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"it is vital for Europe to be visible and active in the Southern Mediterranean"

The Robert Schuman Foundation has published a European interview wih Jean-Pierre Filiu, University Professor at Sciences Po (Paris). He has just published «Le nouveau Moyen-Orient. Les Peuples à l'heure de la révolution syrienne.» Fayard 2013.

1. Two years after the start of the Arab revolutions Tunisia is suffering a serious wave of violence and instability. How should we view the present situation? Could the country be engulfed in the chaos of civil war?

With hindsight the assassination of lawyer Chokri Belaïd on 6th February 2013 may possibly reveal itself to be an event as important as the immolation of Mohammed Bouazizi on 17th December 2010, as it marked the beginning of the democratic uprising in the Arab world. We have now entered the second phase of this historic, long-term upheaval, which quite logically began again in Tunisia: in a record lapse of time the local Islamists, belonging to the Ennahda party, have exhausted the popularity capital which they had acquired in the autumn of 2011. Tunisia easily has the capacity to solve the present crisis if the constitutional transition is put back on track – which means as wide a political agreement as possible.

2. What is the Muslim Brothers plan in Egypt? Are they trying to establish a religious dictatorship, or are they trying to move towards normalising their government practice?

Contrary to talk of a "Fundamentalist Winter" the Islamists in both Tunisia and Egypt are aware, better than any other, of their true weakness. And it is because they fear losing the next elections in both countries that they have undertaken some measures in the hope of transforming what was simply a transitory gain into structural advantages. The Egyptian army has fuelled this trend by delaying the effective devolution of power over to the elected authority by a year and a half. And the Muslim Brothers have paid back the military by granting them excessive legal privileges in the Constitution that was adopted with great difficulty in December 2012. But this Constitution, because it was forced through (low turnout for a positive vote totalling 64%) did nothing to solve the Egyptian crisis, as the violence in Port Saïd and in Cairo reminds us. It is not so much about normalising government practice but rather the acceptance by the Islamists of the long term sharing of executive power with other forces. It is striking to note that this maturity is admitted by resigning Tunisian Prime Minister, Hamadi Jebali, but rejected by the Ennahda party of which he is a member, simply because he proposed a government of technocrats.

3. There is not much mention of Libya in the media these days. What is the situation there?

The Libyan transition is happening slowly but overall it is adhering to the timetable set before Kaddafi fell. We must never forget two vital developments: the revolutionary leaders of the National Transition Council (NTC) indeed withdrew from the political scene after the first free elections; and the Muslim Brothers won only 17 of the 200 seats in the new Assembly – which is opposite to the scores made by the Islamists in the neighbouring

countries. Having said this, the adjustment between the various groups competing in the new political space, which we too easily summarize as being "tribal" antagonism, is taking time. And the presence of "revolutionary" militias continues to pose a serious threat to public order and of course to the rule of law. After the assassination of the American ambassador in September 2012, not only did the population of Benghazi chase the jihadists out of town, but it turned against the militias in general, before the authorities intervened to protect what they deemed to be "legal" militias.

4. The civil war in Syria is by far the longest and has been the bloodiest. What makes this conflict so specific? What has enabled Bashar al-Assad to stay in power, unlike Gaddafi, Ben Ali or Mubarak?

In Tunisia, and all the more so in Egypt, the army believes itself to be the holder of the supreme interests of the nation, over and above the dictator in power. In Libya and in Syria the hard core of the armed forces was basically a praetorian guard at the exclusive service of the despot, whilst the rest of the military was controlled strictly in order to prevent any form of organised subversion. Gaddafi responded immediately and with extreme brutality to the revolution which encouraged defections, before the NATO intervention literally saved Benghazi. For months on end in Syria the revolution stuck to civilian, and even citizen discipline and it paid highly for the simultaneous rise of repression in Syria on the one hand and the fall of the despot in Libya on the other. Countries in the west believed, or pretended to believe that the Syrian revolutionaries wanted similar direct intervention; they therefore refused in October 2011 to recognize the Syrian National Council (SNC) contrary to the gesture they granted to the Libyan NTC. This misjudgement was tragic because it supported the murderous illusion that Assad is representing Syria, opening the way for Moscow and Beijing's obstruction at the UN Security Council.

5. Again regarding Syria, might the international community not take a firmer stance as far as Assad is concerned? And in the affirmative how might they do this?

The international community absolutely has to act in line with its own principles. More than one hundred States have recognized in the fall of 2012 the Revolutionary Coalition as Syria's representative, but they have rejected both cutting diplomatic relations with the Assad regime on the one hand, and delivering the opposition with arms, which would be vital to break the dictator's terror machine, on the other. We are now in a scandalous situation in which Bashar and his clique have created the conditions for a humanitarian catastrophe, notably via the systematic destruction of healthcare and transport infrastructures, whilst the UN is still negotiating with this criminal regime the ways and means of deploying humanitarian aid. Either the revolution is fully legitimate and it has the right to expect from abroad the instruments for the liberation of the Syrian people– or the present colluding abstention will continue and the revolutionaries, who will control Syria in the future, will not easily forget who helped them and who abandoned them during a battle that is so disproportionate from a military point of view.

6. As far as Mali is concerned, and in spite of the French intervention, what should be said about the effective lack of response on the part of the European Union? Is it because of a lack of joint vision over Europe's role in the region and/or different views of terrorist threats (AQIM, MNLA)?

It is less inter-European divergence than bureaucratic pressure that bears on EU in times of crisis. Thanks to the presidential tradition of the Fifth Republic, France can respond rapidly to an imminent threat. It is clear to me that the Malian crisis pleads for a truly operational European Rapid Reaction Force and for the development of European defence. Anyway it is up to the European Union in the short term to train and equip the Malian units that will ensure the progressive return to the rule of law in the north of the country. The next elections will not take place in Mali without determined support of the EU, at least to guarantee their exemplary nature. More generally Europe will take front stage in a variety of types of aid to re-establish a democratic, pluralist Mali, which is vital for regional stability.

7. Does the European Union have a global or an ad hoc approach to this issue? Can it succeed in adopting a united position? How might it pass from response to anticipation? What lessons can we learn of these events in terms of the policy undertaken by the EU in the region, notably via the European Neighbourhood Policy and the Union for the Mediterranean? Are we moving towards a recasting of this policy?

Sometimes we feel that the European Union, via its various institutions and its components, adapt to events over which it accepts not to have any control. This low profile cannot be justified either from a financial or a strategic point of view. Indeed it is vital for Europe to be visible and active in the Southern Mediterranean where most of the (significant) funds paid out are not really used to promote necessary (and possibly inevitable) developments, but to maintain an increasingly expensive status quo. We have to emerge from this "soft consensus" on humanitarian aid, often presented as the only response to major crises, because it would be better to adopt political, more courageous and probably cheaper guidelines (Syria is particularly enlightening in this instance). Generally European decision makers must extend the range of their contacts in the Arab world, beyond the Islamists, towards new emerging forces in the widest possible number of areas. The social dimension of the new uprising, in Tunisia and elsewhere, ought to lead the European Union towards more pro-active work with the unions.

Jean-Pierre Filiu

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