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## The (re)configuration of the Euro-Mediterranean space after the 2011 Arab uprisings: borders, politics and identity

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### 1. Introduction

Political events following the 2011 uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) have contributed to a new conceptualisation (and management) of border issues. The tumultuous period had a dramatic effects on Europe and the southern Mediterranean countries. On the one hand, Europe is facing a continuous redefinition of its borders, especially in the southern neighbourhood but also in the eastern part of the continent. On the other hand, the MENA countries are part of a game in which the political elites deploy sectarian identity, narratives and symbols to neutralise dissent and (re-)assert control, even on borders, spaces and places. Notwithstanding the counter-revolutionary trend, the presence of ongoing civil conflicts, along with the escalation of regional competition over the past decade, has notably changed the political and social landscape in many countries. In this context, the Euro-Mediterranean space seems more and more unstable, and its margins porous. It has become a place of new (internal and external, physical and mental) barriers and systems. European space has been besieged by a new wave of populism that is strengthening national identities and putting a strain on the European Union as a cohesive space. Meanwhile, in some MENA countries, the repression of a new wave of mobilisation in 2019 is silencing counter-hegemonic movements that could potentially cross state and community borders, as well as ethnic and religious divides.

### 2. Why investigate the reconfiguration of the Euro-Mediterranean space after the 2011 uprisings?

In this special issue, we deem it crucial to reflect on the reconfiguration of the Euro-Mediterranean space, particularly after the 2011 uprisings. Some trends need to be explained in order to understand this centrality. A preliminary reflection focuses on the nexus between space and politics and the politics of the space. Spaces and this is the case of the Euro-Mediterranean space have become more and more politicised. This is due to several factors: the relevance that the control of spaces assumed for both the European Union and the leaders of some of the Mediterranean countries (regulation of immigration flows and prevention of terrorist attacks); the idea that spaces (here also intended as border spaces) can be re-organised and re-assessed

according to rules and hierarchies capable of challenging the political order(s); and an awareness that spaces are not merely geographic entities but *loci* where identities develop and transform themselves, where dissent may coagulate and practices of resistance may emerge (Di Peri 2020). This final point is more evident when we look at the post-2011 era as a period of institutional and identity fluidity.

However, the politicisation of the Euro-Mediterranean space is nothing new. Although the 2011 uprisings seem to have marked a turning point in relations between the *non* EU Mediterranean countries and EU, some key points, in our view, remain unchanged. First: Before the uprisings, the Euro-Mediterranean space had mainly been perceived (and consequently managed) through asymmetrical relationships that disadvantage the states of the southern bank. Despite the many attempts to frame these relationships over the years (*e.g.* the Barcelona Process and the European Neighbourhood Policy), the real effect of the adopted policies has not been as evident. In the vast majority of cases, scholars have shown that European projects (and funds) end up in the pockets of restricted circles and elites, boosting the network of privilege and strengthening authoritarian resilience (Teti, Abbott, Cavatorta 2017; Heydemann 2004). More broadly, they have incentivised ‘relations of privilege’ since the colonial era and heavily favoured European countries in commercial and economic terms (Di Peri, Zardo 2017). Despite all these problems, however, the 2011 uprisings made it possible to start a fresh discussion of the old hierarchies and debate the need to reconceive these asymmetrical relations, which have contributed to describing the European Union as an empire, on a new basis (Del Sarto 2016).

Second: The unexpected effect of the revolts, namely the increase in regional instability, greatly helped to revamp an essentialist debate promoting the idea that the post-2011 era would simply show the problems of a region predestined to chaos, violence and backwardness. This vision strengthened the idea of a “Fortress Europe”: a space that needs to be preserved, strictly controlled and protected from foreign intrusions and attacks.

Third: This interpretation and its ramifications for the Euro-Mediterranean (and especially the European) space led to, on the one hand, a radicalisation of certain populist views and, on the other hand, an increase in geopolitical interpretations of the post-2011 era. This paved the way for a cause–effect relationship marginalising political explanations for social phenomena.

While it is true that the 2011 uprisings spurred a re-politicisation of the Euro-Mediterranean space, Europe–Mediterranean relations remain largely dominated by old legacies and strategies (Zardo 2019; Bauer 2015). This is more evident when one considers how the European Union has worked, especially after the uprisings, to re-border its margins. The obsessive focus on borders and the migration agreements stipulated with some neighbourhood countries to maintain control over migration flows and the arrival of refugees, as well as the countries’ incapacity to manage the continuous violation of basic human rights in some detention centres, are just some examples of the attitude of ordering and re-bordering the Euro-Mediterranean space (Cuttita 2018; 2020). It is a situation that has been exacerbated by the COVID-

19 pandemic and populist discourses across the globe. This has also affected the strategies the European Union put in place to update relations between Europe and the *non* EU countries on the Mediterranean Sea. However, at the time of this writing, no substantial strategies or policies have been implemented yet.

On the other side of the Mediterranean, the countries of the southern flanks adopted a twofold attitude: On the one hand, as some scholars recently pointed out (Del Sarto, Tholens 2020; Paciello Huber 2020), this re-politicisation creates new attitudes and reconfigurations at the institutional level that can challenge, renegotiate or even stop the contractual imposition by the EU through very interesting acts of resistance. This is perfectly in line with a consolidated attitude seeking to challenge the Eurocentric perspective that has historically dominated Euro-Mediterranean relations (Di Peri, Zardo 2017). On the other hand, in the opposite direction, the counter-revolutionary forces in the vast majority of the countries affected by the revolutionary wave, except for Tunisia, have tried to capitalise on the re-politicisation of the Euro-Mediterranean space by signing agreements totalling billions of euros with the EU to manage the flows of refugees (Turkey and Libya) and using these agreements as leverage against the bloc to defend their authoritarian posture and power.

These dynamics of re-politicisation have had an impact on the redefinition of borders, which are conceived more and more as spaces to manage, control and re-adapt according to different needs: spaces that, while marginal relative to the centre, re-acquire a pivotal role not just in policy-making but also in academic circles and debates aimed at a new re-conceptualisation of the Euro-Mediterranean space.

### 3. Outline of the special issue

The trends we have outlined above are present to a greater or lesser degree all across the Mediterranean – from Morocco in the west to Turkey in the east – but perhaps most vividly in the core countries that the authors in this issue investigate, such as Lebanon. All the articles presented here are based on extensive ongoing fieldwork in the region supported by desk research and data collection. The issue puts the Euro-Mediterranean space and the analytical category of the border at the centre of the study. The articles examine in-between border spaces within the wider Euro-Mediterranean space. The salt lake as described by Braudel is, after all, a great space of interaction and sharing (in-)between the European shore and the south-eastern flank commonly referred to as the MENA region. As such, the long wave of uprisings and the subsequent counter-revolutions that have swept through many of the MENA countries have transformed the Euro-Mediterranean landscape since 2011. Hence, both the political-regional and socio-identity boundaries are currently extremely blurred and variable. The issue aims to provide in-depth insight into the dynamics of boundary redefinition from both a macro and a micro perspective. The concept of a border is interpreted through an interdisciplinary approach because it was considered more suitable to grasp the complexity of the phenomenon and because it reflects the authors' different academic paths.

Stefania Panebianco's article attempts to rewrite the conceptual security boundaries of the Euro-Mediterranean region by proposing an alternative analytical framework based on the concept of the Mediterranean Global South. The author joins a growing body of literature by highlighting the Mediterranean connections or "complexification of regional relations" emphasised by migratory phenomena that are increasingly being understood from a human security perspective. Accordingly, these dynamics make the Euro-Mediterranean space "a significant case study to understand world politics". In her conclusion, the author points to the renewed centrality of the Mediterranean Sea. The significance of the Euro-Mediterranean space as outlined by Panebianco is an unconventional interpretation at a time when the centre of gravity of international politics seems to have shifted eastward.

As in the study conducted by Panebianco, the contribution by Eugenia Blasetti takes a macro view of the Euro-Mediterranean region. Drawing on Lefebvre's theorisation of space as a social product that does not pre-exist human beings and on Foucault's concept of heterotopia, the author analyses the role that European migration policies and search & rescue operations carried out by non-governmental organisations (NGOs) play in the socio-political construction of the Euro-Mediterranean space. By underscoring the EU's securitisation process of migration policies, Blasetti explores how NGOs have constituted an alternative space of hospitality and inclusion. As a result, the current Euro-Mediterranean social space is crossed by multiple reconfiguration processes in which both state and non-state actors are involved.

While Blasetti's study discusses European borders politics within the framework of a Euro-Mediterranean space-making process, Daniel Meier focuses on how the *European Integrated Border Management* (IBM) is being integrated into the countries on the region's southern-eastern flanks in a post-Arab uprising context. Taking Libya and Lebanon as case studies, Meier analyses how the EU manages its external borders. His study shows how the IBM and the many associated EU agencies have had poor results due to inherent constraints and a narrow-minded approach to the complex institutional framework of the states on the southern shore. The two case studies allow Meier to develop a comparison between two countries commonly classified as a failed state and a weak state. The findings reveal that the difficulties of the EU institutions in implementing the development of border management are also due to the extreme fragmentation of the local actors' institutions and the transformations of the geopolitical environment.

Stefano Fogliata's contribution also uses Lebanon as a case study but adopts a micro-level perspective focused on the dynamics of social interaction and marginality within refugee camps on Lebanese territory. The country has historically been known as a place of refuge for people of Palestinian origin (commonly known as long-term refugees), and the arrival of large numbers of displaced people from Syria since 2011 has generated new socio-spatial relations and patterns. The study, which is the result of a long period of fieldwork and participant observations, shows how, within the "current landscape of overlapping displacements", interactions

between Palestinians and Syrians on Lebanese territory spatially materialise through the camps' new geographies and mental configurations. In addition to highlighting the interconnectivity between Syrians, Palestinians from Syria, Palestinians from Lebanon, and Lebanese, the research inside and outside the Burj Al-Barajneh camp challenges the widespread trend in the literature that considers the camps in Lebanon as "spaces of exception". According to the argument put forward by the author, the hyper-mobile spatial practices that transcend the institutional discriminations have contributed to a re-elaboration of the Palestinian refugee camps into what Fogliata defines as "meaningful places of elusive contestation".

In parallel with Lebanon, the country most affected by migration flows from Syria is Turkey, which hosts almost 4 million refugees. The Turkish management of the crisis is analysed by Chiara Maritato, who highlights how the Ankara government has used the emergency to gain greater bargaining power in its relations with the EU. The author's research is developed within the framework of the two greatest challenges – migration and terrorism – that have forced the EU to rethink its relationship with third countries. Maritato's study focuses on the concept of migration diplomacy and highlights how Turkey plays a dual role formalised by the signing of the EU–Turkey Statement in 2016. On the one hand, Turkey has used crisis management to present itself domestically and internationally as a humanitarian actor endowed with a degree of "moral superiority". On the other hand, Turkey has consolidated its role as a gatekeeper able to prevent illegal migration into the EU, becoming a prominent player in controlling the EU's external borders.

Migration diplomacy is part of a broader framework of the reconfiguration of Turkish foreign policy that has increased the prominence of the Mediterranean space. The topic is discussed by Peter Seeberg, who analyses Ankara's foreign policy by taking domestic policy changes as the main determinant or explanatory factor. He argues that democratic backsliding and the general "erdoganisation" of Turkish politics have been accompanied by a neo-Ottoman narrative and greater regional interventionism. According to Seeberg, Turkish ambitions – in particular, those of President Erdogan, defined by the author as "Neo-Ottomanist" – drive a new expansionist trend of Turkish foreign policy of which the case studies (Eastern Mediterranean, Libya and Syria) are the most recent examples. The research conducted by Seeberg not only contributes to the literature on the domestic and foreign policy nexus but also highlights how Turkey's expansionist strategy has led to changing patterns of territorial control in two important ways: a "re-bordering" of in-between spaces in northern Syria and a potential restructuring of the regional power balance in the Eastern Mediterranean.

Finally, Gianluca Pastori's article analyses the geopolitical dynamics of the Euro-Mediterranean space by focusing on the role of the North Atlantic Alliance (NATO) in the post-2011 period. The study closes the loop opened by Panebianco and adopts a macro approach to the region, highlighting the limits of NATO's Mediterranean policy that emerged in the wake of the Arab uprisings. Pastori's research shows how the lack of a comprehensive vision for the MENA region and the security-only

approach have gradually eroded NATO's relevance in the Mediterranean arena. As a result, after a few unsuccessful attempts within the organisation to shift the strategic orientation towards the southern shore, the trend in recent years has been a re-orientation towards more traditional positions where the Mediterranean Sea is considered a marginal arena.

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