

The Mediterranean dimension of the OSCE

A southern pivot for the East-West dialogue

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It has become something of a cliché to refer to the Mediterranean as the cradle of the monotheistic civilisations. My own country, which lies right at the geographic centre of the Mare Nostrum, inevitably views this region as a crossroads where north meets south, and east meets west. Europe and North Africa; Rome and Byzantium; the West and the Levant; the Maghreb and Asia Minor.

The OSCE, for its part, is most frequently viewed as a theatre for East-West exchanges. In the minds of some, this means that there cannot be much room for more than a symbolic nod towards the southern rim of the OSCE space. I will argue that this is not only a fallacy — because events in the Mediterranean region have a direct impact on the European security area — but also because I will contend that the southern dimension is a natural pivot upon which the traditional Vancouver-Vladivostok dialogue can be balanced. Indeed we could add that there is also a north-south element to be considered, and we should perhaps also refer to an OSCE stretching from Valletta to Vilnius.

Any view of the Mediterranean and its place in a wider security context requires that an evaluation is made not only on the basis of the purely classical military dimension, but it must also take account of societal, environmental, economic and political aspects of security. Here we must speak not only of the security that is tackled by armies and tacticians, but also of issues that require a more nuanced, though no less strategic, approach.

Indeed a list of the security challenges in the Mediterranean would inevitably include migration, both legal and illegal, organised crime, energy supply and climate change. These are arguably just as relevant as the more traditional fault lines represented by the Arab/Israeli conflict, the Western Balkans and the Cyprus question, among a number of others.

All these issues are enmeshed in a complex web of historical baggage, with the north-south discourse being inevitably coloured by a colonial past which has rarely left good memories behind. Although this reality has now been consigned to history, there are still many prejudices, perceived or otherwise, that need to be overcome.

But history is not destiny and the recent events in the Arab world provide a unique opportunity for the countries concerned, and also for their neighbours, to contribute to a lasting transformation that can bring prosperity, stability and opportunity to the entire region.

It should be recalled that the Arab awakening is not only about revolution, but also about evolution. The reforms that have been underway for some time now in Morocco and Jordan, for instance, are also part of this transformational wave that is sweeping the region. We should not forget that this is not yet a comprehensive success story: Libya is still subject to turmoil; Syria is still in the throes of a bitter conflict, while Algeria seems impervious to the events around it. Besides, even those who have experienced change have no guarantee, as yet, that this will be lasting and irreversible.

The OSCE has a part to play, as do all the other regional formations that abut onto the Mediterranean area. The countries of Europe form part of a plurality of these organisations, but this does not mean that competition or overlap is inevitable. Each must seek to do what it does best and to bring to the collective effort the expertise that it is most equipped to offer.

The OSCE has an impressive body of expertise within it, both at headquarters and in the field and while it would be wrong to try to apply its wealth of experience in the East directly to the events in the South, there are certainly some lessons that have been learnt and which could provide encouragement during the transition that many Arab countries are experiencing.

One achievable target would be to encourage the new Libya to join the partnership. It is laudable that the transitional leaders wished to leave momentous decisions to an elected government but more effort is required to ensure that there is no doubt in Tripoli that their eventual participation will be welcomed with open arms.

On a more practical level, the work done by the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) represents an invaluable repository of skill and expertise. It is uniquely placed to offer know-how and training to entities tasked with law and order as well as civil society. It can assist in providing wider participation in a variety of areas of activity by encouraging more space for women and the young people. Its wide experience with elections can help new democracies understand that the second election is more important than the first; that respected and functioning institutions are far more important than a façade that does not stand the test of time. ODIHR has made itself available and in some cases is already offering its support. This is to be lauded and encouraged.

The Office of the Special Representative on Freedom of the Media is also uniquely placed to offer a brand of expertise and guidance that is not easily found elsewhere. Its mandate to ‘...advocate and promote full compliance with OSCE principles and commitments in respect of freedom of expression and free media’ is one that would find ample application in these countries in transition. This is a principle whose value cannot be restricted by artificial borders.

There is, however, one real challenge for all the participating states of the OSCE and those from the northern rim of the Mediterranean in particular. Up to now, the OSCE has essentially only paid lip-service to its southern flank and it is now time to make an unequivocal political statement amounting to a genuine commitment addressed to the countries of the southern Mediterranean.

The response so far has been the launching of a raft of projects dealing with a variety of areas. While these proposals are certainly commendable, they are a rather bureaucratic response to the needs and aspirations of the partners. I stress that this is no fault of the OSCE Secretariat, which is operating under a mandate from the participating States. Indeed, while a number of events have been proposed, there is still no guarantee that they will all be implemented, primarily because the states themselves (ourselves, I should say) have not expressed the desired level of commitment. In this it must be added that we are also the victims of a particularly harsh economic climate that does not lend itself easily to costly endeavours.

We must also bear in mind the fact that the OSCE is not necessarily the most natural interlocutor for our partners. Their speed-dial is more likely to be set to Brussels, Moscow or Washington than it is to Vienna. This is reality and it will not change soon. The challenge is to present an option that is interesting for the partners and not one where they feel that they have precious little to gain.

Too frequently the emphasis is on how much interest the partners are expressing, while in reality it is up to the OSCE and the participating States to ask themselves what the organization can offer to strengthen the partnership and to further its interests in a region that has a profound impact on its own security.

Some have advocated a distinct or separate OSCE-style formation for the Mediterranean, an OSCM. This idea has been floating around for decades, but it never seemed to find sufficient support at the political level. Moreover, other Mediterranean initiatives have surfaced from time to time, with mixed fortunes.

My own country, Malta, has been at the forefront of these initiatives because we have always sought to encourage co-operation in the Mediterranean region as well as beyond into the areas on its borders. In the past, Malta advocated the setting up of a Council for the Mediterranean, along the lines of the Council of Europe, but this did not find sufficient support, primarily because it was a victim first of the Cold War and then the burst of optimism that came after it. Nevertheless, Malta is today a prime venue for Euro-Arab relations, having hosted the first EU-Arab Foreign Ministers meeting in 2008, which led to the setting up of the EC-Arab League Liaison Office in Malta. Moreover, on 5-6 October 2012, the Heads of State and Government of the Western Mediterranean Forum (5+5) gathered in Malta for a Summit that marked a new phase of regional dialogue and co-operation. The 5+5 has been a more discrete formation and, I believe as a direct result of this lower profile, has been more successful.

The Barcelona Process, which has given way to the Union for the Mediterranean, is viewed as being too EU-centric and, moreover, it has been bogged down by cumbersome structures and the lack of progress in the Middle East. It has failed to convince in its reaction to the events in the Arab world.


The main obstacle to a future OSCM may be fatigue. A combination of reduced resources and a lack of appetite for new initiatives would put paid to any serious proposal in this direction. Moreover, it may be justifiably argued that the characteristics of this initiative are already present, even if they are spread in different formations. The challenge, therefore, is that of identifying and harnessing these efforts in such a way that the twin requirements of political commitment and practical support are satisfied in an unequivocal manner.

While regional co-operation must be conceived within certain parameters, we must avoid artificial delineations that find little application in reality. If the OSCE is to fulfil its vocation as a platform for the safeguarding of security and co-operation in Europe, it cannot overlook the fact that the entire Mediterranean basin is a natural extension of the European space as

conceived in the Helsinki Final Act. This is unequivocally stated in that document. Moreover, we cannot conceive of a security discourse that stops at the southern shores of one of the most turbulent and eventful regions on the planet.

It is true that the Mediterranean may need to appreciate the OSCE more, but the feeling needs to be entirely mutual.





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