



A COMMON VISION FOR A PROGRESSIVE ARAB WORLD

LISTENING TO THE PROGRESSIVE MEDITERRANEAN INITIATIVE

Massimo D'Alema

Cairo, 20 January 2013

Any further information can be obtained through FEPS Policy Advisor,
David Kitching at david.kitching@feps-europe.eu

Dear colleagues, dear friends,

I am very glad to be here today and have the opportunity to discuss with you the spirit which will define the future relations between Europe and the Arab world. This is a very different political context from the one that existed only until a couple of years ago, before the extraordinary revolutionary wave that stretched across the Arab countries starting from the end of 2010.

You may think that it is an odd comparison. But, please, let me remind you what happened in Europe after the fall of the Berlin Wall. With the end of the Cold War, for more than ten years, Europe turned eastwards. For over a decade it decided to focus its attention primarily on enlargement towards the Central and Eastern European states and to the consolidation of peace and democracy in our continent.

Well, I believe that the Arab Spring is a political and cultural revolution comparable to events in Eastern Europe at the end of the 20th century. It is changing the lives of millions of people across a wide region.

Yet, my impression is that Europe has failed to fully grasp the extent of the changes underway. And in fact, the EU has not yet re-oriented its own policy towards the Mediterranean region with the necessary strength and determination.

We must not forget that Europe is living a deep crisis and it is now looking inwards. However, allow me to underline that some people in Europe look concerned at the political transition taking place in the Arab countries. We can understand the reason for concern. But the real problem is what Europe can do in order to favour a positive outcome of the process.

I do not pretend to shape a new political strategy for the European Union here. But I would like at least to suggest briefly the priorities that should influence the EU's policy towards its Mediterranean neighbours.

Firstly, Europe and its member states must never again give the impression that they are nostalgic for the old dictatorial regimes. Some maybe think that dictators represented the ideal political partners, because they raised fewer problems as far as issues such as international security or energy supply or immigration were concerned.

Let's be honest: supporting dictatorships was a huge mistake for which Europe should now do some serious self-criticism. Today and in this context, it is the very credibility of the European Union which is at stake.

Secondly, taking democracy seriously means that we must open up dialogue with the new emerging leaderships, even if we do not like them.

Democracy is a core aspect of our political culture. More than this, democracy is for us a universal value, an indisputable principle. As a consequence we cannot deny to our Arab partners the right to democratically express their own choices. And we cannot but engage with the new protagonists of this epochal change. We must deal and discuss with these new leaderships issues such as human rights and democratic consolidation, because these questions are consistent with our values

Besides, it is a mistake, in my view, to demonize the Islamic movements. We must learn to distinguish between intolerant fundamentalism and political Islam. Moreover, their demonization only

favours anti-Western attitudes and a climate of clash of civilizations and religions, which damage the secular and progressive forces in the Arab world.

However, showing respect for the democratically elected leaderships does not mean that we shall refrain from urging them to protect human and civil rights, freedom of opinion and association, equal treatment of women and minorities.

But to be credible and effective, Europe must develop its new relations with its Arab partners on an equal basis, without anachronistic postcolonial paternalism or intolerable hegemonic claims. And this is particularly true in two fields: those of the energy sources and of migration policies.

As far as energy is concerned, I believe that Europe should start to develop a common energy policy with its Arab neighbours. A policy that should overcome the strict and dated distinction between suppliers and consumers and that must be founded on new imperative environmental priorities. A common policy which should also couple the exploitation of traditional energy sources with the development of renewable ones.

Migration, as I just mentioned, represents the other crucial issue we must seriously deal with. As for the case of energy, I think that also in this area it will be necessary to initiate a new serious common policy. It will not be new for you to hear that thousands of migrants die every year in the Mediterranean Sea in the desperate attempt to escape from conflicts or persecution, famine or poverty. Their aim is to find a safe haven. I do believe that Europe has too often shown a deplorable indifference towards this problem. Instead of formulating policies based on migration flows, on a common management of reasonable migration, Brussels' policies – as well as those of the member states: I remember Italy and the agreement between Berlusconi and Gaddafi – have focused on preventing arrivals and protecting Europe's borders, without any respect for human rights and human lives.

Respect for the human rights of migrants and support for the civil rights of those immigrants who live and work and raise their families in Europe, and contribute to our economies, are priorities we can no longer neglect or postpone. The EU's approach in these fields will in fact qualify the relationship between Europe and our Arab and African neighbours.

But in my view, the crucial question on which, once again, relations between the Arab and Islamic world on the one side and the Western world on the other side will be tested, is the Palestinian issue. In fact, I dare say that Europe's and more generally the Western world's, incapability to genuinely commit itself to the search for a solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict has largely contributed to Islamic movements' radicalization.

Let me stress one key point. A double standard in the EU's approach towards the question was accepted for many years for two reasons: first, because Israel was the only democratic country in the region. Second, because the dictators were not credible when they raised the issue, for they were violating human rights in their own countries. This will no longer be acceptable for democratic states, for the new-found free public opinion in the Arab world. The first step towards a feasible European approach to the Middle East peace process – a process in which we cannot allow ourselves to fail – is then to abandon any double standards towards the actors involved.

Obviously, for European countries, Israel's need for security and its right to exist are not to be disputed. This is for Europe the unavoidable precondition for negotiating. Nevertheless, this does not mean that the solution of the conflict can be left to the sole responsibility and goodwill of the Israeli leadership.

In fact, it is evident that the Israeli right, which is ruling the country, is currently working against any prospect of a peace agreement which takes Palestinian people's rights into fair consideration. For this very same reason, I think that to keep asserting that Israelis and Palestinians must negotiate, and

that it is up to them alone to find the solution to this interminable conflict is not enough. Rather it is only a way for the international community to relieve itself from its own obligations and responsibilities, pretending hypocritically that the relationship between the fragile and divided Palestinians and the powerful Israelis is on an equal footing, which, as we all know, it is not.

First of all, we must, finally, favour the Palestinian reconciliation, as the very precondition for a negotiation. To this end, we also have to admit that the European decision not to have relations with Hamas was a mistake, for it represented an obstacle for Palestinian unity.

Secondly, I believe it is up to Europe, and to European progressive forces in particular, to bring the question of the resolution of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict back on the negotiating table, ensuring the international community's genuine commitment to the search for a solution, which must abide by the international law and the United Nations' resolutions.

According to reliable rumours – which have been confirmed by an important Israeli newspaper – the European Union is currently working on drafting a political plan to break the deadlock of the negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians. The core of such plan would be the establishment of a Palestinian state along the 1967 borders, with East Jerusalem as its capital, and a definite schedule to open and conduct negotiations in the course of 2013, after national election in Israel and the formation of the new government.

It appears that the United Kingdom and France are the main sponsors of this initiative, that they enjoy Germany's support and that the EU High Representative, Lady Catherine Ashton, is considering the possibility of advocating the plan at European Union level. I hope so, and I strongly hope that Italy can join the group after the elections, once a reliable, center-left government will be established.

I cannot but rejoice at the news and hope that it will be soon confirmed by official sources. It being understood that I strongly wish for the full commitment of the European Union to such a plan, including – and let me stress this point – the possibility to undertake concrete measures in order for us to help both sides of the negotiations. Because without a strong international action to call for negotiations, that will remain just a plan.

Last but not least, I am convinced that it is also time to reflect upon the need for a new institutional framework for relations between the European Union and the southern shore of the Mediterranean. No doubt the experiences of the Barcelona process and of the even more disastrous Union for the Mediterranean are now well behind us and cannot be recovered.

Certainly, the effort to re-think the main features of the European Neighbourhood Policy, and especially the proposal to strengthen cooperation with and offer more benefits to the southern partners that are willing to introduce more democratic reforms – the so-called “more for more” approach –, is a positive development.

We all remember the great extent to which the prospect of accession to the European Union worked as a strong incentive for the Central and Eastern European states to introduce the necessary reforms in their political systems. This made them comply with the Copenhagen criteria of democratic governance and respect for human rights.

I am not going to affirm here that Europe should offer the prospect of accession to the Arab states, as it was able to do with its Eastern European neighbours. I understand it's not feasible. Yet, I think that we should explore boldly every new possible form of integration between the European states and the Arab world, which is something more and something different from the Mediterranean. We must aim to enhance every area of cooperation through the establishment of common institutions

and through the involvement of civil society, economic actors, and representative organizations, not only governments.

In other words, what we should strive for is a new community of democratic states, which should be open to the accession of all those countries that want to collaborate with the European Union and that are able to guarantee adequate standards of respect of human and civil rights, and freedom.

To conclude, I believe it is our responsibility, it is up to Europeans to launch a clear message to the Arab world, to the huge masses of people who fight bravely to free themselves from dictatorships. Our message should be “we are with you”. If we show scepticism as they struggle to build democracy – even if, in some countries, this is happening in the most turbulent ways – then I am afraid that, in the end, freedom and human rights will be the victims. By contrast, it will be the components that are most hostile towards Europe that will eventually prevail.

A great French historian, Fernand Braudel, once wrote that the Mediterranean Sea, after being the core of civilization for a century, witnessed a shift in economic and cultural exchanges. It lost its position as the heart of growth and development towards, first to the Atlantic and later to the Pacific. Today, for several reasons, the Mediterranean is back at the centre, a crossroads of many risks and opportunities. The greatest challenges of our times are largely to be faced along its borders.

Many centuries ago, the languages that were spoken around this sea were Greek and Latin. In these two ancient languages there were two different words to name the sea: “pelagos”, a term that evokes the unknown, the danger, the threat, and “pontus”, a word which has the same root as pont, in French, ponte in Italian, which is translated as “bridge”. Two totally different names. It is fascinating how even the ancient people that inhabited this region perceived the dual nature of our sea.

Making the Mediterranean a bridge between civilizations finally unified by the common values of freedom and democracy is the great opportunity of our times. And it is a duty that progressives must fulfil.