EU, citizens of Mashreq (Jordan and Lebanon especially) and Egypt prefer to work in the GCC. This is reflected in the volume of remittances – for instance in 2004 Egypt, Jordan, Sudan, Syria and Yemen accounted for 10 billion USD, while together with the unregistered money outflows it could be even twice as much.²⁷

On the political level, most of the GCC states are reluctant to get involved economically and politically in the SEM region. Only the state of Qatar strives to secure its interests in the region. Its two main aims are: to stabilise the region so that no spark of discontent, or potential conflict spreads to the Arabian Peninsula, and to play a role of a regional superpower. Especially the latter is played most vigorously. Qatar took an active part in the 2011 overthrowing of Mu'ammar al-Qadhafi's

25 I elaborate on it in: K. Górak-Sosnowska, *Świat arabski wobec globalizacji*, Difin, Warszawa 2007.

26 *Economic Developments and Prospects*, World Bank 2005, p. 23.

27 S. Ferabolli, *Arab Regionalism. A Post-Structural Perspective*, Routledge, New York 2015, p. 124.

regime, and supported the anti-Asad coalition in Syria.²⁸ The state of Qatar has also been involved in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and even tried to compete with Egypt as the Arab peace broker.²⁹ Moreover, the Qatar-based Al-Jazeera TV station narrated the whole Arab Spring to the regional and international audience. Its coverage, though rather biased, was still the most complete and detailed. Other GCC countries are far less politically involved in the region. One can only name the United Arab Emirates which supposedly with Egypt occasionally bombed some Libyan militias in August 2014.³⁰

Conclusions

There are more challenges than opportunities for the intra-regional cooperation. The SEM countries have been divided politically and economically since they were established. While it is widely claimed that regional integration benefits collaborating countries,³¹ it seems extremely difficult to induce the Arab countries to cooperation that would exceed the limits of declarations and overt willingness – in other words, wishful thinking. These declarations are never or rarely translated into actions. Instead of bombing the Islamic State, the Western world could induce the Arab world to cooperate in fighting not only against this extremism but also its other manifestations. A great number of solutions might be named. However, their implementation would require a complete reversal of current policies. Political pressure on the Arab states would also lead to economic cooperation between them. Again, this would require flexibility and setting good examples, for instance in the case of Syria or the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Suffice it to mention that perpetuating this conflict and maintaining instability in the Arab Mediterranean world only serves the in-

28 K. C. Urichsen, *Qatar and the Arab Spring: Policy Drivers and Regional Implications*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, September 2014.

29 K. Hroub, *Qatar and the Arab Spring – Conflict & Intl. Politics*, 3.03.2014, Heinrich Boell Stiftung, <http://lb.boell.org/en/2014/03/03/qatar-and-arab-spring-conflict-intl-politics>

30 It seems that in retaliation both embassies were attacked a couple of months later – see: *Embassies of Egypt and UAE attacked in Libya*, Al-Jazeera, 13.11.2014, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2014/11/embassies-egypt-uae-attacked-libya-201411137319239874.html>

31 See e.g. L. Kritzinger-van Niekerk, *Regional Integration: Concepts, Advantages, Disadvantages and Lessons of Experience*, World Bank, May 2005, http://www.sarpn.org/documents/d0001249/P1416-RI-concepts_May2005.pdf

terest of Israel to the detriment of Western economy in this region. The economic potentialities in this region are enormous and they are used only in a small percentage because of the lack of local intra-regional contacts on all possible levels: political, economic, and cultural.

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