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The EU's pursuit of 'resilience' in southern Mediterranean countries: Opportunities and Challenges

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1. Introduction

Resilience' has become a new watchword in the European Union's relations with partner countries in the eastern and southern neighbourhood (EC/EEAS, 2015; EUGS, 2016). The EU sees resilience as a tool to lend support to partner countries affected by the turbulence in the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) area, caused by the Ukrainian crisis and the conflicts in Libya, Syria and Yemen (Johansson-Nogués, 2018a). On a deeper level, resilience is also a signal of a desire to shift from an erstwhile predominantly value-driven EU foreign and security policy to a more pragmatic, interest-based approach (Juncos, 2017). If earlier ENP objectives had centrestaged 'deep democracy' and good governance, the accent in the 2015 review of the policy was rather put on stability and security in and around the EU. This is in recognition of that "the EU is not insulated from the pressures affecting its external partners" and that the aim of the EU external policy is thus also in part to make "a contribution to strengthening resilience within the Union itself" (EC/EEAS, 2017). Resilience has, for these various reasons, been mainstreamed into a wide variety of EU policy documents such as, for example, the new Partnership Priorities concluded with neighbouring partners, which replace the former ENP Action Plans.

The main aim of this policy brief is to explore the conceptual and practical effects of the EU's pursuit of resilience in relation to the southern Mediterranean partners. Our findings point to that the more pragmatic EU foreign policy since 2015 and the more flexible EU funding for policy objectives have been welcomed both in Europe and by southern ENP partners. The EU Global Strategy reflects a will to co-design policies with its southern Mediterranean partners. However, while holding great inherent potential, resilience has met with certain unforeseen teething problems in its first years of its implementation due to regional or intra-EU dynamics. Elaborating an effective new 'resilience toolkit' could allow reaching better outcomes in the Euro-Mediterranean region.

2. Opportunities and challenges for the policy concept

Resilience has been defined by the EU as "the ability of state and societies to reform, thus withstanding and recovering from internal and external crises" (EUGS, 2016). The policy goal is ultimately to boost states, societies, communities and individuals'

ability to weather “political, economic, environmental, demographic or societal pressures” with a view “to sustain progress towards national development goals” (EC/EEAS, 2017).

The EU here takes a leaf from policy trends in global international organizations, where resilience has a longer institutional trajectory (Wagner and Anholt, 2016). The concept was first used by international donors, in the context of humanitarian and development policies, with the intention to give a response to post-conflict reconstruction or natural disasters. The concept has, however, since become wedded to the holistic, all-encompassing logic of state-building and development cooperation (UNDP, 2016).

The EU’s version of resilience is more conceptually compartmentalized in comparison. EU documents make a clear distinction between state and societal resilience. State resilience aims to strengthen the capacity of a state in the face of significant external or internal pressures to build, maintain or restore its core functions, and basic social and political cohesion, in a manner that ensures respect for democracy, rule of law, human and fundamental rights and fosters inclusive long-term security and progress (EC/EEAS, 2017). As for societal resilience, it seeks to build up response mechanisms and capabilities of local stakeholders to better face problems and challenges related to domestic crisis or open conflict (ibid.). On paper, state and societal resilience appear complementary and perhaps even, on a practical level, two mutually supporting dimensions. Arguably it would be difficult to achieve sustainable state resilience without relative societal resilience and vice versa. The policy objective therefore appears to lend ample opportunity for the EU to pursue a win-win, twin-track engagement with governments and civil society.

In the southern Mediterranean context, however, the potential for such twin-track engagement faces a set of deep-seated, structural challenges. On the one hand the EU’s pursuit of state resilience rests on partner governments’ ‘good faith’ to undertake reform to improve administrative accountability as well as to provide quality public services for the benefit of citizens. Some southern ENP governments are indeed willing to engage on this agenda. However, implementation efforts may still have come up against a want of strong administrative capacities, technical expertise, and/or coordination among and within national Ministries (European Commission, 2017). Yet other governments in the area appear to equate state resilience with regime resilience. Hence, for them any acknowledgment of the necessity for wider socio-political reform in the above sectors might make the regime a target for criticism from restive domestic publics. State resilience also implies that governments must demonstrate a will to reign in on the current rampant corruption affecting most public authorities, including the legal system. Such aims are made more difficult in the southern Mediterranean area due to that the status quo benefits the lucrative interests of key regime supporters in many countries.

On the other hand, EU’s pursuit of societal resilience depends on its ability to reach out to and engage directly with southern Mediterranean local actors. This would involve first overcoming and circumventing the many legal and political hurdles regional governments’ raise for the EU, or any foreign donor, to engage directly with their respective civil societies. The European Union have made in this sense made some inroad in Tunisia since 2011, as we will see below. Nevertheless, in many southern ENP partner countries heavy regulation and severe restrictions on foreign NGOs or local associations with access to foreign funding is still an all too persistent feature (Johansson-Nogués, 2006 and 2018b) [1].

3. Opportunities and challenges at the practical level as well

The EU’s pursuit of resilience also produces a number of practical opportunities and challenges in its relations with southern Mediterranean partners, both at the state as well as societal levels.

The EU’s principal focus so far has been on state resilience. In 2012 the EU concluded a Privileged Partnership with Tunisia and negotiated a set of Partnership Priorities with Jordan and Lebanon in 2016. In these docu-

ments attention is given above all to ensuring the economic state resilience of these countries by ways of fiscal stability, economic growth, social development and structural reforms for improved competitiveness. However, although considerable EU funding has been channelled into the region and the overall number of projects is on the rise, the EU's quest for economic resilience in these countries has also encountered various difficulties.

Tunisia : support that brought relative economic stabilization, but controversies slow-down the resilience process

In the case of Tunisia, economic resilience has predominantly centred on budget support, strong support for small and medium industries, the prospects for creating a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) and temporary measures (EC/EEAS, 2016a). While the former two have contributed usefully to the relative stabilization of the Tunisian economy, the latter two have sparked some controversy. Certain economic sectors in the country, such as for example, agriculture and service, are concerned over the uncertain benefits related to tying the country's economy so closely to the EU Internal Market (FTDES et al, 2018). Therefore, the DCFTA negotiations are progressing with considerable paucity.

In 2016 the EU also adopted temporary measures intended to boost the Tunisian economic resilience. The EU granted an additional duty-free tariff quota for Tunisian olive oil of 35,000 tonnes per year for 2016 and 2017, after the Bardo National Museum and Sousse attacks in 2015 severely affected the country's tourist sector. However, Tunisian export statistics show that the country has only been able to benefit from a small percentage of the additional quota, as the temporary measures came to a halt when olive-oil producing EU member states became concerned over the potential effects of the Tunisian oil on their share of the European market and on prices.

Jordan and Lebanon : good will to support displaced populations, but internal factors impede rate of implementation

As for Jordan and Lebanon, their respective Partnership Priorities can also be seen principally as opportunities for promoting enhanced economic resilience. Here the focus has above all been on providing economic opportunities for the more than 3 million displaced persons present in these two countries and for vulnerable host communities (EC/EEAS, 2016b and c). Through the so-called Compact, annexed to the Partnership Priorities, host communities and refugees would be guaranteed EU funds to increase protection and access to employment, quality education as well as pay for renovation of existing infrastructure. Despite good will from the Jordanian and Lebanese governments, and the great number of worthy projects that have been launched in the support of such objectives, implementation has been complicated by the combined effect of the low level of state planning and the struggling economies in these countries. In Jordan, the Compact has enabled substantial numbers of Syrian refugees to find employment and schooling for their children. However, the incorporation of refugees into the national job-market has been a slow process due to lack of formal employment opportunities and the overly bureaucratic procedure for obtaining work permits. Compounding the problem further, the Jordanian agricultural sector, a large employer for Jordanians and Syrian refugees, is facing increasing structural constraints of a dwindling access to natural resources such as water (Seeberg, 2017).

The pessimistic economic outlook, together with IMF-inspired austerity measures, brought yet another Jordanian government down in 2018 by ways of public demonstrations.

As for Lebanon, the EU initially put up the ambition to create 300,000–350,000 new jobs in Lebanon, of which 60 percent should be reserved for Syrians refugees, capacity-building for conducting “credible, periodical, transparent and inclusive elections” and to develop a decentralised waste management system and local water supply (EC/EEAS, 2016c).

The EU has also worked closely with the Ministries of Education and Agriculture to work out long term strategies for these sectors. Implementation has been slow, however, as a consequence of a dysfunctional state apparatus wrought by sectarian tension and governmental officials not always having a clear mandate or authority to act. Added to this has been the conjunctural situation of weak economic growth, corruption, rising costs of goods and job destruction, as many small and medium business have been forced to close.

Rest of the region : varying non-economic approaches but progress often stalls

For Algeria and Egypt, the respective Partnership Priorities of 2017 have adopted a different, non-economic and narrower path to state resilience. In Algeria, the Partnership Priority document identifies the need for common EU-Algeria action on counterterrorism efforts and their links to cross-border organized crime and drug trafficking.

In the EU-Egyptian Partnership Priorities, the term resilience is not employed at all—a remarkable fact given EU's efforts to mainstream the policy objective across the board. The Partnership Priorities appear instead to be translated into 'stabilization' in different basic service sectors, such as TAIEX and Twinning programs on renewable energy, water and sanitation. In other southern Mediterranean country contexts, resilience has not made much headway.

In the case of Morocco, the EU Court of Justice verdict on the EU-Moroccan fishery agreement as not applicable in Western Saharan waters has stalled progress towards Partnership Priorities and a DCFTA agreement.

Both Israel and the Palestinian Authority have been offered Partnership Priorities in the context of a settlement of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. However, so far, no progress on such Priorities or complementary efforts to foment state resilience have been made.

In Libya and Syria, the EU's approach on state resilience has not been attempted, despite that resilience clearly also covers states in conflict. The EU is not a direct party in the ongoing conflict settlements and appears to await the outcome prior to engaging.

Societal resilience : some success, but deep-rooted obstacles require the approach to evolve

Shifting our optics to the societal level, resilience ostensibly aims to foment responsibility in, and ownership of, local communities in southern Mediterranean countries. As noted above, the EU has so far only been able to engage in societal resilience projects where southern Mediterranean authorities have been more permissive. In this sense, **the EU-Tunisia tripartite dialogue** (EU institutions, Tunisian government and Tunisian civil society actors) has been a welcome initiative. By regularly including civil society actors in exchanges of views prior to EU-Tunisia ministerial or senior official meetings, a certain sense of civil society co-ownership of EU-Tunisia relations has been fostered. Moreover, the EU has allocated substantial funding for civil society projects, such as the EU-Tunisia Youth Partnership, gender, health services, education or support to underprivileged zones [2].

In other southern neighbourhood context, however, the EU's pursuit of societal resilience has experienced certain difficulties due to the current dynamics within the region and what appears to be a lack of deeper understanding of what societal resilience entails and what benefits it could accrue over time for local communities. Current tensions between majority-minority groups or among ethnic, religious and sectarian communities, across and within borders in Lebanon, Syria and, to some extent, Jordan are at an all-time high. The EU's pursuit of societal resilience and/or reconciliation thus appears highly opportune. With the explicit aim to bringing communities closer together, the EU funding rules stipulate that local NGO projects must bridge dividing lines and secure stakeholders from different religious, ethnic, sectarian and tribal groups. Still, the short-term benefits of such approaches have so far been unclear.

The presence of many different international donors in Lebanon, have exposed local actors to a multitude of project objectives. Resilience thus just becomes yet another programming objective among many in a dense funding-scenario. This explains why Lebanese civil society activists, when interviewed, show a tendency to be relatively unaware or unsure of what resilience is or what it aims to do [3]. Moreover, project results show that it has been difficult to put aside inter-group differences and animosity to secure equally distributed benefits for all involved in the short project lifetime, as well as to foment long-term trust and communal reconciliation (Anouti, 2017 and 2018). Local actors have clearly preferred straightforward projects with direct benefits for their own community, over any longer term and complex intra- or inter-communal reconciliation project with less assured outcome (ibid.).

Finally, the pursuit of societal resilience in rural areas can also be further complicated by the lack of consistent project monitoring and/or local authorities' laws and regulations which may, at times, impede funds to reach their intended target groups. For example, in rural areas of Lebanon, a large number of resilience-based projects have been launched to support Lebanese host communities and Syrian refugees. It is noticeable that data show that out of 100 projects designed to improve livelihood situations, e.g. by creating micro-businesses, only five fully succeeded in attaining their objectives, while the rest either partially or failed (ibid.). The difficulties experienced in Lebanon can serve as a potent reminder about the deep-rooted obstacles for creating a single, positive-sum societal resilience in any southern Mediterranean country despite strong international support.

4. Conclusions

The EU has made the pursuit of resilience in the ENP area one of its key external policy priorities as of 2016, showing its philosophy of engagement with its close neighbourhood. The EU strategy reflects a will to co-design policies with southern ENP partners. This policy brief has pointed to both conceptual and practical opportunities, as well as challenges of such pursuits.

We find the objective to attain resilience opportune as turbulence in the ENP area have placed strong downward pressure on partner countries, their societies, as well as on the EU itself in recent years. We also believe that there is a **great potential for synergy between the EU and other international institutions/donors in terms of fomenting resilience**, as this is a central concern also for the latter.

However, we also conclude based on empirical evidence drawn from the southern Mediterranean context that **building resilience is no easy task**, whether in the short or the longer run. In the southern neighbourhood the pursuit of resilience is conditioned by regime, societal, economic, security, political, traditional and cultural dynamics, whether within a single state-setting or across borders, not always conducive to stabilization and resilience.

Even though many southern Mediterranean region has benefited considerably from EU economic and political support, we have noted that the strong focus on economic resilience in the EU's relation with southern ENP partners, frequently by use of formulas have resulted in less than a clear added value for such countries in resolving their most pressing economic tribulations.

Finally, we point out that fomenting societal resilience might prove to be harder than state resilience. State resilience is institutionally based, technocratically controlled, it can be monitored and achieve verifiable short-term successes. Societal resilience, in contrast, is a long-term approach based on sustainability, learning, trust and human agency. Societal resilience depends heavily on state resilience as it requires minimal state infrastructure, the enforcement of rule of law and institutions of arbitration, all of which is absent in most southern Mediterranean countries at present. Hence, while the EU's pursuit of state and societal resilience is urgent and opportune, the challenges remain formidable.

5. Recommendations

In order to have better outcome from building resilience in the Euro-Mediterranean region, we feel it will be in the common interest of all actors to:

1- **Adjust and advance the EU resilience policy** and create firmer and more concrete objectives to be achieved, allowing further common ground for engagement. A new strategy might combine both the existing objectives along with new or revamped ones.

2- **Create an effective new verification and evaluation system** that is specialized for resilience projects and could be applied to both the donor and recipient partners. The aim of this ‘resilience toolkit’ is to monitor the real implementation of projects rather than the theoretical ones. In addition, it will assess in advance whether the project or strategy is doable or not.

3- Abandon the currently limited/sector-specific state resilience approach in favour of **an action-based one which combines political, societal and economic objectives in a more holistic way**. A certain division of labour could be achieved with good results with other international donors also concerned with resilience in key southern Mediterranean countries.

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Notes

1. After the Arab uprisings in 2011 some countries strengthened their restrictions on charitable or non-profit organizations. One example is Egypt's Law on Associations and Other Foundations Working in the Field of Civil Work (Law 70 of 2017) which prohibits CSO activity outside those marked by the Egyptian state's development plan and priorities, or to engage in "any work of political nature".

2. Although it is fair to point out that various program evaluators have flagged that a lack of indicators and adequate follow-up on the wealth of project carried out makes it difficult to establish the true added value for the EU's foreign policy objectives in Tunisia (cf. European Commission, 2017).

3. It is worth noting that resilience does not translate well into local languages. In Arabic, resilience is translated into al mourouna, which could also refer to the quite different concepts of 'flexibility' or 'elasticity' (UNDP, 2016). Consequently, this newly minted term has the potential for leading to confusions and discrepancies in communicating the real meaning of resilience to state representative, non-state actors, as well as the average Arab citizen with a view to work on appropriate courses of action to foment resilience.

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FEMISE is coordinated by the Economic Research Forum (Cairo, Egypt) and the Institut de la Méditerranée (Marseille, France) and gathers more than 100 members of economic research institutes, representing the 37 partners of the Barcelona Process.

Its main objectives are:

- to contribute to the reinforcement of dialogue on economic and financial issues in the Euro- Mediterranean partnership, within the framework of the European Neighbourhood Policy and the Union for the Mediterranean,*
- to improve the understanding of priority stakes in the economic and social spheres, and their repercussions on Mediterranean partners in the framework of implementation of EU Association Agreements and Action Plans,*
- to consolidate the partners of the network of research institutes capable of North-South and South-South interactions, while it sets into motion a transfer of know-how and knowledge between members.*

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