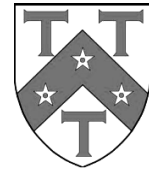




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St Antony's College
Oxford

AGENTS OF CHANGE IN THE MEDITERRANEAN

St Antony's College, 18-19 June 2009

Conference report

Agents of Change in the Mediterranean

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Report by Dimitar Bechev

On 18-19 June 2009, the European Studies Centre at St Antony's College, Oxford hosted a conference on political, socio-economic and cultural change in the southern Mediterranean (North Africa and the Middle East). Co-organised with Maison Française d'Oxford, the event followed in the footsteps of *Mediterranean Unions? Visions and Politics*, a joint event held back in June 2008 as well as a series of workshops and roundtables put together by the Free University of Berlin (FUB) as part of a collaborative project within the RAMSES2 Network of Excellence on Mediterranean Studies. *Agents of Change* was kindly supported by the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the RAMSES2 workpackage co-piloted by St Antony's and FUB.

The conference kicked off with an overview of Europe's impact on North Africa and the Middle East. **Esther Barbé**, professor at the Autonomous University of Barcelona, surveyed the dynamics of intra-EU policymaking. With respect to the Lisbon Treaty, she stressed the potential role of the new Article 8 stipulating a 'special relationship' between the Union and its neighbours. She was, however, sceptical if the Union for the Mediterranean could bring a break-through and significantly upgrade the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP) or the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP). The Mediterranean Union's launch was marred by intergovernmental bickering, notably between France and Germany, which had negative implications as to the coherence of the scheme. Furthermore, no additional incentives were provided to southern partners as President Sarkozy's brainchild could not draw on additional EU resources beyond what had already been allocated. Finally, the Union for the Mediterranean could not benefit from the increased legitimacy achieved through giving the southerners a greater voice. The Franco-Egyptian co-presidency and the secretariat in Barcelona additionally 'intergovernmentalised' the process but it is questionable how much this affected the institution's standing in

societies in the southern Mediterranean. If anything, the bias in favour of the existing regimes in the south has brought divisions in Europe as certain countries lament the dilution of EMP's commitment, whether rhetorical or genuine, to democracy and human rights.

The second speaker on the panel, **Richard Youngs** (FRIDE/University of Warwick), examined Spain's place in North-South relations across the Mediterranean and argued that the country has more often than not failed to act as an agent of change. The country's weight has declined since the 1990s. In addition, the generally introvert government of Zapatero has 'traded' the Barcelona Process (EMP) for Sarkozy's Union for the Mediterranean, lured by the dubious gain of having Barcelona as seat of the secretariat. Zapatero has refocused Spain's Mediterranean policy on Morocco, away from the partnership with Algeria pursued under his predecessor Aznar. While Spain has trebled developmental funding, the greatest share goes to Sub-Saharan Africa rather than the proximate neighbours, which has negatively affected the country's profile in cross-Mediterranean affairs. Spain has been one of the chief proponents for a 'securitised' migration policy, pushing for the build-up of FRONTEX and the upgraded cooperation with North African states on border controls. The rhetoric about human rights and democracy, often referenced to Spain's own transition in the 1970s, sits strangely at odds with the actual policy of support for autocratic leaders such as Hosni Mubarak. Pet initiatives such as the Alliance of Civilisations are limited to a narrow elitist circle and have no wider political resonance. Overall, Spain has benefitted by the deepening economic integration between the two shores of the Mediterranean but this has not been translated into a strategic asset for Madrid's foreign policy. One critical sector is energy where successive governments have cultivated bilateral links with supplier countries such as Algeria and Libya but short-termism rather than vision dominates motivations. In sum, though Zapatero has made up for some of Aznar's policy shortcomings (notably the alignment with the US), Spain has done little by way of progressive engagement with the southern Mediterranean.

After debating at length the nature and effects of the EU's involvement in the region, the shifted its analytical focus to the countries and societies of the southern Mediterranean as loci of transformation, in tune with RAMSES2 commitment to 'decentring'. That this altered perspective, away from the talk of a 'Mediterranean' emanating from Brussels or Paris, proved timely and appropriate has been vividly demonstrated by the unprecedented demonstrations on the streets of Tehran and other big Iranian cities in the wake of the

contested presidential elections. The spirit of 'decentring' was also present in the landmark speech by the US President Obama during his visit to Egypt, advocating mutual respect and understanding between the West and the Islamic world.

The first panel on 19 June dealt with the role of societal actors in political changes in the region. **Ahmed Herzenni** (Moroccan Human Rights Advisory Council) concentrated on Morocco's evolution from authoritarianism to a pluralism starting from the early 1990s. To him, democratic and evolutionary change is the only possible path of political development in Morocco and the wider southern Mediterranean at present, after revolutionary upheavals, often driven by the army, have been discredited as a method. In the case of Morocco, he stressed the role played by King Hassan II, the presence of relatively strong political parties and the activist stance of civil society as the three key catalysts for regime liberalisation. Herzenni then focused on the role played by the Equity and Reconciliation Commission in addressing the difficult legacy of past repressions. Still, he argued that Morocco has still a long way to go to what he described as 'institutionalised democracy'. The main constraints, for Herzenni, have to do with the weakening of political parties from the 1990s onwards and the limited role of the legislative branch.

Rafi Nets-Zehngut (Columbia University) investigated the ever-changing landscape of historical memory in Israel, concentrating on the case of the 1948 war and the ensuing exodus of Palestinian Arabs. Drawing on a rich body of empirical data collected from various sources as well as representative sampling, he contended that a majority within the Israeli society has gradually moved beyond the nationalist paradigm to what he described as 'Jewish-balanced narrative'. His presentation was followed by a vivid discussion with several attendees questioning the significance of this evolution in terms of the day-to-day politics in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Another debated issue was the impact of revisionist historiography over the past two decades or so.

Panel II proceeded to investigate the role of globalisation and increased mobility of goods, people and ideas in bringing transformation in societies and economies as well as empowering agents of change. **Leila Vignal**, a researcher at the Middle East Centre within St Antony's College, posited that the last 20 years have witnessed a dramatic shift of economic paradigm in the direction of the so-called Washington consensus. The region has been 'inserted' into the global economy epitomised by the dense trading networks and the influx of foreign direct investment. She examined in depth the case of Egypt, looking at

phenomena such as urbanisation, the growth of consumerism, the changing social structure but also the persistence of clientelist and rent-seeking economic practices that put in question the notion of 'liberalisation spill-over' from the economy into the political sphere.

A similar negative view informed the talk by **George Joffe** (Cambridge University), a long-standing student of politics in North Africa and the Middle East. He argued that a 'decentring' view of the Mediterranean is next to impossible, given that Europe is always the 'elephant in the room' in the economic and political debates on the region. From the perspective of the *longue durée*, the Mediterranean has oscillated between being a zone of confrontation and a space for colonial expansion. There is a clear continuity between the neo-liberal liberalisation of the present and the prevailing mode of engagement in the colonial era starting in the early 19th century. In addition, Europe influenced the southern shore through the diffusion of ideas concerning socio-economic and political modernisation. More recently, the current 'securitisation' of frontiers linked to migration and the post-9/11 concern over transnational terrorism cements inequalities and exacerbates the grave social tensions in the south. Noting the impotence of the various EU initiatives aimed at integration, Joffe advocated a more constructive engagement with political and social actors seeking to redefine democratic norms and practices through embedding them in the authentic experience of the region as exemplified by the Justice and Development Party (AKP) in Turkey.

The last session of the conference explored the fields of media and culture. **Naomi Sakr** of the University of Westminster offered a critical perspective on the popular notion that the transnationalisation of media is ushering in new democratic culture into the Arab-speaking Mediterranean countries. She noted that the most visible channels operating across borders are not Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya but rather entertainment-oriented operators such as NBC feeding viewers a steady diet of US films and sitcoms. Westerners take it for granted that television has had a liberating effect on societies in the Middle East but evidence shows that media are quickly hijacked or coopted by ruling elites. While channels are launched with the promise to foster freedom of speech the status quo is largely perpetuated as the popular talk shows only marginally contribute to the emergence of a genuine political debate. Sakr observed that a persistent impediment to media have been the ever changing regulatory frameworks which make the media business costly in addition to being politically sensitive. **Yves Gonzalez-Quijano** (University of Lyon) had a much more

optimist take on social dynamics in the region. He argued that in some countries such as Egypt cultural production has been democratised since the 'open doors' economic policy was introduced 1970s. Previously there was a strong emphasis on the paramount role of the state as an educator and moral guide of the population at large. Following that a mass culture has emerged from the bottom up, resonating much more robustly with the public than the elite-fostered production. Gonzalez-Quijano interpreted that as a sign of Westernisation and argued that the rise to prominence of various Islamic representations and references is also part of the phenomenon at hand. He paid particular attention to the field of music as representative of the trend towards hybridisation (between global and local rather than 'foreign' and 'authentic' elements) and pluralism. What followed was a discussion about the political significance of those processes. In Gonzalez-Quijano's thinking, the advent of a new popular culture coupled with the tremendous expansion of young population is germane for major social shifts which might not have to do much with politics but would nonetheless bring long-term consequences.