Routledge Handbook of Mediterranean Politics

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Historical/geopolitical turning points in the modern Mediterranean

Publication details
Francesco Cavatorta
Published online on: 14 Aug 2017

How to cite :- Francesco Cavatorta. 14 Aug 2017, Historical/geopolitical turning points in the modern Mediterranean from: Routledge Handbook of Mediterranean Politics Routledge
Accessed on: 10 Dec 2020

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The modern Mediterranean has always been considered an important region from the broad perspective of international relations. It has a prominent geo-strategic position, it contains vast hydrocarbon resources and it is a hotbed of domestic and international political violence. By the mid-1990s these traits convinced many scholars that the Mediterranean was a ‘fracture line’ where the most problematic issues plaguing international politics seem to concentrate and divide the west from the rest with a modern, democratic, economically developed and peaceful northern bank facing a pre-modern, authoritarian, underdeveloped and war prone southern one. This chapter partly rejects the notion that the Mediterranean represents such a clear fracture line. In fact, the historical vantage point allows us to look at the Mediterranean as an area where political, economic and cultural dynamics go beyond pre-defined boundaries based on essentialised notions such as north–south, development/underdevelopment, democracy/authoritarianism or Islam/Christianity. This is relevant to underscore in contemporary international politics because there is a tendency in the region to play a political ‘blame game’ whereby all the difficult issues come either from imperialist Europe or, conversely, from the ‘barbarians at the gates’ in North Africa and the Middle East. Thus, while there are clear differences between the southern bank and the northern one in the Mediterranean, there are also shared dynamics. It follows that the modern Mediterranean cannot be understood in its complexity through simplistic lenses.

This chapter focuses on the ways in which countries in the region interact with the international system and how major historical turning points impacted the Mediterranean. In turn, it should also be underscored that events occurring in the region have also had a considerable influence on global politics. The chapter focuses specifically on the post-colonial period of the countries on the southern bank of the Mediterranean, up to the Arab uprisings of 2011. There is little doubt that the legacy of colonial rule as well as the influence of post-World War II international politics contributed to shape the history of the region and the relations between its constituent parts. Post-colonial and Cold War politics prevented the realisation of pan-Arab dynamics, with the region becoming a crucial locus in the global struggle between the Soviet Union and the United States. Cold War politics inserted itself in an already unstable post-colonial environment and contributed to increase the divisions among Arab states, leading them to take divergent
paths of economic, social and political development. For a brief interlude after the end of the Cold War, it seemed that a genuine Mediterranean dimension could be generated whereby the wealthier countries on the northern bank could become the locomotive for the creation of a shared area of democracy and prosperity. However, the reality played out differently. The war on terror and the 2008 economic crisis unleashed powerful destabilising dynamics across the Mediterranean with popular movements challenging regimes (Arab world) and governments (southern Europe) to make fundamental changes in the way they governed. Finally, the Arab Spring further destabilised the region with security becoming even more of an obsession for all countries in the region and further distancing European powers from the pursuit of normative objectives.

The post-colonial Mediterranean: the influence of the Cold War

During the Cold War, the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) was a central arena for the confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union and countries in the region were effectively forced to side with one or other superpower. After World War II, countries in southern Europe became pillars of the US-led western camp with Turkey and Greece freezing their disputes in the context of the NATO alliance. Spain and Portugal also chose the western camp, as did France and Italy, although the French operated outside of NATO structures. On the southern bank, Cold War dynamics influenced and overlapped with post-colonial dynamics, rendering politics in the region complex to navigate. From an ‘ideological’ perspective, one would have expected the newly independent countries to become close allies with the Soviet Union. The rhetoric of anti-imperialism at the time belonged to the Soviet camp and the former colonial powers in the region all belonged to the western camp. This should have favoured Soviet penetration of the southern bank of the Mediterranean, therefore allowing the USSR to share control of the region with the United States. In reality, the complexity of national post-colonial politics generated profound divisions among the countries of the south. Thus, broadly speaking, post-colonial conservative monarchies such as Morocco fell within the sphere of influence of the United States, while the radical republics of Egypt, Libya and Algeria gravitated towards the Soviet Union, although all maintained a certain distance from Moscow.

This notion of distance is quite significant because it suggested that genuinely anti-imperialist attitudes applied to both the US-led camp and the Soviet one. These newly independent countries were not about to cede their recently acquired sovereignty to another foreign entity and opted for a businesslike relationship. Post-independence dynamics in Morocco favoured the monarchy over nationalist parties and this meant that pro-French attitudes sat at the top of the political system, making the country a vital ally for the western camp in the Mediterranean. The newly independent countries of Tunisia and Mauritania followed the same pattern as Morocco despite their republican institutions.

The problematic nature of post-colonial politics had both an internal and external dimension with feedback loops in place whereby domestic and international developments were closely intertwined and influenced each other. For instance the traumatic war of independence between Algeria and France meant that the Algerian post-colonial leadership preferred to distance itself rhetorically and ideologically from its former French masters. Thus, it embraced a socialist model of economic development and became a beacon of third-world anti-imperialism. Despite a degree of ideological proximity and cordial relations Algeria’s third worldism (Malley, 1996) was not subservient to Soviet interests. Algeria therefore, with the Soviet Union, pursued a reasonably aggressive and autonomous foreign policy in the neighbourhood, particularly when it perceived that ‘imperialist’ rivals like Morocco were attempting to vie for regional supremacy. It was therefore no great surprise that Morocco and Algeria fought a war over territory soon
after Algerian independence. At the other end of the spectrum, Morocco, Tunisia and Mauritania had a much less traumatic experience of separation from France and the respective post-colonial leadership chose to accommodate its colonial legacy and gravitate towards France. This had inevitable international repercussions because it also meant that the foreign policy choices they made largely coincided with the ones the west made. This could be seen, for instance, in the far more moderate stance that both Morocco and Tunisia took with respect to the issue of Israel. Both post-colonial dynamics and Cold War ones structured the foreign policy choices of Mediterranean countries. While on the northern bank this meant the freezing of conflicts and disputes because the parties belonged to the same camp, on the southern bank regional disputes broke out in all-out wars at times. In addition, regional rivalries deepened throughout the Cold War period because they found both domestic and international justifications with the Morocco–Algeria dispute over Western Sahara and the Egypt–Libya armed conflict of 1977 being the most prominent examples.

Thus, military and political conflicts between Arab states in addition to larger geo-strategic rivalries between the Soviet and American blocs rendered the Mediterranean a very ‘hot’ area during the Cold War. It should, however, be noted that relations between the two superpowers and their allies in the Mediterranean were not unidirectional or unchangeable. For once, many of the Arab countries sought to keep their powerful patrons at arm’s length and, at times, attempted to play one superpower off against the other, in order to maximise benefits. There was the realisation on the part of Arab leaders that they could try to secure their domestic power by ‘playing’ both sides while projecting internally an image of autonomy from international constraints through, for instance, the non-aligned movement. For example, Egypt left the Soviet sphere in the 1970s to become a linchpin of the US strategy in the region. This occurred at the height of the Cold War when shifting from one bloc to another was particularly difficult. In the same vein, superpowers sought to keep Mediterranean allies onside through the provision of material resources and interfered in domestic politics when it seemed that local dynamics might undermine a country’s place in one’s camp. It is for this reason that, for instance, military coups were tolerated – when not actually encouraged – in countries like Greece and Turkey when it seemed that local political actors were pushing for distancing their respective countries from the NATO alliance. These shared dynamics in countries of both banks therefore indicate that the idea of clear-cut fracture line should be problematised.

Scholars like Karsh (1997) insisted that the end of the Cold War did not actually alter regional dynamics. Karsh’s argument is largely misguided, but he is correct about the case of Israel. For Israeli policy-makers the end of the Cold War did not change much in strategic terms because the enmity and hostility of the vast majority of Arab states did not subside with the fall of the Soviet Union. In short, the politics of the Cold War had a significant influence on the region and the end of the rivalry between the US and the Soviet Union had a profound effect on both regional relations and on the internal politics of individual countries. The following section will deal with the most significant post-Cold War consequences.

The Mediterranean in a unipolar world

The most dramatic change was the emergence of the United States as the sole superpower, leading some to hail this new era of ‘unipolarity’ because the hegemonic superpower was a benign one (Krauthammer, 1990). In this privileged position, the US, and its western allies, wished to remake the world according to their strategic interests – access to oil resources and expansion of markets first among them – and to promote their constitutive values of liberalism, democracy and economic openness. By the time the Cold War ended, the northern bank of the
Mediterranean had been almost fully integrated into the economic, political and military system that the United States had led during the struggle against the Soviet Union. For its part, the southern bank had undergone a much more difficult Cold War period and by the early 1990s was mired in economic and political difficulties and facing considerable challenges. This is where the idea of a fracture line is more convincing, but it was presented as a natural ‘cultural’ outcome rather than the product, for instance, of decades-long western support for authoritarianism and specific political choices such as the refusal of the European Union to let Morocco accede while admitting Spain, Portugal and Greece. In this respect the Mediterranean as a fracture line dividing the basin between economically successful, democratic and liberal countries and underdeveloped, poorer and authoritarian ones was ultimately the product of a series of political choices. In any case, the fracture line began to be perceived as a serious problem to be addressed in the aftermath of the Cold War, as authoritarianism, economic underdevelopment, localised conflicts and the rise of Islamism became a menace to regional stability. As a result of both unipolarity and the emergence of new threats to the stability of the new world order, the west began to invest considerable resources to promote the power of universal ideas and values, namely democracy, human rights and the market economy. This had significant repercussions because there was suddenly the sentiment that realist concerns could be better defended through ethical policies. Concern for human rights abuses, international law and democratic accountability on the part of the US, France and the UK were not priorities during the Cold War and they insulated their allies from criticism. In order to avoid any risk of ‘losing’ precious allies in the war against communism, ethical concerns about supporting authoritarian regimes were usually set aside and realpolitik imperatives prevailed. The end of the Cold War offered the opportunity to attenuate realist imperatives and reintroduce an ethical dimension in foreign policy. The promotion of democracy became a central tenet of this new policy. At the same time, countries that had been under Soviet influence, like Algeria, felt both internal and external pressures to fall in line with the dominant discourse on democracy and market economics. On foreign policy matters, this meant that they had to abandon their anti-imperialist positions. Thus, the promotion of neo-liberal economic reforms and democratic values became the mainstay of post-Cold War international politics for the United States and its European partners. Indeed, there was a conflation between US strategic interests – unquestioned leadership in global affairs and international peace (Jervis, 2002) – and its ethical position – liberal democracy as a universal good that all should enjoy. The significance of these geo-strategic changes in the Mediterranean crystallised during the Gulf crisis of 1990–91 following Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait when the United States, without any challenge from the Soviet Union, decided to put together an international coalition under UN mandate to oust Iraqi troops from Kuwait. The US president George H. Bush argued that in the new post-Cold War world order international legality should prevail and he set about making an example of Iraq. All Mediterranean countries rallied around the United States’ decision. Among the countries siding with the US, there were both its traditional Arab allies – with the exception of Jordan and Yemen – and a number of rivals such as Syria and, indirectly, Iran. This testifies to the considerable changes that the end of the rivalry between superpowers brought about in the Mediterranean.

In addition to changes in foreign policy, Arab countries began to undertake proto-democratic reforms to project an image of renewal which the US and European countries could be satisfied with. Thus, in Egypt and Jordan for example, a number of liberalising political and economic reforms were introduced. Tunisia and Morocco also witnessed liberalising initiatives in the late 1980s and 1990s respectively as did Algeria and, to a lesser extent, some of the Gulf countries, in an effort to inject renewed legitimacy into their respective political systems and ailing economies. Finally, it is worth noting that the post-Cold War environment facilitated the
Arab–Israeli peace process. While it might be argued that the seeds for peace had been sown before the collapse of the Soviet Union, it is in the aftermath of the 1991 Gulf war and through US pressure on both allies and rivals in the region that Israel, Jordan, the Palestinians and Syria sat down to work out a comprehensive peace deal. In conclusion, the 1991 Gulf war, the pro-democracy initiatives that the west promoted and the pressure on both Arabs and Israelis to come up with a peace deal demonstrated that the world had changed. Following the US line was a requirement for traditional allies as well as former rivals.

While the US was the superpower, its European partners contributed to solidifying the US’s grip on global affairs. In the Mediterranean in particular, the United States, the European Union and individual member states pursued very similar policies centred on democracy promotion, trade liberalisation and strategic primacy. After the Cold War, the process of European integration accelerated and closer coordination in external relations led the European Union to take a significant role in supporting US unipolarity. Central to this process of increased integration was the idea that the EU would become an ethical actor in international politics, attempting to promote universal norms and human rights. The EU would engage all actors on the global scene without resorting to threats, but rather through positive inducements and the power of example, pointing specifically to the way in which economic integration was the instrument for achieving both domestic development and international peace. It is through this self-perception of what it is, and what it does on the international stage, that the EU is referred to as ‘normative power Europe’ (Manners, 2002). Given the ideals that the pursuit of external relations was built upon, the Mediterranean became a privileged area for the EU’s external activism. It was during the early 1990s that the reading of the Mediterranean basin as a fracture line appeared, leading the EU and its constituent parts to believe that such a fracture could be ‘healed’ through the policies of democracy promotion and trade liberalisation, as well as the military partnerships the United States was advocating and implementing on a greater global scale. This EU policy of ‘constructive engagement’ did not differ much from how the United States, under George H. Bush and, at least initially, Bill Clinton, sought to reshape international relations. In fact there seemed to be both a coincidence of interests and ideas between the US and the European Union on how to integrate the southern bank of the Mediterranean into the global economy and international security structures. The clearest example of this post–Cold War strategy on the part of the European Union was the effort made to engage Turkey and ‘absorb’ it in the European space albeit without guaranteeing full accession.

The end of unipolarity

The moment of unipolarity did not last for very long and the Mediterranean has since been a source of instability, leading to considerable security problems across both banks of the sea and further afield. By the mid-1990s, it had become clear that the United States was unable to consolidate its role as the sole benign superpower. While no other country was and would be capable of challenging the US militarily, the assumption that all actors in the global system would accept a new world order with the US at its helm was mistaken. Although military challengers were unlikely to emerge for a long time, two broad reasons explain how unipolarity was unlikely to go unchallenged politically. Firstly, the conflation of US material interests and ethical values proved problematic. While many countries were happy to accept US economic, military, political and cultural dominance because they were able to also reconcile material and ethical interests within US hegemony, others were much more sceptical and pointed to significant inconsistencies in US behaviour. This was particularly true in the Mediterranean where the tension between the norms and interests the US and its European partners pursued was at its
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strongest, particularly after it became clear that the promotion of democracy on the southern bank of the Mediterranean might have adverse consequences for the pursuit of material interests. Secondly, a number of regional and international actors became more assertive over time on the international stage. Following the realist tenet that imbalances in the international system would be corrected with the rise of emerging powers, new challengers did indeed defy US hegemony, and the Mediterranean has become once more an area of fierce competition.

Democracy promotion in the Mediterranean

The policies of democracy and human rights promotion together with trade liberalisation and market reforms encapsulate both the hopes and contradictions of the moment of unipolarity. The logic behind these policies was that democracies solve their disputes peacefully, contribute to international stability, cooperate more closely on economic matters and, ultimately, produce better living conditions for citizens. The same logic applied to the adoption of genuine market reforms and progressive integration into the global trade system. The changes promoted on the southern bank would have therefore positive repercussions for all actors involved. The US and the European Union would achieve both material and ethical objectives – international stability, the promotion of the ‘good life’ and economic growth. The Arab countries would achieve better governance, economic success and responsive state institutions. Finally, the wider regional environment would become more peaceful with solutions found to long-standing conflicts, including the Arab–Israeli one. Unfortunately, very little of this occurred and the unipolar moment collapsed under the weight of its contradictions. First and foremost, the promotion of democracy did not deliver the stability the US and the EU sought. In fact, it quickly became clear that the outcome of genuinely democratic elections would be ‘counterproductive’ if those who were elected did not wish to conform to external requirements, values and interests. Contributing to opening up political systems in Arab countries placed the United States and the European Union in a very awkward position because political overtures coincided with the success of parties and movements holding anti-western policy positions. These views were expressed through the instruments and mechanics of democracy and open political debate, making them very difficult to dismiss. From the early 1990s the rise of Islamism, in all of its guises, became a considerable preoccupation for the United States, the European Union, and local governments, as the ‘green peril’ (Miller, 1993) came to be identified as the most significant challenge to western civilisation (Huntington, 1993). While it should be noted that Islamism is a very broad and divided family, the electoral weight of Islamist parties, whether actual or potential, represented a powerful obstacle to the continuation of pro-democracy policies. Mistrust of Islamism was the product of the belief that Islamists in power would pursue an aggressive anti-western foreign policy in a region where there are vast oil and gas resources, where Israel, the most important US ally in the region, stands alone, and where the proliferation of weapons is a genuine concern (Kepel, 2004). In addition, Islamism represented a potent threat to Arab regimes, which had, for the most part and to different degrees, thrown in their lot with the remaining superpower.

Thus, the idea that pro-democracy and pro-human rights policies could coincide with the defence and promotion of material interests began to lose its momentum rapidly. The outcome of free and fair Algerian elections in 1991, the subsequent military coup to prevent the Islamists from gaining power and the ensuing civil war became a powerful ‘lesson’ on the divergence that might exist between ethical and self-interested positions for the western community of states (Cavatorta, 2009). The events in Algeria produced two mutually reinforcing outcomes. Arab rulers saw the opportunity to roll back on liberal reforms or, more precisely, to implement
façade reforms that would ultimately strengthen their grip on power (Heydemann, 2007). At the same time, the US drew back from genuine democracy promotion across the Arab world, reassuring allies that processes of liberalisation and reform would only continue at a pace dictated by Arab rulers. For its part the European Union launched over time a number of pan-Mediterranean initiatives including the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership and the Neighbourhood Policy, with the objective of creating a shared area of democracy and prosperity. Repairing the ‘fracture’ between the two banks of the Mediterranean through increased trade, the promotion of good governance and greater cultural exchanges was, and still is, a laudable objective, but policy implementation proved complicated and the initiatives ultimately failed under the weight of their internal contradictions. According to some critics (Cavatorta et al., 2008) these initiatives were effectively designed to place democracy and democratisation on the back burner, privileging instead economic links even if they meant strengthening authoritarian rulers in place. Despite the implementation of three different policy frameworks, the adoption of Association Agreements with a number of Arab states and a significant increase in bilateral relations on economic, security and political matters, the overarching objective of the EU, namely the promotion of democracy as the path to international peace and stability, failed.

In addition to the failure of democracy promotion and the decision to favour short-term authoritarian stability, the end of the unipolar moment had negative consequences for the Arab–Israeli peace process. Thus, the gamble the United States took under Bush senior in seeking to resolve the issue of Palestine did not pay off. The peace process launched in Madrid following the first Gulf war against Iraq proved to be a reasonable success in the medium run, and Bill Clinton, who became president in 1992, was able to build on it to get the Israelis and the Palestinians to sign a comprehensive peace deal, the Oslo Accords, in 1993. The early 1990s were years of great hope for peace across the region. But, when the peace process encountered its first obstacles, it seemed to many in the Arab world that the US was not an honest broker. As the situation progressively worsened, the disappointment of ordinary Arabs with US policies in Palestine grew, with accusations of hypocrisy being laid at the US door. The unravelling of the peace process further undermined the image of ordinary Arabs with US policies in Palestine grew, with accusations of hypocrisy being laid at the US door. The unravelling of the peace process further undermined the image of the United States for two specific reasons. It became apparent that, in its effort to maintain the peace process, the US was prepared to pressure only the weaker side, namely the Palestinians, directly, as well as through its special relationships with Jordan and Egypt. Also, US talk about a new world order underpinned by international legality and justice was exposed as cynicism. Through the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership, the European Union had included Israel in its framework for the creation of a shared peaceful area of prosperity and democracy, gambling that through progressive economic integration and enhanced dialogue both Israelis and Arabs would see the benefits of cooperation. In turn this would have had positive repercussions on the peace process. This did not occur and the ‘peace process’ stalled. Overall, the EU, instead of providing an alternative to the hegemony of the US in the region, simply strengthened it (Youngs, 2004).

**The impact of September 11**

The fallout for the Mediterranean of the terrorist attacks against the United States in 2001 accelerated and consolidated the dynamics in place since the early 1990s. In fact the attacks simply entrenched US assumptions and policies in the region and hardened the European ones. Despite a change in rhetoric, the war on terror did not modify existing trends, even if, for a brief moment, George W. Bush seemed to give thought to overhauling US policy framework
towards the Arab world and the Middle East more generally (Durac and Cavatorta, 2009). The reality is that the requirements of the war on terror led the US to pursue the same policies adopted in the past. Fighting the war on terror required the support of authoritarian regimes in the region. In the name of the war on terror the United States cooperated even more closely with the security services of countries that had used such services extensively to repress domestic dissent and European countries did the same. Rather than healing the supposed regional fracture, the war on terror instead exposed the connivance between ruling elites on both sides of the Mediterranean (Pace, 2009). On the one side, local autocrats began a new wave of repression that affected all sorts of dissenters, be they peaceful or violent, secular or Islamist. On the other, European and US leaders sold out the very principles of democracy and respect for human rights by contracting out abuses and sanctioning anti-democratic policies. Ultimately, the supposed fracture line did not impede the close relations between western and Arab leaders. Furthermore, while conducting the war on terror with the help of autocratic leaders, the US was finalising plans for the invasion of Iraq, which began in March 2003. The war has left a legacy of instability affecting regional politics ever since, radicalising sectors of the population on both banks of the Mediterranean and undermining the prospects of peaceful change of power. In short, the conflict between realist imperatives and the ‘normative’ commitment to democracy saw the ‘securitisers’ win out. The accusation of hypocrisy reverberated across the region once again, leaving the US in the same dilemma as before, except that it was now embroiled in an unwinnable war in Iraq, which provided many young Muslim radicals the opportunity to fight for a new pan-Arab cause, with considerable negative consequences on regional peace and domestic stability on both banks of the Mediterranean. While powerful European states such as France and Germany stayed out of the war in Iraq, European powers as whole did not much deviate from the requirements of the war on terror, particularly when terrorist attacks occurred in Spain and the UK.

In all of this, there is also another dimension worth discussing because it would reveal its importance during the Arab uprisings of 2010–11. During the 1990s and the 2000s, the United States and the European Union promoted policies of economic liberalisation that found an audience in Mediterranean countries on both banks, seeking a ‘map’ to revitalise their ailing economies. Neo-liberal policies were therefore adopted throughout the region, including southern Europe. The post-Cold War era had provided the opportunity for reshaping local economies in order to integrate them into the neo-liberal economic system. While countries such as Morocco and Tunisia had already gone through a number of market-oriented economic reforms before the collapse of the Soviet Union, dramatic economic change followed the launch of the ‘Washington Consensus’ and a greater push for European economic integration. Many countries in the region, including Turkey and Israel, adopted the neo-liberal economic model. The US, through its leadership in international financial institutions and through its extensive contacts with ruling regimes in the Middle East and North Africa, pushed for a series of economic reforms based on an end to price subsidies, privatisation, strict fiscal policies, and free trade, as the agreements with Morocco and Jordan indicate (White, 2005). Reforming stagnant economies was certainly necessary and these reforms led indeed to economic growth over time and contributed to the insertion of the Mediterranean in global trade patterns, but failed to ensure wealth redistribution. In fact labour markets suffered with the rise in unemployment, poorer working conditions, increasing informal employment and poor job prospects for graduates. In addition reforms were hijacked by authoritarian ruling elites and increased income distribution gaps and corrupt practices of resource allocation (Dillman, 2001). Countries in southern Europe experienced a similar trend with the push towards greater market integration within the EU. Although authoritarian political structures made the situation more explosive
in Arab countries, rising unemployment, poor prospects for young people and welfare restrictions characterised the politics of southern Europe throughout the late 1990s and the 2000s. Ultimately, the politics of protests on both banks of the Mediterranean exploded in 2010 following the financial crisis of 2008.

**The uprisings in the Mediterranean**

A combination of socioeconomic and political factors therefore explains the reasons behind the protests, which took place, in different forms and to different degrees, across the Mediterranean, including Israel, Spain, Greece and Turkey. This is relevant because it undermines the assumption of a permanent north–south fracture when in fact all countries of the region were affected. As mentioned earlier, from the 1990s onwards, the adoption of neo-liberal economic reforms across the region began the process of erosion of social contracts, insofar as the state withdrew from a number of activities, most specifically welfare provisions. On the southern bank, measures to liberalise foreign trade, the lifting of import restrictions, changing tariff protection and removing barriers against exports were all enforced while state intervention in the economy was scaled back. Government subsidies were reduced, as was employment in the state sector (Sika, 2012). As a result, the reforms prompted widespread unease and led to the Arab Spring. At the same time, an economic downward spiral struck the countries of southern Europe after the 2008 financial crisis. While the signs of crisis were present before this date (the launch of the euro being particularly problematic), the financial crisis demonstrated that the power of the unrestricted market to deliver economic benefits for all was a sham. Increasing unemployment, reduction of safety nets, and the seeming inability to influence the political process despite the existence of democratic institutions added to the frustration of considerable sectors of the population. While protests in Europe and Israel were not uprisings, they suggest that economic frustration was a shared sentiment in the Mediterranean.

However, neo-liberal reforms had a much greater effect on less developed economies because authoritarian political structures remained largely unchanged. This meant that there were few venues for citizens to express their grievances. While their counterparts in Europe, Israel and Turkey could gather, protest and eventually vote as well as channel their dissent through meaningful civil society activism, dissatisfied citizens in the Arab world had no real option but to defy the authoritarian regime. Corruption at the highest and lowest levels of the bureaucracy and in the private sector with the predominance of *wasta* (nepotist patronage) weighed on ordinary citizens. Thus, by the 2000s a pernicious combination of economic de-development and arbitrary political rule alienated many from the regimes in power. The uprisings were a testimony to the failed economic policies of recent decades and it was no coincidence that it was in Tunisia, the model of neo-liberal economic governance according to international financial institutions, that the uprisings began. Demographic patterns contributed to the explosion of protests as younger people were much more affected by unemployment and lack of prospects (Achcar, 2013).

The Arab uprisings have had tremendous repercussion on the Mediterranean and while it is too early to offer a final verdict, it can be safely argued that in the short term they have generated instability, violence and renewed authoritarianism (the exception being Tunisia). From an international perspective, the uprisings for a time re-focused attention away from the war on terror and towards the possibility of rebuilding the Mediterranean order on inclusive and democratic political bases. The US seemed to realise that it had backed the wrong horse for too long, as the picture of widespread political protest drawing on basic human rights, dignity and governmental accountability emerged from the streets of Arab capitals. Former friendly dictators were
ditched and calls for the establishment of democracy began. In addition, and crucially, Obama opted to intervene militarily, through NATO, to support the anti-Gaddafi rebellion in Libya. The European Union also re-evaluated its pan-Mediterranean initiatives, admitting that in the past it did not pay sufficient attention to the democratic will of the people (Teti, 2012). Promoting democracy through cooperation with the institutions of authoritarian governments had not worked, and the EU and its members, despite some initial dithering, eventually supported the uprisings, with France and the UK also contributing militarily to the fall of the Gaddafi regime.

For a brief moment it appeared that the Mediterranean could finally be on its way to the construction of what the EU hoped to be an area of peace, economic prosperity and democratic accountability. This, however, did not occur and old ‘habits’ returned to dominate the politics of the region. The initial enthusiasm for the democratic wave faded rapidly as Islamist electoral victories in Tunisia in 2011 and Egypt in 2012 brought back fears of anti-western policies. The inability and unwillingness of domestic actors to settle their differences through consensual politics brought chaos in Libya. The ability of the Algerian, Mauritanian and Moroccan elites to consolidate their grip on power despite mass protests and therefore to remain stable made international actors wary of promoting changes that might backfire. The regional chaos further afield with the civil wars in Yemen and Syria empowered violent Islamist groups, heightening the quest for security and stability. Finally, the collapse of Iraqi authority on its territory and the rise of the so-called Islamic State decisively shifted the momentum from support for change to the quest for stability at almost any price. At the same time, the rise of populism in southern Europe reinforced this quest for stability with governments unwilling to support policies that might make them look weak and unprepared in the face of mounting regional challenges.

New global powers and the Middle East

It is in this context that new global powers have made their presence felt in the Mediterranean, although it should be underscored that their influence is more limited. China and Russia were not interested or strong enough for quite some time to challenge the US and the EU in the Mediterranean, but more recently they have come to play a somewhat greater role, particularly when it comes to the expansion of their commercial links, with Russia also interested in developing greater security cooperation and attempting to divide the European Union. While both acquiesced in the attack on Libya in 2011, Russia and China drew the line when it came to Syria, with their position having significant consequences for the wider Mediterranean.

Aside from having a historical involvement in the region, Russia appears to be more determined to become involved in the regional politics and reassert its status as a global power. Building on its renewed economic development, Russia has sought to provide some sort of counterbalance to the US and the EU, while offering its considerable resources in the fight against Islamism, which Russia considers a domestic threat (Malashenko, 2013). This is evident in the Russian intervention in Syria where international and domestic concerns are both central in Russia’s thinking about the role of the Mediterranean. The region represented a strategic and therefore important locus of confrontation during the Cold War, but in its aftermath such significance has, if anything, become stronger. Major wars have taken place in the Mediterranean and it is the only region where US military expansion has known few bounds since the early 1990s. In many ways the southern bank of the Mediterranean has become a ‘chasse gardée’ of western powers with Russia being rather firmly shut out of major decisions concerning the region. Russia has, however, been in a position to object to its marginalisation and it has
acquired the strength – both diplomatic and military – to challenge the US and its allies, in part because of the 2003 US blunder in Iraq and western wavering about the Arab uprisings, and it has taken a stand over Syria. Russian interventionism is not only the product of global concerns about counterbalancing the United States, but is also driven by significant worries about the rise of violent Islamism. It is on this issue that the international and the domestic dimensions are linked according to the Russians. While Russia is interested in preventing western dominance of the global system, this becomes a concern only when the effects of misguided western policies have a deleterious impact on Russia’s internal security. Thus, it is the blunder in Iraq in 2003 and its consequences, the unwavering support for Israel and anti-Iranian stance of the United States that are seen in Russia as the drivers for the rise of extremist Islamism. This perceived anti-imperialist struggle then takes on a transnational character that undermines Russia’s internal security, as Muslim communities within the country can radicalise through this transnational discourse and employ violence to subvert the Russian domestic order (Allison, 2013) equating western imperialism with the Russian one. The Russian strategy in Syria has been coherent from the beginning of the crisis, and this coherence has played well in the rest of the region with a number of governments willing to build better relations with Russia, allowing it to have a greater degree of regional influence (Katz, 2013). However, it would be erroneous to argue that Russia’s Mediterranean policy simply focuses on the Arab world to counter the effects of what it sees as western-fuelled violent religious extremism. In this respect, Russia has attempted to gain traction as a viable political and economic partner for countries in southern Europe, employing the economic crisis and the dissatisfaction in Greece in particular to divide the EU countries over the issue of sanctions against Russia following its takeover of Crimea and Moscow’s role in the crisis in Ukraine (Williams, 2015). While this strategy yet has to produce tangible results, it is indicative of the role that Russia intends to play globally and regionally.

China for its part has thus far stayed away from political and security issues, preferring to focus on building economic linkages, but there are political undertones to China’s engagement, particularly because it contributes to consolidate the authoritarianism of Arab countries (Sun and Zoubir, 2014). While China is not as invested as Russia in the survival of the Syrian regime, it has also drawn a line in the sand when it comes to western attempts at managing regional affairs unilaterally and through the use of force. This is because China too sees western policies in the region as somewhat self-defeating insofar as they increase tensions and instability with consequences that go beyond the Arab world. China too has domestic concerns about the rise of Islamist violent extremism and while violent groups are sufficiently far not to be considered an immediate threat, there are transnational links that China worries about when it comes to keep its own Muslim population under political control. From a security perspective though, China prefers to remain aloof from the disputes that characterise the region and argues that all issues should be solved regionally without outside intervention and interference. The main priorities for China in the region remain those of increasing its access to the natural resources and expanding the markets for its products, suggesting that these economic imperatives drive Chinese security policy. Accessing resources is certainly a priority given the needs of the Chinese economy, but finding new markets has also been prioritised. As Neill (2014: 206–7) argues: ‘the value of China’s exports to the Middle East grew from $6.47 billion in 1999 to $121 bn in 2012, and large-scale infrastructure and other construction projects have become a major feature of the Chinese economic activity in the region’. Thus, Chinese leaders are reluctant to be perceived as a regional alternative challenging the United States and prefer a ‘strictly business’ approach. This is particularly welcome in the region, although security matters for all Arab countries remain important and cannot be dealt with adequately without US diplomatic, economic and military commitments.
Conclusion

The Mediterranean region is a concentrate of problematic issues, and the countries in the area have more in common than traditionally has been perceived. While it is true that there exists a divide between the Arab world, southern Europe, Israel and Turkey, there are also points of convergence and shared challenges. Despite periodic attempts at constructing an area of prosperity and good governance, these have foundered amidst the primacy of narrow national interests, fears and recriminations. The challenges the region faces are unlikely to be dealt with in the short term and this does not bode well for those who aspire to construct a progressive regional order where integration could take place according to the shared values that do exist even though they might not always have the strength to emerge.

Note

1 This chapter draws in part from the chapters ‘The Arab Awakening’ and ‘The Middle East and the Wider World’ in Vincent Durac and Francesco Cavatorta, Politics and Governance of the Middle East, Palgrave, 2015.

References