Cultural Diplomacy and Cooperation in the Mediterranean: a Constant Investment

Damien Helly
Visiting Professor
College of Europe, Bruges

Cultural Diplomacy, Cultural Cooperation and Cultural Relations Five Years after the Arab Spring

The cultural dimension of international relations in the Mediterranean has been researched quite extensively.[1] Cultural diplomacy experts tend to distinguish cultural diplomacy from cultural relations.[2] While cultural diplomacy primarily involves state apparatuses, cultural relations unfold beyond the State and flourish among people and societies. This distinction matters in the Mediterranean region where international relations between states have, in the last five years, been marked by two main conflicts in Syria-Iraq and Libya – and the consequent increase in migration flows-, the return of debates on the role of political Islam (Turkey and Egypt), repression policies in Egypt and Turkey and the EU's difficulty in effectively managing migration shocks.

The Syrian and Libyan conflicts are closely linked to a wider Muslim jihadist phenomenon to which not only southern Mediterranean citizens contribute, but also northern Mediterranean or EU citizens (the so-called foreign fighters of Daesh). Recent crises have created tensions among Arabs (in the case of Daesh), between Arabs and non-Arabs (Syrian-Turkish tensions), among Muslims and between some Muslims and non-Muslims (as demonstrated by anti-Muslim moves taken by President Trump). Conflicts have also provoked large refugee flows that host countries have struggled to deal with. This context might explain contradictions between, on the one hand, support for religious diversity (around 80% in the region according to 2012 polls) and, on the other, fear of cultural diversity as a threat to a society's stability (between 46% and 48%).[3]

In such a context, cultural relations and diplomacy in the region have to be understood as a mix of cultural relations taking place in the framework of a space created from four angles: states, society, markets and knowledge producers. Of course, cultural relations and diplomacy also have to be understood in a wider context and in a historical perspective, but the length of this article does not allow for such an assessment.[4] While some 2008 studies started by stating that Western-Arab relations were grounded in deep mistrust,[5] this article looks at the conditions under which cultural diplomacy and relations in the Mediterranean region have evolved in the last three years, without making a clear-cut judgment on where they stand. Since the very idea of a "Mediterranean cultural region" is not shared, perceived or experienced homogene-

---

[1] BOUQUEREL, Fanny and EL HUSSEINY, Basma, "Towards a strategy for culture in the Mediterranean Region. EC preparatory document. Needs and opportunities assessment report in the field of cultural policy and dialogue in the Mediterranean Region." 2009. See also Mediterranean country reports and notes (Algeria, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Palestine, Syria, Tunisia) of the EU Preparatory Action on culture in EU External Relations, available at http://ec.europa.eu/culture/initiatives/external-relations_en

[2] ISAR, Yudhishthir Raj et al. *Preparatory Action: 'Culture in EU External Relations.' Engaging the World: Towards Global Cultural Citizenship*. Brussels: European Commission, 2014, pp. 123-124.

[3] SILVESTRI, Sara. "Religion and Societal Cohesion at the Heart of the Intercultural Debate." In: *The Anna Lindh Report 2014. Intercultural Trends and Social Change in the Euro-Mediterranean Region*. Anna Lindh Foundation, 2014, p. 41.

[4] For a historical overview of Euro-Mediterranean relations, see YOUNGS, Richard. http://carnegieeurope.eu/2015/05/18/20-years-of-euro-mediterranean-partnership-pub-60337

[5] BERGERS, Maurits et al. *Mind the Gap or Bridge the Gap? Culture in Western Arab relations*, Clingendael, 2008

ously, the shapes cultural relations have taken in recent times vary greatly.

The Main Actors and Levels of Cultural Relations

Cultural practices and habits in the Mediterranean have been influenced by the globalization of new communication technologies and the Internet as much as by internal societal dynamics. On the societal level, cultural relations go far beyond cultural diplomacy in the region: people-to-people contacts through migration flows, educational exchanges, city twinning, cultural trade or gastronomy outweigh government-led initiatives.

Polls run between 2009 and 2012 show that there is a convergence among societies regarding the importance attached to family values, suggesting that "basic and intimate human relations associated with kindness, solidarity, mutual care and respect count more in the region than ideological or theological positions."[6]

Statistics reveal that in the southern Mediterranean, around half of the population was under 25 in 2011 (only 27% of the population in the EU-28) and 20% of the population was between 15 and 24.[7]

These populations make widespread use of social media, although in different ways. For instance, research has shown that the role of the Internet during the Arab Spring varied from one country to another (eg. strong role in Tunisia and much less so in Egypt).[8]

The diffusion and consumption of music and films online is increasing across all Mediterranean societies, with specific connections to global networks or publics organized according to diaspora, language (in the case of Turkish speakers) or other community factors.

In the "South," some cultural professionals and organizations have developed international cooperation, sometimes espousing Mediterranean geography, but not always. The re-granting Arab Fund for Arts and Culture (AFAC) receives funding from Arab but also US (and Asian & European?) spon-

sors. Cultural research organizations have developed regional programmes. Al Mawred Al Thaqafy, in partnership with Ettijahat and the European Cultural Foundation and Mimeta, have managed an open platform on cultural policy in the Arab region, with new online dissemination tools. In the Maghreb, some organizations have decided to join Pan-African cultural networks such as Arterial, which organized its 2014 annual conference in Rabat. Relations between cities[9] across the Mediterranean Sea are essential links and drivers of cultural diplomacy, even more so when diaspora groups are involved.

Until 2014, the Arabic book sector was still dominated by Lebanon and Egypt. In the Maghreb some intellectual property rights still belong to French organizations and publishing houses are connected both to France and to other Arab countries.

Cultural relations and diplomacy in the region have to be understood as a mix of cultural relations taking place in the framework of a space created from four angles: states, society, markets and knowledge producers

Although international cultural relations policies also vary greatly from one country to another, governments (except those busy with internal conflicts and instability) have kept investing in cultural relations to pursue national interests. Such investments usually focus on heritage and tourism policies (Egypt, Algeria), but also on cinema (Morocco, Algeria) and create co-funding opportunities for the European Union and its Member States.

Because of its magnitude, the EU still represents the lion's share of cultural cooperation in those sectors. Its co-financing of the Anna Lindh Foundation targets cultural relations between civil society organizations. The whole range of the EU's Euro-Med pro-

---

[6] Silverstri, Sara, op. cit. p. 40.

[7] Stoenescu, Marilena. *Statistics in focus.* EUROSTAT, 10/2014. http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Archive:Youth_statistics_-_North_Africa_and_Eastern_Mediterranean

[8] SAHWA Youth Survey 2016.

[9] Bernié-Boissard, Catherine. "L'Europe en Méditerranée ou la ville-culture," In: *Revue géographique des pays méditerranéens*, 114: 11-16, 2010.

grammes covers cultural heritage and tourism, youth, media and audiovisuals, performing arts as well as cultural policies. While the amounts spent may be impressive, they are never enough to address regional challenges such as pre-Arab Spring societal tensions, socio-economic hardship and domestic turmoil and regional conflicts since the uprisings.

Relations between cities across the Mediterranean Sea are essential links and drivers of cultural diplomacy, even more so when diaspora groups are involved

Bilateral cooperation managed by large cultural institutes (Spanish Cooperation, British Council, Goethe Institute, Institut Français) provide large shares of cultural diplomacy in culture and the arts (performing arts, visual arts, design) and cultural management training sectors. There is still a tradition of archaeological cooperation, despite long-lasting disagreements on the restoration of cultural property by former European colonial or conquering powers.

In response to the destruction of cultural heritage in Syria and Iraq, as well as the illegal trafficking of cultural heritage goods, international organizations have developed new modes of cooperation.

Relations in Times of Crisis and in Times of Peace

Cultural diplomacy and cultural relations in the Mediterranean have taken a different shape in areas affected by conflicts compared with in peaceful countries. War in Syria and Libya has made it extremely difficult for governments to maintain cultural diplomacy channels. Cooperation efforts have focused on supporting artists in exile, particularly in the case of Syria. The organization, Ettijahat, was created by Syrian artists. Because of the conflict, many crea-

tive professionals have fled to Lebanon or Europe. Some residencies have hosted artists, such as Aley in Lebanon, while specific projects, such as "Miniatures: a month for Syria in 2013," have been funded by Arab and European (for instance, the British Council) organizations.[10]

Other initiatives have targeted Syrian refugees. Al Mawred al Thaqafy launched "Action for Hope" in refugee camps with Arab volunteer artists, and similar initiatives took place in Jordan and Turkey. The European Union Trust Fund for Syria also funded education programmes in Jordan and Lebanon to help these countries to deal with large refugee flows from Syria. Exhibitions, performances and shows by Syrian artists have been organized in several European countries (Germany, the Netherlands, Denmark, Norway). Following Daesh's brutal destruction of cultural heritage in Syria and Iraq, cultural diplomacy evolved towards heritage rescue and protection. The trafficking of cultural goods has been identified as one of the funding sources of Daesh. In the EU, it is now being addressed by a new regulation on the import of such goods. The EU is funding a €2.4-million programme in cooperation with UNESCO on the emergency safeguarding of Syrian cultural heritage.[11]

The EU's inability to find effective responses to an upsurge of refugee flows in 2015 raised questions about the readiness of European societies to cope with intercultural differences. The so-called "refugee crisis" as well as incidents of sexual harassment in 2015 in Cologne, Germany on New Year's eve stirred domestic debates in Europe on the challenges related to the integration of Syrian (and other Mediterranean) refugees. Migration issues are not part and parcel of the new cultural relations in the Mediterranean. They will require well-documented and evidence-based policy approaches toward xenophobia prevention as well as the integration of southern Mediterranean migrants into European societies.

In Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia and Israel, cultural relations with the Mediterranean region vary largely depending on the evolution of governments' cultural policies. In Algeria, cultural relations remain mostly state-funded and controlled.[12] Morocco has developed cultural relations in combination with tourism

---

[10] GALEAZZI, Greta. *Syria note*, EU preparatory action on culture in external relations, 2014. p. 6. On other initiatives, see also ISAR, Yudhishthir Raj et al., op. cit.

[11] More information is available on the official website of the project at http://en.unesco.org/syrian-observatory/.

[12] Country reports and documents can be found for instance on the MedCulture website at www.medculture.eu/fr.

and value-creation strategies. The country is famous for its numerous festivals that have become a symbol of its cultural diplomacy. In Tunisia, the democratic transition has created an era of uncertainty as well as opportunities for renewed cooperation with the region. In Israel, cultural relations in the region originate mostly from the private sector and civil society.[13] The constraining impact of Middle Eastern conflicts on Israel's cultural relations in the Mediterranean has become a structuring factor in the region's cultural diplomacy .

Priorities for Cultural Diplomacy and Cooperation in the Mediterranean

As described above, states, markets, societies and knowledge producers in the Mediterranean region have all played very different roles in regional cultural diplomacy and relations, mostly because of very diverse societal, geopolitical and national policy trends. Hence this moving and heterogeneous cultural environment is worth monitoring on a regular basis. In this respect, the role of knowledge production and research on cultural dynamics will be instrumental to ensure that sufficient space for exchanges between states, markets and societies is maintained.

National and regional cultural policies do not always have a strong Mediterranean feature and often rely on multilateral bodies (such as the Anna Lindh Foundation, the EU or the Arab League's Education Cultural and Scientific Organization – in the case of Arab capitals of culture[14]) or non-governmental organizations or foundations to nourish cultural relations. In the wake of recent migration shocks in the region, more explicit policies clearly linking domestic cultural strategies and policies with regional, intercultural objectives and challenges (conflicts, migration) could help regional diplomacy and relations flourish.

Research and policy recommendations of all kinds constantly emphasize the need to support cultural mobility[15] in the region, and while more initiatives have been taken in this direction, strict visa policies in the EU and political instability in the South may contradict mobility objectives. The contribution of culture to local development in the Mediterranean also requires sustainable cultural structures of production, protected from global providers that dominate the supply side of cultural markets. Such protection and sustainable support for local and regional cultural markets are still to be developed.[16] Therefore, long-term investment in cultural relations is certainly a way forward to prevent violence, deal with conflict-related trauma and build harmonious and integrated multi-identity societies while contributing to their economic development.

The contribution of culture to local development in the Mediterranean requires sustainable cultural structures of production, protected from global providers that dominate the supply side of cultural markets

The more recent technology factor is having a lasting effect on cultural diplomacy and relations in general.[17] Combined with demographic trends (not to mention the use of mobile phones by migrants) and the role of youth in southern Mediterranean societies, there is a need to better grasp and shape the increasingly widespread use of cyber-based facilities in cultural relations. Web-based technologies offer tremendous opportunities for peaceful and mind-changing cultural relations in the region.[18] This requires massive investment in skills enhancement as well as the production of content that feeds the

---

13 More information on Israel is available at www.medculture.eu/fr/country/documents/israel.

14 See for instance the official websites of Arab capitals of culture: Baghdad 2013 (http://al-mataf.com/default.aspx?lg=en), Sfax 2016 (www.sfax2016.tn/#Accueil). On Constantine 2015, see www.huffpostmaghreb.com/2015/02/18/demission-constantine-cap_n_6704668.html.

15 HULEILEH, Serene et al., *Exploring Mobility Around the Mediterranean*, Istikshaf Platform, 2011. www.cimettafund.org/content/upload/file/SymposiumBooklet%20in%20English.pdf

16 BENNER, Maximilian. "Culture in local and regional development: A Mediterranean perspective on the culture/economy nexus," In: *Munich Personal RePEc Archives, Paper No.* 77787, March 2017. https://mpra.ub.uni-muenchen.de/77787/

17 ARAB SOCIAL MEDIA REPORT. 2015. *Facebook in the Arab Region.* www.arabsocialmediareport.com/Facebook/LineChart.aspx .

18 Researcher Catherine Cornet's Twitter account is one example of online sources on Mediterranean cultural relations, quoting many other sources from both sides of the Sea. https://twitter.com/catherinecornet?lang=en

development of multicultural and mutually respectful identities in the Mediterranean. Obviously, cultural relations and the Internet alone will not solve Middle East conflicts, but multilinguistic content produced by and with local cultural professionals working toward cross-cultural understanding and dialogue are a necessity.

Cultural cooperation programmes developed in the last few years have largely targeted young publics, while generating fresh knowledge and research into youth in societal dynamics

Demographic realities demand that cultural relations focus on young people, tomorrow's adults.[19] Cultural cooperation programmes developed in the last few years have largely targeted young publics, while generating fresh knowledge and research into youth in societal dynamics. For over a decade, the EU and the Council of Europe have invested in youth cooperation programmes. Initiatives such as SAHWA, Power2Youth or the Anna Lindh Foundation's programmes have involved thousands of young people in various forms of intercultural dialogue.[20] This has to continue, deepen, and hopefully lead to more intense educational, scientific, sports and professional exchanges.

Interreligious relations and dialogue have become a renewed challenge for the EU in light of the bloody and perceptual impact of jihadist terrorism on societies, on both shores of the Mediterranean. The new motto is "counter-radicalization" and radicalization[21] prevention. Cultural diplomacy and relations have not proved very effective in countering violent extremism in the region, especially since the establishment of Daesh. Alternative and attractive narratives and policies (including new ones addressing the EU's existential crisis or the lack of opportunities for youth in the South) still have to be designed or delivered. In this domain the cultural sector has a strong role to play, together with academics and (local) policymakers, in creating new forms of economic, societal and aesthetic value.[22]

Investing in intercultural communication, relations and competences will enhance people's self-awareness and skills to cope with their cultural differences.[23] A better understanding of mutual perceptions, once they are uncovered by rigorous research, will help policymakers (including local authorities) and societies (including cities) to design sound, realistic and tangible cultural initiatives inserted into wider economic and political dynamics.

Conclusion

Cultural diplomacy in the Mediterranean is not the only cultural cooperation game in town. As a matter of fact, cultural relations are shaped by interactions between states, societies, markets and knowledge. Euro-Med frameworks are still operating along cultural relations and cultural diplomacy lines and the EU and its Member States have invested massively in people-to-people contacts. However, trust-building in the region has become increasingly difficult in an age of conflicts, violent extremism and migratory pressure. Mediterranean cultural diplomacy requires the constant maintenance and development of networks and communities that gather cultural professionals and entrepreneurs, policymakers, civil society activists and academics to resist crises and shocks: forms of cultural resilience.

[19] Arab Human Development Report 2016.

[20] GÖKSEL, Asuman, SENYUVA, Özgehan. "European youth cooperation schemes in the southern Mediterranean context: One for all, all for one?" *SAHWA Policy Report 2016*, 56p. More reports and publications are available on the SAHWA project website: www.sahwa.eu/SAHWA-PROJECT/About-SAHWA

[21] *Nouveaux regards sur le djihadisme,* Cultures Monde, France Culture, 2016. www.franceculture.fr/emissions/culturesmonde/culturesmonde-lundi-30-mai-2016

[22] BAKHSHI, Hasan. *Measuring cultural value*. Keynote speech delivered at Culture Count: Measuring Cultural Value Forum, Customs House: Sydney, Australia, Tuesday 20 March 2012. www.nesta.org.uk/sites/default/files/measuring_cultural_value.pdf

[23] HELLY, Damien. "Intercultural integration and communication: An agenda for Europe." ECDPM: *Talking Points blog*, 21 April 2016. Available at http://ecdpm.org/talking-points/intercultural-integration-communication-europe/