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WHEN THE “STABILITY” EUROPEANS ARE PROUD OF, FUELS INSECURITY IN THE MEDITERRANEAN

JEAN-PIERRE FILIU

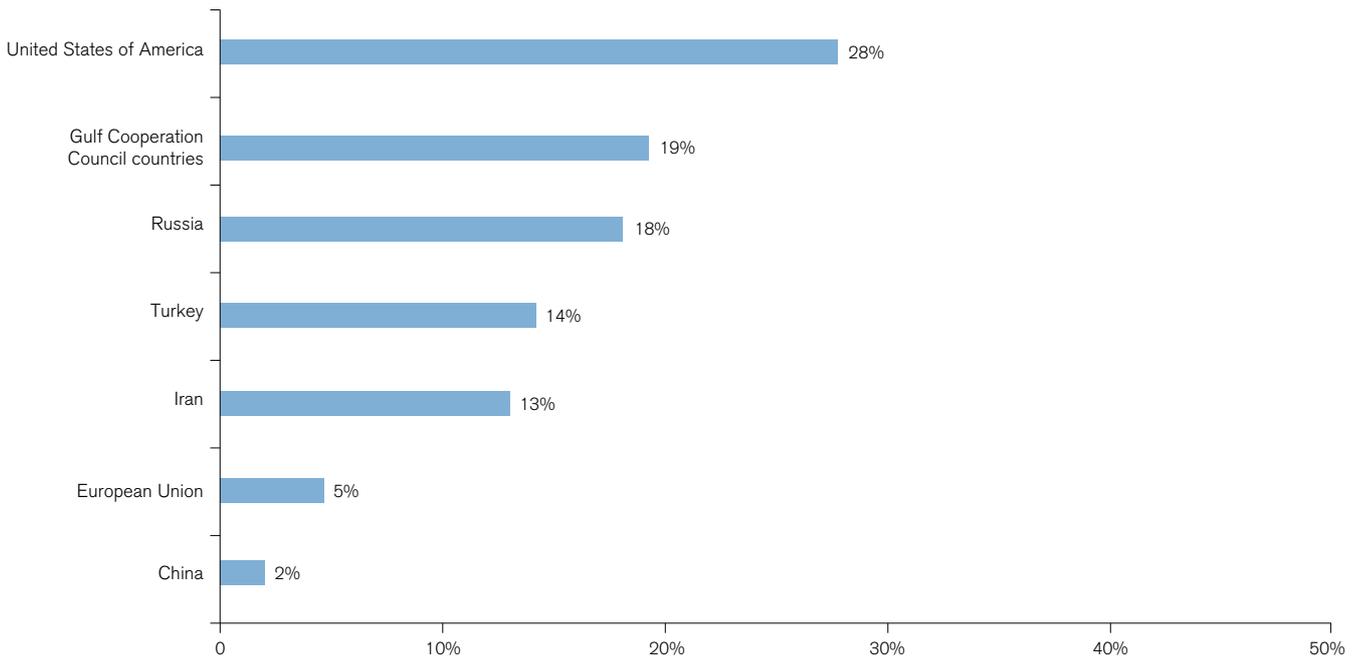
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What if the obsession of the European Union (EU) member states with “stability” in the Mediterranean paradoxically led to maintaining long-lasting insecurity in the region?

What if the obsession of the European Union (EU) member states with “stability” in the Mediterranean paradoxically led to maintaining long-lasting insecurity in the region? This deliberately provocative suggestion is not reflected in the Euromed Survey results: only 5% of respondents, an identical percentage for both the north and south of the Mediterranean, consider that the EU may have “a negative effect on the stability” of the region, far behind the United States (28%), the Gulf oil monarchies (19%), Russia (18%), Turkey (14%) and Iran (13%).

Graph 1: Which of the following actors are more likely to have a negative effect on the stability of the Southern and Eastern Mediterranean region?

(respondents were asked to choose 2 options out of 7)



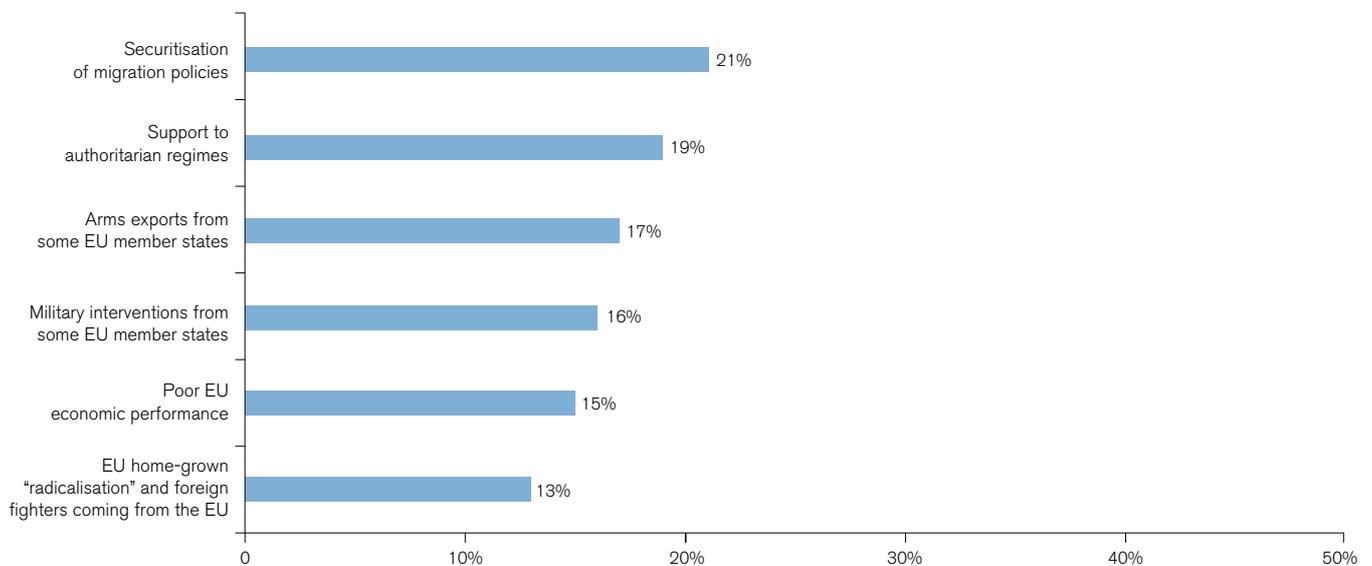
Source: Compiled by the IEMed based on the results of the 9th Euromed Survey

A “Stability” in Trompe l’Œil

However, although the EU is not seen as the most harmful actor for the region, some of its dynamics or the policies it promotes may have negative effects. For 19% of respondents, “Support to authoritarian regimes” by the EU worryingly contributes to instability in the Mediterranean (again an almost identical percentage for the north and south) and is the second option chosen after “Securitarisation (sic) of migration policies” with 21%. “Arms exports from some EU member states”, which are often the logical consequence of support for dictatorships in power, are also emphasised by 17% of respondents, once again equally in the north and south of the Mediterranean (see Graph 2).

Graph 2: From the following options that relate either to the situation of the EU or to its policies, which ones are likely to have the most negative effect on the stability of SEM countries?

(respondents were asked to choose 2 options out of 6)



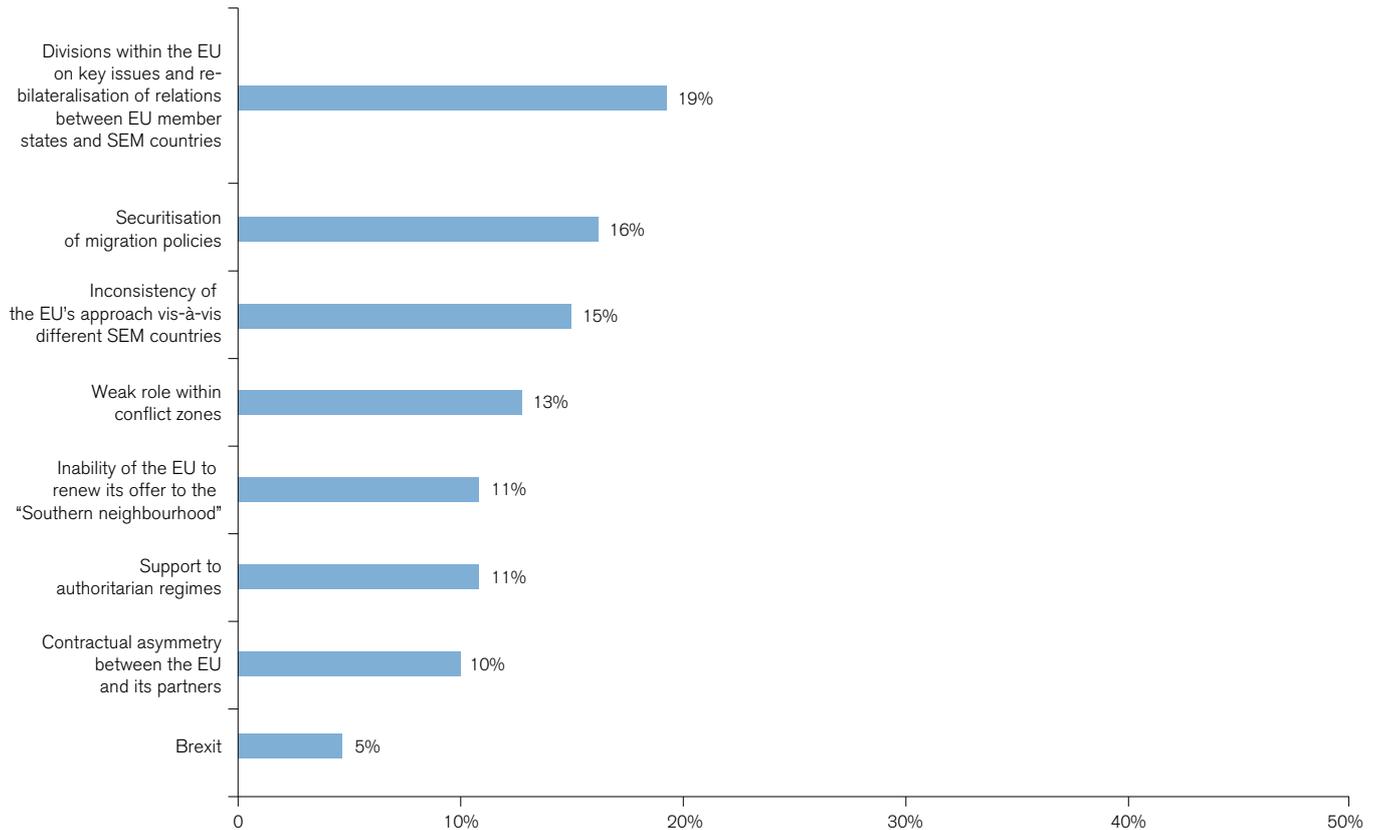
Source: Compiled by the IEMed based on the results of the 9th Euromed Survey

Even more revealing is the fact that this “Support to authoritarian regimes” is considered by 11% of respondents as one of the main reasons for the EU’s loss of credibility in the Mediterranean (see Graph 3). Other reasons for loss of credibility identified are: “divisions within the EU” (19%), the “inconsistency” of the European policy in the Mediterranean (15%) and the “weak role within conflict zones” (13%). These different factors taken together not only undermine the importance of the EU in the Mediterranean but also strengthen a default consensus between member states to the benefit of the status quo. Thus a very disturbing image is drawn of a Europe incapable of promoting a future vision in the Mediterranean, of a Europe that, for lack of anything better, clings on to a “stability” in trompe l’œil, based on the most brutal force at the expense of the most basic right.

A very disturbing image is drawn of a Europe incapable of promoting a future vision in the Mediterranean.

Graph 3: What is most likely to affect the EU's credibility in the Mediterranean?

(respondents were asked to choose 2 options out of 8)



Source: Compiled by the IEMed based on the results of the 9th Euromed Survey

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From 1995 to 2010, the Barcelona Process had already suffered from the European inability to consolidate a real "third pillar" of cooperation with Southern Mediterranean civil societies. The Arab dictatorships had steadily blocked any progress in this respect, either by stressing their demands for "sovereignty" or by fabricating NGOs controlled by the regime (and often known under the ironic oxymoron of GONGO for Governmental NGO). The democratic uprising that spread through the Arab world in early 2011 torpedoed this fateful illusion. Nevertheless, European policy-makers refused to accept that the fall of the "wall of fear" in the Arab world had been as important for EU security in the long term as the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989.

Instead of taking stock of such a historical turn of events, Brussels laboriously updated programmes already in force, adapting them under a new name to the democratic transitions in Tunisia and Egypt. Once again these two countries, where the people's protest had overthrown the dictators in power, were not the only ones to benefit from an extremely measured generosity. They were connected by the EU to Morocco and to Jordan, the former as a result of the constitutional reforms introduced by the monarch and the latter for reasons more linked to the Near East equation than to real democratic openings. Today we assess to what extent this certificate of "liberalisation" awarded by the EU rested for these two monarchies upon questionable foundations. It said much, above all, about European blindness faced with the radical originality of the popular uprisings in the Arab world.

Despite this persistent feebleness, Brussels was notable for its will to impede the worst in Egypt in summer 2013. Mohammed Morsi, the first democratically-elected president in the history of Egypt, had soon compromised his political credibility by prioritising the interests of

his party, the Muslim Brotherhood, over those of the nation. The Egyptian army had fuelled a broad protest movement that had enabled it to overthrow Morsi to the benefit of General Abdel-fattah Sissi, Minister of Defence. Catherine Ashton combined the EU's efforts with those of John Kerry, the head of American diplomacy, to mediate between Morsi, held incommunicado, and Sissi, the real "strong man" of the country. But the general who had led the coup soon put an end to this mediation and, in mid-August, crushed the gatherings of his opponents in Cairo. This blood bath was the worst outburst of violence in the capital since the invasion of Egypt by Bonaparte in 1798.

The Regeni Scandal

Within the framework of the "Neighbourhood Instrument", the EU allocated to Egypt aid amounting to 115 million euros in 2014, 105 in 2015, 100 in 2016 and 100 in 2017. These amounts may seem modest in comparison to the 1.3 billion dollars of military aid allocated each year by the United States, as well as the billions of dollars in aid that Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates poured into Sissi's regime. But Brussels claims to frame its assistance to Egypt within a partnership based on "a shared commitment to the universal values of democracy, the rule of law and respect for human rights." Such a grandiloquent proclamation sounds sinister in Sissi's Egypt, which is even more dictatorial than Mubarak's, with tens of thousands of political prisoners, a systematic and documented use of torture, an unprecedented level of violence and public liberties in tatters.

Under Sissi, the repression apparatuses have even launched a "disappearance" campaign with thousands of victims, historically related to the Latin American dictatorships and hitherto unknown in Egypt. Faced with these crimes, the EU has preferred to put its head in the sand, which has not prevented the torture of one of its nationals: Giulio Regeni, a 28-year old Italian student conducting doctoral research for Cambridge on the independent trade unions, who went missing in Cairo on the night of 25 January 2016. That night the capital was patrolled more than ever by the security services, mobilised on the occasion of the fifth anniversary of the anti-Mubarak revolution. Regeni's body, bearing the marks of atrocious physical abuse, was found some days later, thrown in the ditch on the road to Alexandria.

Crosschecked testimonies on Regeni's arrest were published soon after his "disappearance" in the premises of the much feared National Security, linked to the Ministry of the Interior. Rome recalled its ambassador to Cairo, with the support of other European capitals in its demand for the truth about the Regeni affair. This demand was taken up in the European Parliament by a mass vote (588 against 10) in March 2016. The Egyptian authorities, put under pressure, announced the death, in an encounter with the police, of four members of a "criminal gang" to which Regeni's kidnapping and murder had been attributed. Sissi's regime has maintained this official version since then. Such systematic obstruction bore fruit in summer 2017, with the return of the Italian ambassador to Cairo. The EU and its member states, on the pretext of not being more papist than the Pope, have also moved on from the Regeni case.

European leaders have therefore abandoned their principles in Egypt, to the extent of accepting that unbridled repression against civil society led to the death of one of their nationals. For France, this shameful climb-down even comes with major arms supplies to Egypt, or the provision of electronic material to control these last independent voices. Despite such evident complacency, Sissi's regime seems incapable of quashing the terrorist threat in his country, busy as he is suppressing any form of opposition. The liberals and progressives who dare criticise him are compared to Islamists, who are lumped in with Jihadists to crush them more effectively. Meanwhile, Daesh has established in the strategic Sinai Peninsula the most important branch of its organisation since the fall, in summer 2017, of the pseudo-caliphate that it had set up between Syria and Iraq.

During the democratic uprising in 2011, European policy-makers refused to accept that the fall of the "wall of fear" had been so important for EU security in the long term.

European leaders have abandoned their principles in Egypt, to the extent of accepting that unbridled repression against civil society led to the death of one of their nationals.

The Mirages of the Status Quo

A European policy that fuels the Jihadist threat, by supporting dictatorial regimes that claim to combat it, can in no way drape itself in “realism”.

A European policy that thus fuels the Jihadist threat, by supporting dictatorial regimes that claim to combat it, can in no way drape itself in “realism”. The same applies to European passivity faced with the methodical dismantling of the “two-state solution” for Israel and Palestine. The EU, the first economic partner of Israel and first donor to the Palestinian Authority, would certainly not lack assets to contribute to a long-lasting settlement of this damaging issue. But the well-known adage in the Middle East according to which “Americans decide, Europeans pay and the United Nations feeds” is still relevant. An Obama administration that denied the EU any capacity for initiative concerning the Israel Palestinian dossier has been replaced by a Trump team that overtly despises its Western allies.

The White House has dealt a terrible blow to a negotiated solution by unilaterally deciding, in December 2017, to recognise Jerusalem as the capital of Israel. The EU, however, showed its division at the UN General Assembly during a vote condemning such a decision, with most of its members voting in favour of the resolution while Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic, Rumania and Latvia abstained (it was adopted by 128 votes against 9, with 35 abstentions). European diplomacy has also chosen not to encourage the Palestinian Authority in its refusal to negotiate with the United States from now on, considering that Washington has always had most possibilities of making progress on peace.

For the EU, the Mediterranean policy is not a “luxury” but a necessity that involves its values, interests and security.

Incapable of formulating an alternative to an American “peace plan” whose publication is regularly postponed, the EU has also failed to distinguish itself with its proposals for finding a way out of the terrible Gaza impasse. The Palestinian enclave, subject to a joint siege by Israel and Egypt, is sinking into catastrophic misery, the despair of the population playing into Hamas’ hands, which controls the territory with an iron fist. Over one hundred Palestinians were killed by the Israeli army in spring 2018 while trying to walk to the fence that encloses the Gaza Strip. Neither Israel nor Hamas want an open war, which would be even more devastating than the summer 2014 conflict, but the increasingly less controlled mistakes follow one after another, with a lack of future prospects. The EU could certainly calm the sharpest tensions by opening under its aegis a maritime route linking Gaza with Cyprus. However, it refrains from such a gesture, which, in close coordination with Israel, would put it back at the centre of the talks on the future of the Gaza Strip.

The Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, in power since 2009, is not content with congratulating himself for this European passivity. He positions himself openly at the side of his Hungarian counterpart, Viktor Orban, to plead in favour of a reorientation of EU policy on the arguments of Budapest, today denounced in Brussels. Make no mistake: the head of the Israeli government relies on European populists as he had relied in the past on American populists, a policy crowned by the electoral success of Trump. Such an aggressive mobilisation of the right-wing and the extreme-right in Israel recalls that, for the EU, the Mediterranean policy is not a “luxury” but a necessity that involves its values, interests and security. This is not the least of the lessons of the Survey conducted this year by the IEMed.

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