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The EU's approach to the religious factor in its near abroad:

Turkey and the Arab Mediterranean countries¹

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1. Introduction

Religion is gaining an increasing weight in international relations: religious-oriented actors have stronger presence in international affairs, religion is a fundamental element defining national, subnational and transnational identities, and, finally, religious feelings are instrumentalized by several actors to defend more effectively their own interests at a national and international level. The increasing popularity of concepts such as 'Clash of Civilizations' or 'Alliance and Dialogue among Civilizations' exemplify this growing importance of religious-related issues in the international arena. This is a global trend. However, these issues are particularly present in relation with the Muslim World.

This article analyzes how a relevant international actor – and a very particular one, the EU - tackles religious issues. Strictly focusing on the EU policies towards the Arab and Muslim World, this contribution highlights that the religious factor (mainly related to Islam) has played and is still playing a different role in the EU's policies towards Turkey and in the EU relations with the Arab Mediterranean countries. To put it in a nutshell, religion has raised high in EU-Turkish relations and Turkish political Islam has not been seen as a threat by the EU. In contrast, it has achieved a secondary place in the Barcelona Process and the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP), the two frameworks which structure the EU relations with nearly all Arab Mediterranean countries. In addition, political Islam has, in a silent way, been perceived as a threat to regional stability in most Arab Mediterranean countries and only recently a more positive approach has been developing.

As this paper will point out, this differentiated approach can be explained (A) due to the different nature of the enlargement policy, the Barcelona Process and the ENP or (B) due to the different characteristics of the religion *problematique* and particularly of political Islam in the two cases.

2. The EU's relations with its southern periphery

The Mediterranean and the Middle East have been of paramount importance for the EU's foreign policy since the early beginning. The Treaty of Rome, for instance, incorporated the previous bilateral trade arrangement between Morocco and France into the Treaty. Later on, in the seventies, a Global Mediterranean Policy was endorsed and association agreements with most Mediterranean countries were concluded. In that decade, the Euro-Arab dialogue was also launched and the Arab-Israeli conflict had an important role in the first steps of the European Political Cooperation, the precedent of the current Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP). Simultaneously, the EEC was enlarging its borders towards the Mediterranean. In 1981 Greece acceded into the EEC and five years later, Spain and Portugal followed.

In the last eighties several voices prompted for both a stronger role of the EU in international affairs and particularly in the Mediterranean. In 1989 a Renovated Mediterranean Policy (RMP) was designed. However, the real upgrading of the EU's Mediterranean Policy occurred in 1995 with the celebration of the first Euro-Mediterranean Conference in Barcelona and the launching of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP).

The use of the concept of partnership illustrated a change of paradigm of the EU's relations with the Mediterranean due to the fact that, in contrast with the Global and Renovated Mediterranean policies, the EMP offered, at least rhetorically, a cooperation framework in which all members (EU and non-EU) would be treated on an equal footing. The EMP, also named Barcelona Process, generated enormous expectations and fixed itself a list of ambitious goals inscribed in the Barcelona

Declaration. This text specified that the Partnership should transform “the Mediterranean basin into an area of dialogue, exchange and cooperation guaranteeing peace, stability and prosperity which require a strengthening of democracy and respect for human rights, sustainable and balanced economic and social development, measures to combat poverty and promotion of greater understanding between cultures.”²

Almost 12 years since its inception, most analysts agree that the Partnership has not achieved the desired progresses and its accomplishments have not acquired adequate visibility. As for the goal of transforming the Mediterranean into a secure and stable area, one should note that major regional conflicts such as in the Western Sahara as well as in the Middle East remain unresolved. There has not been a significant improvement of neither democratic nor human rights standards in most Arab partners. As for the economic dimension, in spite of the fact that most southern countries have concluded association agreements, which would allow for the creation of a Euro-Mediterranean Free Trade Area in the future, south-south integration is very weak and these advances have not led to the extension of prosperity in the region. Simultaneously, European investors have not yet sought to invest in the economies of these countries. The cultural and social dimensions has been considered the ‘Cinderella’ of the EMP: a basket full of rhetoric but empty of content which only after September 11 has gained some importance with the creation of the Anna Lindh Foundation which should be working to improve the dialogue between cultures and civilizations (Pace & Schumacher: 2007).

In 2005, Barcelona hosted an extraordinary Euro-Mediterranean summit. For the first time, benefiting from the tenth anniversary of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP), official representatives from the 35 European and Mediterranean countries convened in the Catalan capital in order to revamp a stagnant framework. Although an ambitious five-year working programme was adopted in that summit, it felt short the expectation that it generated (Soler i Lecha, 2006; Asseburg, 2005).

The Barcelona Process has coexisted since its inception with other regional cooperation initiatives such as the 5 + 5 or the Mediterranean Forum.³ Since 2004 it has had to face the competition a regional initiative led by the US, that is, the Broader Middle East and North Africa Initiative (BMENA) and, more important, of two other initiatives are genuinely European and could potentially substitute the EMP: the Strategic Partnership for the Mediterranean and the Middle East, which englobes all the Arab World and not only the Arab Mediterranean countries, and, above all, the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP). In fact, the Strategic Partnership for the Mediterranean and the Middle East, due to the inexistence of specific funds devoted to develop it, represents much less a threat to the survival of the EMP than the ENP does.

² *Barcelona Declaration*, Barcelona, 28 November 1995.

³ The 5+5 was supported mainly by France in the late eighties and includes Portugal, Spain, Italy, France, Malta, Mauritania, Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia and Libya. In recent years, it has reinforced the Justice and Home Affairs and the Defense dimensions. The Mediterranean Forum has a slightly larger membership. It is a French-Egyptian initiative which functions as an informal mechanism to exchange ideas among Mediterranean countries before the Euro-Mediterranean meetings.

The ENP was originally designed for Eastern European countries that were to become EU neighbours after the 2004 and 2007 enlargements (Ukraine, Russia, Moldova and Belarus). Subsequently, the members of the Barcelona Process, with the exception of Turkey (considered an EU candidate), Libya, and the three South Caucasus Republics were also integrated into the same strategy.

The rationale behind the ENP is inspired in the enlargement experience. EU Member States have confirmed that the enlargement policy is the most effective tool to gain real influence in third countries. However, the EU is not willing to extend the membership perspective further. Consequently, the EU needs to offer an alternative for those countries in Eastern Europe, which would like to become members but are not offered that option by the EU. Congruently, Southern and Eastern Mediterranean countries, as well as most of the EU Mediterranean members, have recognised (and still recognise) that the EU has been overly focused on Eastern integration at the expense of Southern cooperation. They therefore advocated enlarging the geographic scope of this new policy to include the eastern as well as the southern EU neighbors.

In the framework of this policy, the EU has tried to replicate the enlargement method (gradualist, result-oriented and focused on the negotiation of the *acquis*) for those who are not to become EU candidates (Kelley, 2006). However, if the EU is not able to offer the same incentives, then it cannot expect the same commitments from its neighbours. This characterises the nature of the ENP and its goals. The ENP is a bilateral policy which gives an “à la carte” model for cooperation with third countries. The EU promises concrete progress towards further integration of the third country into the EU internal market and offers it further areas of cooperation in several fields. In exchange, the EU asks for definite and demonstrable commitments to political, legal, economic and technical reform.

This policy takes shape through the following documents: (a) General Strategy, based on the guiding principle of the ENP; (b) Country Reports, issued by the European Commission, which scrutinise the situation of the neighbouring country in multiple areas; (c) Action Plans, also proposed by the European Commission, but negotiated with the third country and specifying which areas the third country should pursue further reform, as well as what the EU can offer to accompany these reforms and what it can offer as “an award” when these reforms are satisfactorily fulfilled; and (d) the European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument, which merges the funds allocated to the Eastern policy (TACIS) and the Mediterranean (MEDA) into a single fund.

As we will see in a more detailed manner, in both initiatives, the Barcelona Process and the ENP, the religious factor could be incorporated in the agenda if there was political willingness to do so. As for the Barcelona Process, religious-related issues would be dealt mainly in the framework of the so-called ‘third basket’ which aims at promoting dialogue and mutual understanding among the Mediterranean peoples and which pays significant attention to the civil society dialogue. However, it could also be an issue in the political and security basket,

mainly as far as religious freedom, on the one hand, and the role of religion in conflicts, on the other.

In the case of the ENP, religion could be tackled both in the country reports (analyzing issues related with religious freedoms) and also in the Action Plans. In contrast with the Barcelona Process, the ENP framework allows the EU to unilaterally include issues in the agenda and so could be the case of religious-related issues.

This brief overview of the EU's involvement in Mediterranean and Middle Eastern affairs should not forget the EU's positions and actions towards the Arab-Israeli conflict, the cornerstone for stability in the region. Neither the Barcelona Process, nor the ENP, was and is supposed to solve this long-lasting conflict. Moreover, the EU is fully aware that it does not possess the power assets to unilaterally solve the conflict. This is why, together with a deeper political (read, diplomatic) and economical (the EU being the larger donor of the Palestinian National Authority) involvement in the Arab-Israeli conflict, the EU has also tried to coordinate with other international actors and particularly the US in the attempt to reach a realistic and legitimate solution to the conflict⁴. More recently, we can observe that the EU is also acquiring a stronger role in security-related issues. This is the case, for instance, of the two ESDP missions deployed in Palestine (EUBAM-Rafah and EUPOL-COPPS) and the huge military efforts of several EU members in the upgraded FINUL mission in Lebanon after 2006 summer war in this country.

In the framework of this paper, it is also particularly relevant to define Turkey's position in the EU's Mediterranean and Middle Eastern policies. In fact, Turkey can be defined as a *rara avis*, or in a more diplomatic jargon, a particular case, in Euro-Mediterranean arena. Turkey signed an association agreement with the EEC already in 1963, the Customs Union entered into force in 1996, his eligibility for membership has never been contested, since 1999 Turkey is an official candidate and since 2005 it started the accession negotiations. Moreover, after Cyprus and Malta's accession to the EU in 2004, Turkey is the only Mediterranean partner of the EU and member of the Barcelona Process which expects to become full member of the EU. Is it that framework that has to be understood Turkey's ambiguous stance towards the EMP. Authors like Ziya Önis (2003b: 86) and Tobias Schumacher (2004: 162) have pointed out that Turkey has been reluctant to play a more active role in the Barcelona Process, on the assumption that playing such a role would be synonymous with accepting a subordinate status within the EU prior to the realization of full-membership. Nevertheless, when the full membership goal has been clarified, particularly in 2004 and 2005, Turkey's involvement in Euro-Mediterranean affairs, increased significantly. Turkey's active participation in the Barcelona's Euro-Mediterranean summit held in November 2005 was a good example of it⁵.

⁴ In spite of collaborating with the US in initiatives such as the Quartet, the EU has set itself apart from the US as far as Israeli methods of dealing with terrorism are concerned, concretely regarding the selective murders of Hamas leaders or the building of the wall encircling part of the West Bank.

⁵ In the months preceding the summit, Turkey played a much more constructive role than in previous occasions, for instance presenting a non-paper in the Luxemburg ministerial conference with ideas to reinvigorate the EMP. As a pro-positive partner, Turkey defended the need for an

In the last months, Turkish European credentials have been discussed by some European leaders and particularly by the recently elected French President, Nicolas Sarkozy. Sarkozy has even come with an idea to revitalize Euro-Mediterranean relations, the so-called Mediterranean Union, which himself and other politicians present as an alternative to Turkey's full membership. In that context Turkey is likely to return to a low-profile in Euro-Mediterranean affairs as a mean to show that this framework can only be a complement but not an alternative to full membership.

3. The religious factor in EU-Turkish relations

As already said in the introduction, religion-related issues play an important role in EU-Turkish relations. First of all, because arguments linked to religious elements have frequently been used when discussing the convenience and the feasibility of Turkey's EU membership. This is true for the debates in the EU institutions, in most member states as well as for the debate in Turkey itself⁶.

Secondly, both in Turkey and in the EU, religion is instrumentalised by advocates and opponents to Turkey's EU membership. The Islamic faith of Turkish citizens has been presented both as an asset and as a burden. While some opinion-makers have argued that Turkey's integration could lead towards an 'islamisation process of Europe' or a 'cultural alienation in Turkey' others have highlighted that it could have a positive impact for Europe's image in the Muslim world and for the internal cohesion in the EU (full integration and recognition of European Muslim citizens).

Thirdly, when discussing EU-Turkish relations, the debate has also touched which is and which should be the place of religion in the EU and to what extent the European identity is related to a Judeo-Christian heritage. More specifically, there has been a harsh discussion on whether the EU's fundamental norms (Constitution or Treaties) should include references to the so-called 'Christian roots' of the European identity.

Finally, religion-related issues have been included in the reports of both the Commission and the European Parliament which are regularly released to evaluate Turkish progress in accomplishing the political and economical reforms asked by

institutional reform of the Barcelona Process and the convenience to open this framework to the Mediterranean Balkan countries. Furthermore, while most Arab countries sent second-rank representatives, Turkey was represented in the summit by the Prime Minister, Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

⁶ In Turkey both secular and religious-oriented politicians have instrumentalized this issue at their convenience and it is worth remembering the fact that increasing euro-skepticism among Turkish citizens is linked with the perception that the EU tends to reject Turkey's European vocation on the grounds of religious issues.

the EU. In that framework, issues related to religious diversity and religious freedoms have been tackled, both in issues of the interest of sunni-muslims, alevi-muslims and non-Muslim minorities.

Turkey is, as said before, a candidate for the accession. The increasing literature on the enlargement has agreed that one of the key question-marks in the study of this phenomenon is the analysis of why the EU decides to enlarge and why does the EU prioritize some countries among other (Sjursen, 2002; Sjursen and Smith, 2004) Most of the literature identifies three kinds of reasons that could influence the EU preferences: interest related issues (either material or not material), identity bounds and moral principles. In this study of the importance of religion in EU-Turkish relations we can differentiate these three elements. We will start analyzing to what extent Turkey's 'Muslimness' could be beneficial or detrimental to EU's interests of different sorts. We will then focus on the place of religion in the debate on European identity and Turkey's belonging to that identity. Immediately after, we will report the increasing importance of religious-related issues in the EU's evaluation on Turkey's democratic credentials and human rights respect.

This section will conclude analyzing the EU's perception of the religiously-oriented political class that has ruled Turkey since 2002. We will state that most of the EU has perceived the 'islamo-democrat' government of the AKP as a positive element for Turkey's European vocation and we will attempt to explain why the EU's perception of political-Islam groups in Turkey is much more positive than equivalent political groups and factions in other countries.

3.1. Islam: burden or asset?

Interest-related arguments are crucial in the understanding of the EU preferences towards enlargement. When assessing the convenience to offer the enlargement perspective to Turkey several aspects have been taken into account such as the effects in trade benefits, the budgetary absorption capacity, its impact in the decision-making process, the effects in the migratory field and the impact in the strategic depth of the EU and the cohesion and consistency of its foreign policy. Most of these issues have been object of debate in other enlargements rounds such as the one towards the Mediterranean (1981-1986) and the one towards Central and Eastern Europe (2004-2007). However, one of the specificities of the EU's debate towards Turkey is the importance of references to religious, also in terms of benefits, opportunities, challenges, risks and threats.

As said before, both advocates and opponents to Turkey's EU membership have mentioned these topics at their convenience. As for those who contest Turkey's European credentials, a frequently used argument is that its membership would have negative effects for the EU's internal cohesion. This idea is developed in different forms and with many nuances. A significant segment, mostly aligned with rightist positions but not necessarily with the extreme right, has alluded to the risk that Turkey's EU membership could represent the start of Europe's Islamisation process. Two good examples of this reasoning can be found in the statements of

the former EU Commissioner Frits Bolkestein who compared the current discussions on Turkey's EU membership with the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and the 1683 Battle of Vienna. The Dutch politician quoted the American Islam expert Bernard Lewis on the fact that Europe would be "Islamic at the end of this century", and extremely controversially he said that he did not know if this would happen that quick but that it this was right "the liberation of Vienna in 1683 [against the ottomans] would have been in vain"⁷. The other example could be found when the former French PM, Jean-Pierre Raffarin, speaking on the pros and cons of Turkey's EU membership asked if it was on Europe's interest to see "the river of Islam to enter the riverbed of secularism?"⁸ More sophisticated is the argument of the French academician Sylvie Goulard (2004: 56) when she justified her opposition to Turkey's accession because of the "vulnerability of democracy" stating that make European's "gobble a bitter medicine such as Turkish accession could, in the near future, increase the xenophobic feeling" adding that "with a Muslim Turkey, such risk in much higher".

In a complete different tone, many advocates of Turkish membership have referred to the positive effects of integrating this Muslim Turkey in the EU. Two different kinds of reasons have been given. The first relates to the improvement of the EU's image in the Muslim world and the subsequent improvement of the international climate by refuting the idea of a clash of civilizations. This kind of argument became particularly popular after the 11 September bombing attacks. The then German Foreign Affairs Minister, Joschka Fischer (2004: 20) Since the attacks of 11 September 2001, defended that German support to Turkey's EU membership had a strategic nature in a context in which "a new totalitarianism, a terrorism which professes to be religiously motivated, poses a threat to peace and stability (...) its aim is a religious and cultural clash of civilizations between the Islamic Arab world and the West". According to Fischer in this context, "if the modernization process in Turkey is successful, Turkey's much-cited function as a bridge towards the Central Asian states and to the Middle East could become a reality. As a functioning democracy in a predominantly Muslim society, it could inspire neighboring countries and thus increase the prospect of democratic reforms being implemented there. This would be the best response to the new challenges we are facing".. In a similar token, the then Belgian PM, Guy Verhofstadt, stated in an interview that "Turkey's Muslim identity is an advantage since the possibility of a clash of civilizations exists" arguing that the "the best answer to this risk is Turkey's membership as Turkey could be an example with its secular democracy and free market economy to North African countries and the other Muslim countries"⁹.

The second kind or argument consists on the belief that Turkey's accession to the EU would improve the feeling of inclusion of the already existing more than 20 millions of Muslim European citizens, some of them of Turkish origin. The Turkish scholar Ziya Önis (2004a: 21) is one of the voices that has pointed out that the importance of Turkey's being able to make compatible secular and democratic

⁷ *Financial Times*, 8 September 2004

⁸ *Turkish Daily News*, 27 September 2004

⁹ "Verhofstadt: Negotiations Should Begin Soon" in *Zaman on-line edition in English*, 15 December 2004.

values with the Muslim faith in an important message for the Muslim world but even more so for the sizable Muslim communities living in the EU. This kind of argument has been particularly important in countries with significant population of Turkish background. In Germany for instance, the Social-Democrats and the Greens have argued that Turkey's full membership could ease the integration of the Turkish-German citizens, which would have less reasons to feel foreigners in their new homeland (Martens, 2004: 52). This kind of arguments have also tackled the issue that Turkey's integration could be a positive asset to diminish Islamic radicalism and to promote a European Islam, based on tolerance, moderation and compatibility with secular civil norms.

Both aspects have been presented as a opportunity if Turkish membership becomes effective or as a risk if the EU unilaterally decided to stop the accession negotiations. Such a decision would be assimilated by Muslims in Europe and outside the old Continent to European's prejudices against Islam, increasing the feeling of alienation among Muslim Europeans and deteriorating Europe's image in Muslim countries. The Swedish diplomat, Igmarr Karlsson stated, for instance, that "a no to Turkey on religious and cultural grounds would be disastrous for Europe since it would send an immediate and strong message to the fastest growing segments of the European population that they will always be considered unwelcome and second-class citizens also if they chose a secular way of life. Sending such a message could, before we know it, lead to the emergence of a ghetto Islam in Europe instead of a modern tolerant European Islam"¹⁰.

3.2. Islam and European Identity

Most of the discussions on Turkey's EU accession combine interest-related and identity-based arguments. The fundamentals of the European identity, or in other words, of Europeanness, have been extensively debated. On the one hand, some authors and politicians believe that shared cultural elements, a common history and also common religious roots, are on the bases on the current European identity. On the other hand, other opinion-makers argue that the only consensual bases of the European identity are political values such as democracy and human rights. A part some exceptions, those that believe of cultural Europeanness tend to exclude Turkey from the picture while the defenders of Turkey's EU membership also back politically-based European identity.

Islam, the Ottoman Empire and even Turkey not only have been excluded from European identity but have even act as the others, against who the European project was built (Neumann, 1999). According to several analysts, these perceptions still represents a serious handicap for Turkey's accession to the EU (Müftüler-Bac, 2000a: 28).

¹⁰ Ingmar Karlsson "Europe is not a Christian Union" *Zaman On-line English edition*, 16 december de 2004.

In the recent years, several political statements have illustrated the depth of these prejudices. In January 1997, for instance, the then representative of the Dutch Presidency, Van Mierlo, said in the European Parliament that it was time to be honest and say that among others, the problem of the Turkish candidacy is that of admitting a Muslim country in the EU¹¹. The same year, following a Christian-Democrat European Union meeting in Belgium, the then President of the European Christian-Democrats, Wim Van Velzen, stated that the EU had humanistic and Christian values which Turkey did not possess¹². During that meeting the then Chancellor Helmut Köhl reportedly said that the EU was a civilizational project in which Turkey had no place (Müftüler-Baç, 2000a: 21).

In the drafting process of the European Constitution this issue reemerged. Several politicians and *lobbies* argued in the European Convention, in the European Parliament and in the media that the new fundamental text should include a mention to the Christian roots of the European project. Although most of these proposals did not allude explicitly to the Turkish EU-bid, both in the EU and in Turkey there was a shared perception that such inclusion would hamper Turkey's possibility of becoming a full member. In November 2002 the then President of the European Convention, Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, argued in an interview in the French daily *Le Monde* that Turkey's EU accession would imply the end of the European project, among other reasons, because the EU and Turkey did not share the same culture. The impact of this statement was enormous and fueled the debate all across Europe, obliging most EU politicians (and also the intellectuals) to align with Giscard or against him.

In fact, one of the most interesting characteristics of the identity debate in relation with Turkey's European vocation is that it has had a polarizing effect. Many leftist politicians, which are harshly reject the linkage between the EU project and religion, have opted to support Turkey's EU membership in order to prove that the EU is not and should not become 'a Christian club'.

3.3. Religion and the Copenhagen criteria

Religious-related issues have been included in the evaluation of the Copenhagen criteria, that is, the necessary conditions that every candidate has to fulfill in order to, first, start accession negotiations and, in a last step, become full member of the EU. The institution that is formally responsible of evaluating these aspects is the European Commission and since 1998 has released regular reports on the political and economical progresses of the candidate countries as well as regarding their degree of adoption of the *acquis communautaire*. In addition, the European Parliament has regularly produced similar reports which, taking into account the EP's position in the institutional triangle and its deep-rooted self-perception of being the democratic conscience of the EU, have been much more strict in their

¹¹ Quoted in Neumann (1999: 62)

¹² *Financial Times*, 5 March 1997, quoted in Yurdusev (2003: 78)

scrutiny of the democracy, rule of law and human and minority rights conditions in Turkey.

A common characteristic of both institutions' reports is that in both cases the role of religion has achieved an increasing importance. Religion has been focused in terms of religious freedoms. In that respect, a comparison of the 1998 and the 2007 reports is very revealing. Not only the space given to religious-related has increased but the nature and detail of the information is also different.

In the 1998 we can only find mentions to the obligation of *sunni* religious education, the situation of the discrimination against Alevi clergy, the non-recognition of the Assyrian Orthodox religion as a minority and a quite neutral reference to the fact that the "army plays an active role in upholding the principle of secularism in the Turkish society against certain strands of Islam that are considered to be opposed to this principle" and the fact that "the army regularly excludes from its ranks persons deemed to be involved in activities incompatible with secularism"¹³.

Eight years later, the 2006 report devoted much more attention to these issues although this document highlighted the progresses undertaken along the last years and the fact that the "freedom of worship continues to be generally respected". As said before, these reports contained much more detailed information. Considerable attention is paid to Christian and Alevi communities. Regarding the first, the Commission informed about the cases of the discussed property of the Büyükada Greek Girls' & Boys' Orphanage, the closure of the Greek Orthodox Halki (Heybeliada), the ban on the public use of the ecclesiastical title of Ecumenical Patriarch, the murder of the Catholic Priest Andrea Santoro and several incidents against Syrians. As for the latter, the report denounced the difficulties Alevis faced for opening their places of worship (Cem houses), the lack of official funding for this Cem houses and the fact that Alevi children were subject to compulsory religious instruction in schools, which fails to acknowledge their specificity. More general criticisms were also raised on the fact that despite some progress, ID cards still include information on religion, leaving open the potential for discriminatory practices, the fact that sermons and publications of the Religious Affairs Directorate (Diyanet) and of local religious authorities occasionally appeared hostile towards proselytising activities and attacks against clergy and places of worship of non-Muslim religious Communities had been reported¹⁴.

The EP also issues reports which contain information on religious-related issues. Three aspects differentiate these reports approach from that of the Commission. First of all, the EP reports have less impact than the Commission ones. Second, the EP reports are much less consistent, that is, aspects that appear in one years' report, disappear in the following one and reappear years later. This is due to the personal input of the *rapporteur* and the fact that lobbies are quite effective in introducing concrete concerns one year, but not necessarily interiorising these

¹³ Regular report from the Commission on Turkey's Progress towards accession, Brussels: 1998.

¹⁴ Commission staff working document, Turkey 2006 Progress Report{COM(2006) 649 final}, Brussels, 8.11.2006, SEC(2006) 1390

issues in the MEP's minds. Third, because not only minority religious freedoms are tackled, particularly Oostlander's 2003 report and Eurlings's 2004 one, but also because in some of them there are clear references to the fact that the Muslim faith of Turkey's citizens should not be an obstacle for Turkey's accession (e.g. Swoboda's report in 1999 and Morillon one in 2000).

In conclusion, a quick overview of the reports released by two EU institutions, shows that religious freedoms are a fundamental part of the reform agenda that the EU wants Turkey to implement if it wishes to become a full member. As we will see below, this is completely different with the reform agenda that the EU suggests to its Arab Mediterranean partners.

3.4. *Islam democrats: an asset for Turkish European vocation*

Finally, one of the most interesting characteristics of the Turkish case is that the EU has a positive (or at least neutral) approach towards moderate political Islam movements in Turkey. These groups have not been perceived, at least publicly, as a threat to the EU values or to Turkey's path towards full membership. On the contrary, particularly since the year 2002, with AKP's victory in the legislative elections, this political party has been seen by politicians, diplomats and analysts as a reformist and pro-European force¹⁵.

However, it is worth-mentioning that also in times of the *Refah* party, the EU never qualified this party as a threat to stability and the EU even criticized the political repression against this party after the 'post-modern military *coup*' of 1997. For instance, in response to the ban of this party a Presidency statement on behalf of the European Union on 21 January 1998 noted that "this decision is in accordance with the provisions of the Turkish Constitution" but that "the European Union is concerned at the implications for democratic pluralism and freedom of expression". In similar terms, the EU reacted against the ten-month prison sentence imposed to the then Istanbul mayor for a speech deemed to constitute racial or religious provocation. In a statement of 25 September 1998 the European Union "noted with regret the ruling of a Turkish Appeals Court" and expressed, once more "its concern at the implications for democratic pluralism and freedom of expression, which prosecution of democratically elected politicians for non-violent expression of their views is bound to have".

The EU's perception of AKP is significantly more positive than that of their predecessors *Refah* and *Fazilet* parties. The AKP and their *cadres* got this positive image thanks to the reforms undertaken during their first two years of mandate and thanks to a much more constructive stance on foreign policy. The reformism of the AKP was not only appreciated in terms of legislative reports adopted and implemented but also in rhetoric terms. EU officials appreciated the collaboration of the new Turkish administration and the fact that the reforms were not

¹⁵ There are, however, some exceptions. Several authors suggest that the AKP has a hidden Islamist agenda (de Villiers, 2005, Alexandre del Valle, 2004).

perceived as an imposition, as it happened in the past, but as a positive move for Turkey. For instance, Erdogan's statement saying that if the EU goal did not exist, the Copenhagen criteria would become the Ankara criteria and the reformist efforts would be pursued, was warmly appreciated in Brussels and other EU capitals. As far as foreign policy is concerned, the clearest example of the new orientation of Turkey's diplomacy, trying to be seen as a problem-solver instead of a trouble-maker, was its approach towards the Cyprus questions. Turkey's support to the Annan Plan was publicly acknowledged by the EU even if the results of the referendum in the Republic of Cyprus did not open the door to the island's reunification.

Thanks to all these changes in domestic and international policies and to AKP's full commitment with Turkey's EU bid, Erdogan's party was no longer seen by most EU interlocutors as a classical Islamist political party but as a conservative and democratic force. Comparisons with Christian-Democrats became popular and new terms such as Islamo-democrats or moderate-Islamists were coined to define the ideology of this party.

European's sympathies towards this party even increased due to the political situation in 2007, with a radicalisation of secularist and nationalist discourses on the part of the Turkish opposition and the increasing interferences on the part of the Turkish Armed Forces. It is worth noting that this sympathy was particularly deep-rooted in leftist circles and many members of Socialist and Green parties loudly criticized the Republican Peoples' Party (CHP) to the extent that this party is currently being investigated in the framework of the Socialist International.

4. The religious factor in Euro-Mediterranean relations

The EU's approach to religious-related issues with Arab Mediterranean partners in the framework of the Barcelona Process or through different policies (mainly the European Neighborhood Policy and Common Foreign and Security Policy) is considerably different. As we will see in the concluding remarks this could be explained because of the different nature of these frameworks and policies and also because the EU perceives that the characteristics and problems of the religious-related issues in the Arab Mediterranean countries are too different from Turkey's situation in many respects.

Religious-related issues have been secondary in the two most important frameworks for cooperation in the region: the Barcelona Process agenda and the European Neighborhood Policy. In 1995, The Barcelona Process was launched in a moment in which religious tensions and Islamic fundamentalism was already present in the global agenda. The non-declared civil war in Algeria was at its peak and it had effects in Europe, in July a terrorist attack vindicated by the Algerian terrorist group GIA in Paris underground killing 8 persons¹⁶. In the Balkans several wars and ethnic cleansing also showed the fragile coexistence among different

¹⁶ For more information on this context see (Barbé, 1996).

ethnic and religious groups. However, references to religious issues were quite vague in the Barcelona Declaration of November 1995 and the annexed Action Plan¹⁷. Moreover, during the first years such issues were not particularly relevant in the Euro-Mediterranean agenda.

This started to change after September 11. However, even after this shock, references to the need to increase inter-religious dialogue became more rhetorical than practical. It was also in a post September 11 context, when the European Neighborhood Policy started to be designed, with the aim of avoiding new lines of division and to promote in a more effective manner democracy and human rights which, implicitly includes religious freedom.

Particular attention deserves the study of the EU's approach to Political Islam in the region. The EU and its member states have always faced the stability-democracy dilemma in their Mediterranean and Middle Eastern policies. Since the non-declared civil war in Algeria and even before (mainly after the Iranian revolution) Islamist groups were seen by European powers not only as a destabilizing factor but also as movements opposed to the West. Consequently, a democratization process in the Southern and Eastern Mediterranean basin was likely to bring Islamist and anti-western forces to power. In this context, we will see that the EU maintained an ambivalent position to democratization in the region which eroded its legitimacy as a democratization agent. However, as we will see at the end of this section, the severest blow to EU's legitimacy came with their reaction to Hamas' victory in the Palestinian legislative elections.

In order to evaluate the changing attitudes of the EU towards religious-related issues in its Mediterranean policies, we will follow a similar structure to that of the Turkish section. The paper will, first of all, analyze how the religious elements interact with the perceptions of the EU interests in the Mediterranean region. Secondly, it will focus on the nature of the identity discussions in the region and the place of religion in them. Thirdly, it will assess if concerns on religious freedom issues have been tackled in the EMP and ENP's agendas. Lastly, it will assess the EU's approach towards the rise of political Islam in the region and to what extent a substantial change can be envisaged

4.1. Islam and European interests in the region

¹⁷ The first contained a (not-binding) commitment to freedom of religion and non-discrimination on religious grounds and the fact that "dialogue and respect between cultures and religions are a necessary precondition for bringing the peoples closer". The second contained a slightly more detailed reference to the importance of "Greater understanding among the major religions present in the Euro-Mediterranean region" as a mean to "facilitate greater mutual tolerance and cooperation". Thus, the EMP members expressed that they would support "periodic meetings of representatives of religions and religious institutions as well as theologians, academics and others concerned, with the aim of breaking down prejudice, ignorance and fanaticism and fostering cooperation at grassroots level".

Europe's main interest in the region is stability. Due to geographical, historical and sociological reasons, Europe's suffers more than other international actors (the US or China, for instance) the consequences of political and humanitarian crises in the region. Consequently, the debate is, and has always been, how to achieve sustainable stability in a region facing long-lasting territorial conflicts (Israeli-Palestinian, Western Sahara), social unrest and the rise of religiously justified violent terrorism.

In fact, the 2003 European Security Strategy (ESS) pointed out that "The most recent wave of terrorism is global in its scope and is linked to violent religious extremism. It arises out of complex causes. These include the pressures of modernization, cultural, social and political crises, and the alienation of young people living in foreign societies"¹⁸. However, as said above, many of the crises affecting the Arab world also have an immediate impact in the European countries. This is due to geographical proximity but also because of the presence of significant communities of Maghrebian and Middle Eastern origin in many European countries. Consequently, as the ESS also pointed out violent religious extremism cannot only be considered an external phenomenon but a part of our Europe's society as well.

Consequently, the EU has tried to reduce the threat that this phenomenon supposes for the Mediterranean countries as well as for the EU. This has been concretized, on the one hand, through improving the cooperation mechanisms for to fight against terrorism. It is worth-mentioning that Algeria's Euro-Mediterranean Agreement (signed in 2002, that is, after September 11) includes a clause on this issue while former agreements did not and that in 2005 one of the main issues in the EMP's agenda was the approval of a code of conduct against terrorism.

On the other hand, the EU and its Mediterranean partners have renovated their commitment with the need to create the necessary conditions to avoid a scenario of clash of civilizations. This includes discreet references to inter-religious dialogue in the Euromediterranean texts, particularly after September 11. In fact, in was in 2002, under the Spanish Presidency, that Valencia's Action Plan recognized that "dialogue among cultures, civilizations and religions throughout the Mediterranean Region is more necessary than ever before in order to promote understanding among them" and subsequently agreed to "to the principle of creating a Euro-Mediterranean Foundation to promote a dialogue of cultures and civilizations"¹⁹. Furthermore, a specific Action Programme for the Dialogue between cultures and civilizations was also approved in Valencia. This included additional references to the importance of "inter-religious dialogue" and Morocco committed to organize a Conference on inter-religious and inter-cultural dialogue. Nevertheless, in practice there have been very few progresses in this field which remained unexplored by the EU. Moreover, as explained by Sara Silvestri (2005) these issues have gained a life of its own detached of the EMP.

¹⁸ A Secure Europe in a Better World - The European Security Strategy Approved by the European Council held in Brussels on 12 December 2003

¹⁹ *Vth Euromediterranean Conference of Ministers of Foreign Affairs, Valencia Action Plan*, Valencia, 22-23 April, 2002.

In sum, religious extremism and religious confrontation have been largely perceived as a direct and indirect threat to the EU's interests in the Mediterranean. Nevertheless, the actions undertaken to face this challenge have been scarce, largely rhetorical and segmented. Moreover, in contrast with the Turkish case, a deeper integration of the Mediterranean partners in the European Union structures (excluding, of course, full membership) has never been presented as a way to diminish these risks. Most probably because, as we will see below, the nature of the identity debates is different.

4.2. *Islam and Mediterranean identity*

In the discussions over the Turkish EU membership, one of the crucial elements was whether Turkey belonged to the European identity. The discussions in the Euro-Mediterranean agenda are completely different because nor the Mediterranean partners, neither the EU sustain that the Arab Mediterranean partners belong to the European identity. In the Mediterranean, identity discussions have mainly been based in Self/Other discussions and, as Stephen Stetter (2005: 332) explains, in the EU side the emphasis has been put in seeking peaceful and harmonious co-existence of difference while in the South, once can observe the problematization of collective identity perceptions, based on the observation of contradictory and conflictual discourses of difference.

Nevertheless, there have been discussions, generally restricted to expert circles on the existence or not of a shared Mediterranean identity. Historical, cultural and attitudinal elements have been highlighted to prove its existence. In that framework, the place of religion has traditionally been controversial because some scholars like Henri Pirenne (1970) had coined the theory that the arrival of Islam broke the Mediterranean unity achieved in Ancient times and because references to this Mediterranean Unity existed in French and Italian colonialist discourses in the region.

More recently, what we can name 'Mediterraneism' has acquired a more positive tone and seeks its inspiration in the periods of coexistence between the three main monotheist religions such as during *Al-Andalus* times and the almost disappeared cosmopolitanism of some Mediterranean cities like Alexandria. In general terms, there have been attempts to revamp the importance of this coexistence and tolerance values as a characteristic of the Mediterranean *ethos*. This image of 'harmony among civilizations' became particularly appealing after September 11 and even more after incidents such as the Cartoons crisis.

The third basket of the Barcelona Process is devoted to achieve progresses in the cultural and civilization dialogue by fostering civil-society contacts. It is worth inquiring which has been the role of religious-related issues in these dialogue efforts. We have to differentiate, once more, the situation before and after September 11. During the first period, we can see that in spite of the initial commitments to foster inter-faith dialogue and to fight against religious

discrimination, these aspects were almost neglected in the Euro-Mediterranean agenda. A good example of this was the Euro-Mediterranean sectorial meeting of Rhodes on cultural issues. The conclusions of this meeting contained scarce references to religion and only Israel and the Palestinian National Authority proposed projects related with inter-faith dialogue²⁰. Another interesting indicator is the absence of this issue in the agendas of the civil-society meetings, mainly in the framework of the regular Civil Fora that took place in different cities since 1995. This is due to the fact that the EU countries' participants were mainly aligned with leftist movement and the Mediterranean ones came mostly from strictly secular backgrounds and perceived religious-oriented movements as alien to the civil society circles. A consequence of that was the often criticized lack of representativeness of these fora.

In contrast, the best example of a change of tendency after the New York terrorist attacks was the fact that in 2003 the then President of the European Commission, Romano Prodi convened a '*group de sages*' which issued a report in 2003 on Intercultural Dialogue in the Mediterranean Area. Religion-related issues reached a noticeable importance in this report, tackling issues such as the means to foster a fruitful inter-religious dialogue, the interactions between politics, religion and civil-society or the fact that Islam was becoming part of the EU's reality thorough migrations and the enlargement process²¹.

To sum up, Islam is gradually being understood as an integral part of the European, Mediterranean and even Euro-Mediterranean identity. Nevertheless, the importance of the identity concerns in the Euro-Mediterranean agenda is much lower than in the internal discussions on the European integration which intensively affected Turkey. The EU and the Arab Mediterranean partners appeal sometimes to common identity elements but mostly advocate the benefits of the coexistence among different identities based on different cultural and religious backgrounds.

4.3. Religious freedoms in the Euro-Mediterranean and ENP agendas.

Despite the fact the Barcelona Declaration contained a commitment to freedom of religion and non-discrimination on religious grounds, this issue has not constituted a significant element of the first chapter of the Barcelona Process when tackling democracy and human rights. Moreover, the EMP achievements in this field are poor and democratic and human rights situation has even worsen in several Mediterranean countries during the last decade.

²⁰ *Euro-Mediterranean Partnership Conclusions of the Second Conference of the Ministers of Culture*, Rhodes, 25-26 September 1998

²¹ *Dialogue Between Peoples and Cultures in the Euro-Mediterranean Area*, Report by the high-level advisory group established at the initiative of the President of the European Commission, Brussels, October 2003.

As said above, since the year 2004 the Barcelona Process has to coexist with the European Neighborhood Policy. This policy is structured in a purely bilateral base and through country reports and action plans which indicate the road map to follow by the EU and the partners in the short and long-run. This policy has copied the enlargement methods and the country reports and the subsequent Action Plans are (or should be) quite similar to the Progress reports released on the candidates' progresses. Thus, if religious-related matters were present in Turkey's progress reports, concretely on issues of religious pluralism and religious rights, one should expect that the ENP documents would follow a similar path.

To some extent this has been the case in the EU's approach towards some countries. The case of Egypt is probably the best example. Its country report contains relatively detailed information regarding the place of religion in the Egyptian legislative and political system and, as happened in the Turkish case, describes the situation of the religious minorities of the country, particularly the Coptic which the report says represent 10% of the citizens²². Nevertheless, in contrast with the enlargement documents, the very Action Plan of Egypt falls short to propose any concrete measures to improve religious freedoms in the country.

The explanation is threefold. First, the Barcelona Process, which the ENP complements and develops, specifically affirmed that they would refrain from any direct or indirect intervention in the internal affairs of another partner. It also recognized the right of each of these partners to choose and freely develop its own political, socio-cultural, economic and judicial system. Second, the EU does not want to be seen as protecting Christian minorities in the region, which would remember the Europeans' colonialist attitude in the late-Ottoman period. Thirdly and most important, in contrast with the Turkish case, the EU has nothing to offer in the field of political and judicial integration in exchange of the reforms. In fact, the ENP deals mostly with opening the EU's internal market to the neighbors and, consequently, the reforms are mostly asked on economical and technical aspects.

4.4. The EU and Political Islam in the Mediterranean

As we have already seen, Islamic fundamentalism has traditionally been assessed as a threat for Europe's interest security. The silent reaction of the EU and its member states when Algeria's electoral process was stopped in 1991 to avoid the Islamic Salvation Front victory and the support given to Algeria's military regime during the first nineties illustrated this attitude (Morisse-Schilbach, 1999).

Also significant is that neither the EU, nor most of its member states, have outspokenly denounced the human rights violations suffered by Islamist militants in several Mediterranean countries, not to speak about the restrictions and bans imposed to their political activities such as in the cases of *al-Adl-wal-Ihsan* in Morocco, of Tunisian's *Nahda* or the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood.

²² EU/Egypt Action Plan, March 2007.

Nevertheless, the EU reaction after Hamas victory in the Palestinian National Authority is the clearest example of the EU's approach. After having urged the Palestinians to celebrate fair and free elections, the EU decided to react to the displeasing results by freezing the EU aids to the Palestinian government. This attitude complicated the daily life conditions in the Palestinian territories, fueled the internal disputes among Palestinian factions and damaged the EU's image, not only among pious Arab citizens but among most Arab democrats.

In September 2007 Morocco will celebrate legislative elections and the Justice and Development Party (PJD) is likely to obtain good results. Which will be the EU's strategy to the new political situation in Morocco? Will the EU establish contacts with other 'moderate' Islamist groups in Algeria, Egypt or Jordan? Will it change its stance towards Hamas?

In the recent years, some European governments as well as significant members from civil-society and expert networks have underlined the need to broaden the political dialogue to all segments of Arab and Muslim societies, that is, not to marginalize political Islam. Simultaneously, both at a governmental and civil society level, political Islam is no longer seen as an homogenous phenomenon. Thus, moderate Islamists or Muslim-democrats, that is the segments which reject violence, embrace democracy and get involved in election processes) start to be perceived as actors with who the Europeans should engage in a in-depth political dialogue (Asseburg, 2007; Springborg, 2007)

At a governmental level, this issue has been harshly discussed in the preparatory stages of Luxembourg Euromediterranean Conference of 2005 and the Barcelona Euro-Mediterranean summit of November 2005 and faced the radical opposition of several Arab governments which saw such proposals as an intolerable interference of the EU in internal affairs (Soler i Lecha, 2006; Lorca, Jerch & Escribano, 2005; Grigoriadis, 2005).

At a civil society level, voices have also been raised, for instance in the framework of EuroMeSCo. In its 2005 report it urged the EMP members to promote political reform and involve in the process civil society and all groups – Islamic ones included – which reject political violence. This report also highlighted that there is a new attitude towards political Islam, with a gradual abandonment of the view that it is simply a problem to resolve, thus adopting a more positive view that peaceful movements must be involved in the process of democratization. This report even associated the failure of the EMP to deal effectively with the issue of political reform with the refusal of bringing into the debate the issue of Islamist parties' participation in the process of democratization.

What lies behind this slow change of attitude? On the one hand, the EU understands that it is impossible to keep Islamists out of the political game without being alienated from a significant part of the society and that any long-term democratization and stabilization process will require Islamists participation. On the other hand, the own process of change of several Islamists groups, which does no longer present the West as an enemy, are open to cooperation with the EU and publicize their attachment to the democratic rules.

Thus, the EU's attitude towards these political and social movements is getting closer to the European's attitude towards the Turkish AKP. In fact, some Islamist groups in the Maghreb, mainly the Moroccan PJD, refer publicly or privately to the Turkish case. Some European politicians and intellectuals would also like to see these parties to follow the AKP's transformation. Nevertheless, there is still a long way to go.

5. Concluding remarks

The comparison of the role of religious-related issues EU approach towards Turkey and towards the Arab Mediterranean countries shows the existence of common trends as well as significant differences. As for the common aspects, one should note the impact of September 11 in boosting the importance of these issues in both frameworks as well as a more positive (in the Turkish case) or nuanced (in the Arab Mediterranean countries) of the political movements that have been labeled 'Muslim democrats' or 'Moderate Islamists'. As for the diverging elements, we have observed that religious-related issues are tackled in a much more detailed manner in EU-Turkish relations than in the EMP and also that issues that are at the core of EU-Turkish relations (the place of Islam in European identity and the centrality of religious freedoms) are secondary in the EMP and the ENP agendas.

As this paper will point out, this differentiated approach can be explained (A) due to the different nature of the enlargement policy, the Barcelona Process and the ENP or (B) due to the different characteristics of the religion *problematique* and particularly of political Islam in the two cases. As this article has shown, both aspects have to be taken in consideration. The fact that the ENP is not able to provide political recompenses in exchange of political reforms (e.g. religious freedoms) does not allow the EU to ask the same detailed reforms that are being asked to candidate countries. The different degrees of assumption of core diplomatic values by the AKP, on the one hand, and other political Islam movements in Arab countries, on the other, reveals also why the EU is more skeptical towards the latter.

However, the often cited function of Turkey as a model or, at least, as a source of inspiration, have to be taken into account as well. Firstly, because the political class and to some extent, the public opinion of some Arab countries are following attentively the evolution of the Turkish EU bid and are particularly interested in both, the policies of the AKP and the EU's approach towards religious-related issues when dealing with Turkish candidacy. Secondly, because the EU can also draw some lessons from the shortcomings and outcomes of EU-Turkish relations. This experience could inspire its policies towards the Euro-Mediterranean area, particularly taking into account that the ENP attempts to emulate the enlargement policy and copies its methods.

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