

Can the EU Share Values with its Partners in the Southern Neighbourhood?

James Moran

Associate Senior Research Fellow,
Centre for European Policy Studies. Belgium.

The decade since the Arab uprisings has been a difficult one for the European Union (EU) in its dealings with its southern neighbourhood, and it has struggled to strike a balance between its commitment to democracy and the protection of human rights, on the one hand, and its homeland security interests, on the other.

Back in the heady days of 2011, it was hoped that the uprisings in the southern neighbourhood would result in a new dispensation that would result in a happy marriage of the two, insofar as new democratic governments would take root and understand that stability and security on both sides of the Mediterranean would best be served by opening up their societies.

Consequently, the EU and its member states gave strong political, moral and financial support to the uprisings and invested considerable political capital in them. To take one example, Catherine Ashton, the EU High Representative at the time, made no less than 15 visits to Egypt between 2011 and 2013, as she strived, with the full support of member states, to facilitate an inclusive democratic transition.

But with the important exception of Tunisia, those transitions never happened, and as internal conflicts broke out in Libya, Syria and elsewhere, governments in the region reverted to the old social contract predicated on them providing order and stability to their citizenry in return for the latter's acceptance of illiberal or authoritarian governance.

Aggravated by conflicts, the twin dangers posed by extremism and illegal migration grew apace after 2013, the EU was forced to retreat back into its pre-2011 shell, and, while efforts to support rights and civil society continued, they took second place as the EU adopted an essentially defensive stance in its relations with the region, as reflected in the revised European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP)

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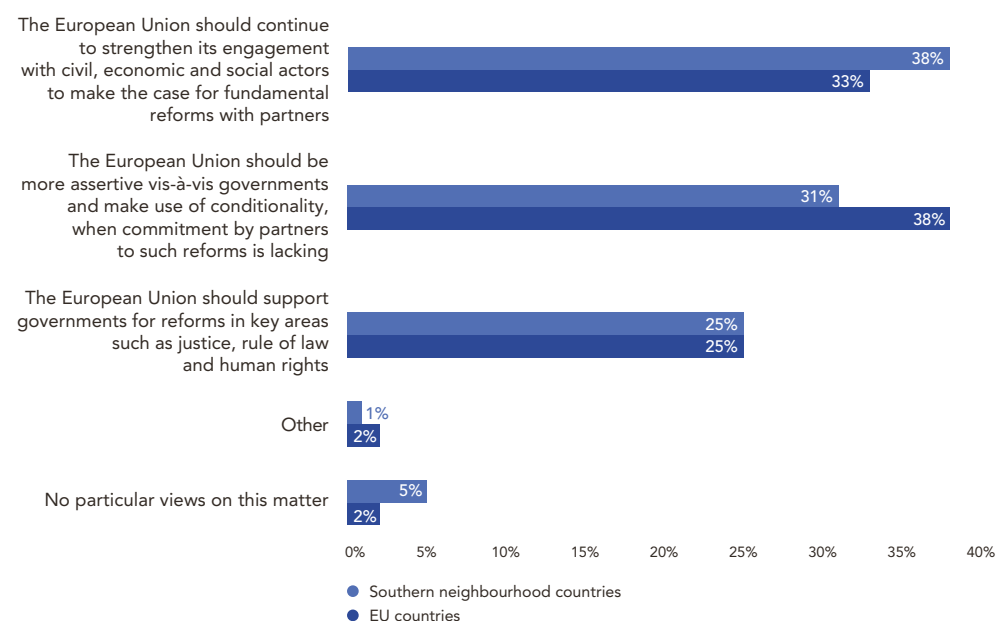
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introduced in 2015, where stability and security were the main aims to be pursued with its southern partners.

That said, democratic values, rights and freedoms continue to attract a good deal of support in southern neighbourhood countries, especially among an increasingly educated youthful population – it should always be recalled that the average age in southern neighbourhood countries is in the mid-twenties – and these factors, together with economic deprivation, were at the root of the new wave of protests that began in 2019.

Apropos, the EuroMesCo Euromed Survey brought out the continuing importance of values in the EU-southern neighbourhood relationship, with over a third of respondents calling for a more assertive engagement by the EU in making the case for human rights, though there were differences between the North and South on how best to do this. Many in the southern neighbourhood stressed that political reforms should be driven from within their societies, while a number of EU respondents felt that they needed to be imposed from the outside, with EU financial support given on conditional terms.

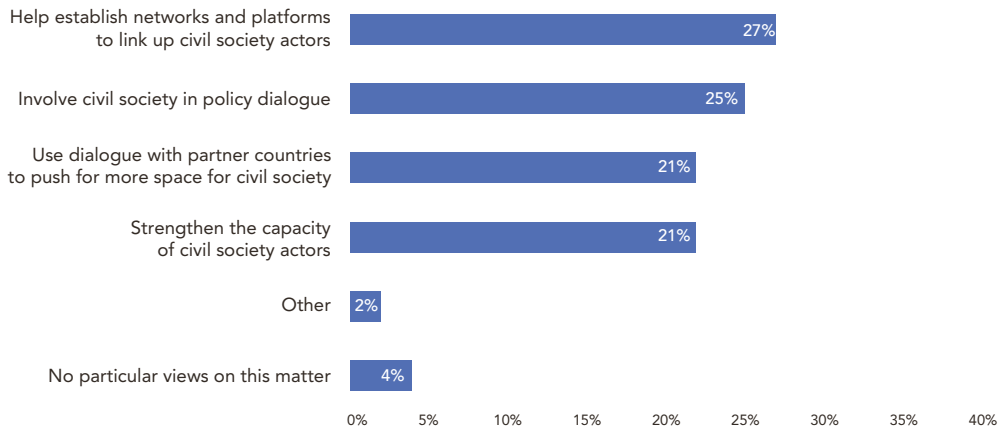
Graph 1: Q.10 When it comes to supporting reforms in the fields of good governance, democracy, the rule of law and human rights (Ranked as first option)



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

The Survey respondents also thought that the EU needed to intensify its interaction with southern neighbourhood civil society, with a quarter of them feeling that the best way to achieve this would be for the EU to involve it in policy dialogue.

Graph 2: Q.9 What could the European Union do to further support civil society in Southern Mediterranean Countries in fully playing its role? (Ranked as first option)



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

These views are to an extent reflected in the EU's "new agenda for the Mediterranean" which states that promotion of respect for human rights, rule of law and democratic values, is to be stepped up alongside policy dialogue with all relevant stakeholders. Among others, this includes commitments to support legislative, judicial and institutional reform, the empowerment of women and youth, labour standards, capacity-building for civil society and data protection frameworks.

On conditionality, the new agenda makes the link between the level of EU support and the degree of partners' real commitment to economic and governance reforms, stating that this "policy first" quid pro quo should be formalised upfront in the priorities to be jointly agreed with all partners.

This will be a tough nut to crack. Agreeing policy priorities in the field of rights and civil society under the existing ENP proved to be extremely difficult in some cases, and the compromises reached resulted in rather weak commitments.

The EU does retain leverage to spur reform but it is limited, and if it is to succeed it will need a high degree of solidarity with member states, something which may prove challenging given the different bilateral foreign policy priorities.

For example, Greece, Cyprus and some eastern EU members are unlikely to support a push for reform in Egypt if this creates tension, as it almost certainly will, with the government in Cairo, who they see as a key ally in the maritime disputes in the Eastern Mediterranean, or as a bulwark in cooperation against illegal migration. Some others who may be supportive in principle will also have commercial interests in mind, such as arms exports, which they will be reluctant to put at risk.

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As for other likeminded partners. The new US administration might be prepared to make some common cause, but it is yet to be seen whether it has the bandwidth – and interest – to follow through on President Biden’s pronouncements about putting values at the heart of US foreign policy in the region.

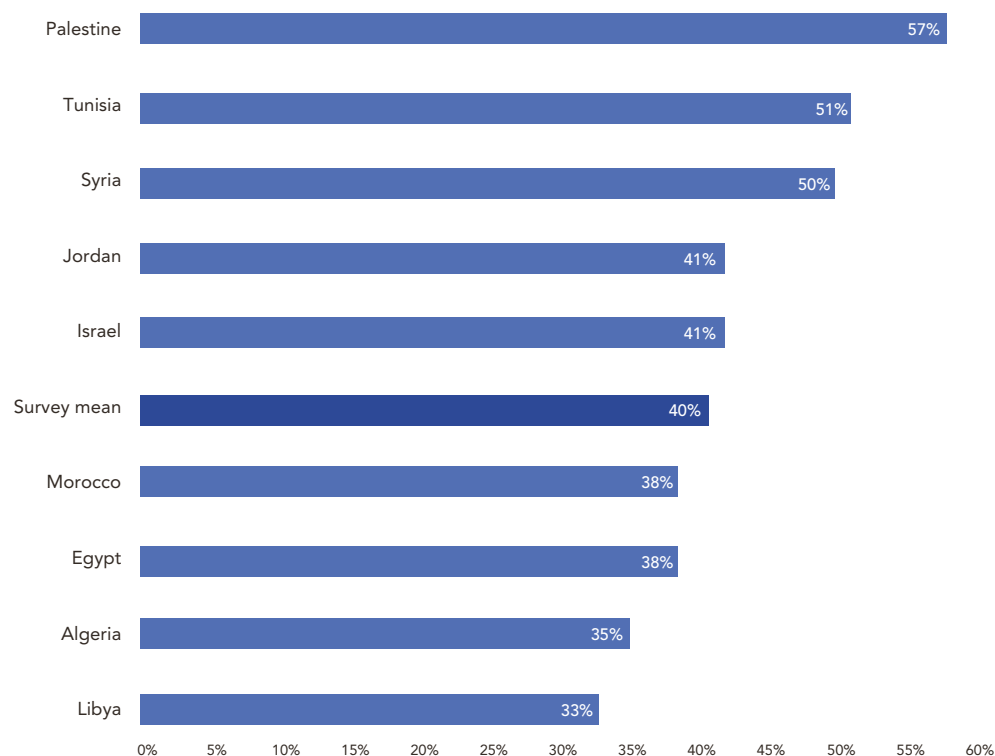
There is a widespread concern of southern neighbourhood citizens about growing corruption, insufficient governance and institutional capacity as the main factor.

One values-related issue deserves special attention: a major driver of unrest, both in 2011 and in the more recent protests in Algeria, Lebanon and elsewhere has been the widespread concern of southern neighbourhood citizens about growing corruption, and this was brought out in the EuroMesCo Euromed Survey, with no less than 40% of all respondents spotlighting “corruption, insufficient governance and institutional capacity” as the main factor limiting progress in EU cooperation.

There was also a clear overall consensus on this between EU and southern neighbourhood participants, though with some marked differences within the southern neighbourhood, ranging from 57% among Palestinian respondents to 33% in Libya.

Graph 3: Q.6 What are the major constraints limiting the success of the cooperation between the European Union and its southern neighbours?

(First top option: Corruption, insufficient governance and institutional capacity)



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

An EU comment was salutary: "Corruption at all levels has eroded public trust and created a climate of discontent and disarray." That said, it is important to add that the Survey category included three elements, albeit interrelated, and one should not rush to the judgement that corruption per se was the prime concern in every case. Nonetheless, the results indicate that it is an area where the EU would do well to ramp up its efforts to control it.

Transparency International (TI)'s latest (2020) Corruption Perceptions index, probably the best international metric available, gives some independent perspective on this. Other than Israel, southern neighbourhood countries are not doing well. To quote TI on the region's overall performance (this includes Gulf countries): *"For the third consecutive year, the Middle East and North Africa region is still perceived as highly corrupt, with little progress made towards controlling corruption."*

In fact, many southern neighbourhood states languish deep in the bottom half of the 180 countries listed, with some, notably Lebanon and Egypt, trending markedly downwards in recent years. The emergency measures brought in to fight the pandemic made things worse last year, with already weak accountability mechanisms often suspended in the name of exigency. The two exceptions are Jordan and Tunisia.

Tunisia is one of the few southern neighbourhood countries that can point to an improved performance on corruption since 2011, even managing to move up the TI ranking last year. The reasons for this are complex but many analysts and donors give credit for this to Tunisia's fledgling democracy and especially its highly active civil society.

Turning to the EU's New Agenda, there is a focus on supporting the independence of the judiciary and the importance of that for fighting corruption, as well as human rights violations and organised crime. Moreover, it calls on southern partners to ensure that fraud, corruption, money laundering and misappropriation are addressed through effective sanctions as well as through cooperation with the European Anti-Fraud Office, and that in cases where they are parties to international agreements on legal assistance, partners should accept the European Prosecutor's Office as a competent authority for the enforcement of those accords.

In addressing the issue, the EU may want to weigh the experience on fighting corruption in the Western Balkans, where there have been some successes through funding for strengthened institutions, capacity-building and training, systems and tools (public procurement databases, codes of conduct), and awareness-raising.

Given that the degree of cooperation and EU leverage there is rather different from that in the southern neighbourhood, driven as they are by the aspirations of Western Balkan nations to join the EU, one would not expect the same results, but there could be useful lessons to learn.

As for the case of Tunisia, there could be some best practice to call on when dealing with the problem in the wider region. But with its somewhat unique system of governance, it is questionable whether Tunisia can serve as a credible model elsewhere.

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Overall, the Survey has underlined the importance for the EU and other international partners of stepping up efforts to stem corruption, which will almost certainly be aggravated by the new pandemic-related emergency measures. Rolling these back will not be easy, especially in more authoritarian states where institutional and judicial checks and balances are fragile and civil society is suppressed.

Among other things, the likelihood of greater misuse of donor funds in the post-pandemic environment is high, and robust engagement with the authorities will be needed if the EU's interests, and indeed those of the beneficiaries of its assistance programmes, are to be properly protected.

In all, there is reason to believe that the old social contract in the southern neighbourhood, if not yet broken, is under immense strain, and the constituency for change is young and growing. At the same time, the economic and social disruption caused by the fallout from the pandemic and the emerging global transition away from oil may well accelerate its progress in the years to come and lead to further unrest. Sustainable security and stability is thus likely to prove elusive.

Against this background, finding ways and means of supporting positive change will pose a serious challenge for the EU. Its New Agenda points a way ahead, but it will require a degree of EU unity and solidarity that has been somewhat lacking up to now, and a new political impulse will be needed if it is to succeed in its aims.