

The Levant, the Mediterranean and the Future of the European Union¹

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On Thursday, June 14, 1325, the second day of Rajab 725 after Hegira, the 21-year-old Abu Abdullah Muhammad Ibn Battuta left Tangier. Thirty years later, after traveling more than 75,000 miles, he returned to Fez, Morocco, and wrote a book, *The Famous Travels of Ibn Battuta*. His memoirs tell us about a world that stretched from the Mediterranean Sea to the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea. Seven hundred years later, do we know more about this world? We travel with similar airplanes, we land in similar airports, we lodge in similar hotels, we eat in the same fast food restaurants and we watch plasma TVs providing us with the same news. Do we know more about this world often called the Levant?

People looking it up in dictionaries or browsing the Internet for the term *Levant* will not find much explanation. For some, it is a word which sounds poetic or romantic. To others, Levantinism is a lifestyle appreciated for its enjoyment of life or, treated in a derogatory manner, as negligence or a passion for subtle intrigue. From the etymological perspective, the word *Levant* was borrowed from the French word *levant* (rising), meaning the point where the Sun rises. In its biblical sense, it includes most of modern Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Israel, the Palestinian territories, sometimes parts of Turkey and Iraq. In the 13th century, the inhabitants of Venice called all the Mediterranean territories east of Rome, including the Black Sea area, *the Levant*. The term first appeared in English in 1497, originally meaning the East, in general. But the most appropriate definition of the Levant was described as the intersection of roads connecting Western Asia, Eastern Mediterranean and North Eastern Africa.

The Eastern Mediterranean area has fascinated the Western Europe in the Renaissance, during the Romanticism, up until Modernity and the admiration for the Levant made outstanding writers, artists and musicians create prodigious visions and impressive literary, artistic and musical works. The cultural connections between the coun-

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tries in the Balkans, the Middle East and Northern Africa have continued in the second half of the 20th century, even during the Cold War and the autocratic regimes through the creation of intellectual elites educated in the universities of South Eastern Europe and through mutual cultural exchanges. Resuming these connections would represent a good opportunity for the diversity of our shared traditions to oppose the tendencies towards uniformity of globalization overwhelmed by the pressure of profit and proposing a lifestyle closer to the aspirations of human beings.

Traveling during the first decade of the third millennium through the Middle East, Northern Africa, the Balkans and the Caucasus, I was struck by the common origin I found in some of the historical and architectural remains, but especially by the multitude of affinities of behaviour deriving from common psychology.

Why should we now talk about something that seems to belong only to a long gone past? Firstly, because the recent popular movements which occurred in Tunisia, Egypt and Syria drew the world's attention to the Mediterranean area and also to the absence of a dialogue, an efficient diplomacy looking to alleviate the causes generating conflict. Secondly, because I find risky the way the economic crisis made many people look at Europe just as if it were a big corporation to be assessed through economic indicators. The construction of the EU based on democratic ideals, law enforcement and Christian morality makes ridiculous those statements made by financial analysts or politicians who talk about a war as a possible consequence of the single currency collapse. These assertions are not only irresponsible and foolish, but they also show ignorance of history. I can see the temptation, especially of those who caused the crisis, to forget that the European Union is primarily a model of civilization. The roots of this model – Athenian democracy, Judeo-Christian religion and Roman law – are in the East, where the Islamic civilization was born, too.

The 20th century Europe was the Europe of nation states which appeared after World War I, as a consequence of the revolutions of 1848 against the Austrian, Ottoman and Russian empires. It was a process that triggered much progress-generating energy, but conflicts as well. The desire for expansion of some states, the dissatisfaction of some nations about how their own territory was bordered, the folly and ambition of some leaders to demonstrate their superiority by occupying and annihilating the independence of other states have led to the outbreak of regional wars and two world wars. But peoples' aspiration to live in peace could not have been annihilated. On the contrary, huge war losses to both losers and winners encouraged impulses towards pacifist movements and the desire of surpassing misunderstandings through dialogue and the Treaty of Good Neighbourship. The culture of peace is based on the relations between states, but also on the relationships between people who share common values, born long before the current nation-states. It is a good time for cultural diplomacy and for us to evoke the legacy which old Levant left us.

When the Academy of Cultural Diplomacy launched the project of a new type of relationship between states and nations, based on understanding the other instead of relationships based on military or economic pressures, I thought about which kind of laboratory is needed for such an approach to be tested? And the answer came right away. It seems obvious to me that this kind of relations, the one that offers peace a chance in the globalized world, can find an inspiring source in the old world of the Levant. This happens not only because the Levant has been, over millennia, the cradle of cultural diplomacy, but also because the Egyptian, Jewish, Assyrian, Babylonian, Phoenician civilizations, and the Roman, Byzantine and Ottoman empires have, each in their own way, created an extended area for changes — from goods to ideas — and for cultural dialogue. The Balkans and South Eastern Europe have for a long time been in contact with the areas like Northern Africa and the Near East and people living here have a vast experience in the inter-cultural dialogue.

The political project of the European Union was outlined as a new chance at the end of a great historical tragedy that bled the world: World War II. It was developed after the fall of communism, at the end of another huge historical trauma: the Cold War, as an opportunity for the countries and peoples in Central and Eastern Europe.

It was a new project. A project that began from the conflict generating diversity during the time of national states, not only did it accept, but it also promoted the development of national, linguistic, religious and cultural identities. At present, the European Union, despite the deficit encountered due to all its bureaucracy and administration, works like a harmonious body where diversity seems to be an advantage and not ballast.

From my experience as a geologist, while researching big natural petrographic areas, I learned that a system subjected to strong oriented pressures (stress) holds better if it is flexible than if it is rigid. In the present crisis, such a harmonious system can be achieved by an extensive partnership with the Levant area. Europe can offer possibilities for transferring the pressures, like the case of the monetary crises, or the opportunities of alternative approaches during some global or regional political crises.

Making up strategies starting from the present policies, and further on, the vision of the future, based on these long-term strategies, no matter how sustainable they are, means nothing but moving ahead towards the future while facing backwards. On the contrary, if we start from an inspired vision upon the future to the present, we can advance to the future head on, and at the same time notice obstacles and dangers.

In addition to the draft of public policies, as well as long term and short term strategies, something else is necessary. We need a vision which allows us, in a fast changing world, to imagine what seems unthinkable today. But to do this, except achieving the *acquis communautaire* and accomplishing the economic, administrative, social, and military projects, we need to rediscover our European *ethos*.

Upon reaching this point, let us go back to the acknowledged terms of contemporary debates, to ask ourselves about “the added value” new members bring to the EU and “the added value” they receive from the EU; what changes “the *country brand*” of each EU member is subjected to, and what could be the “*Europe brand*” in a globalized world. We could enter the field of *advertising* and *public relations* policies which invaded the election campaigns mainly based on advertising elements, degenerating more than once into cheap populism.

Or we could use the “conform language” of the European bureaucracy, characterized by technical and “politically correct” features, which merely masks the unpleasant realities, without solving the real problems.

None of these approaches can help us manage the serious challenges of tomorrow’s world, with a society traumatized by the obsession of risks involved by European integration and globalization. The traumatized societies are those whose leaders are not able to explain neither the historical project missions nor the balance between its benefits and costs. The citizens’ capacity to support important projects must not be underestimated. The European Union is thus the most important historical project of the 20th century and is unique in the whole history of mankind.

There are people in the European Union, people that a century and a half ago fought in the Revolution of 1848 to free their countries from the Habsburg, Ottoman and tsarist empires and to build national states able to modernize themselves and join the prosperous states of Western Europe. The EU succeeded in stopping the inter-European conflicts that caused two world wars and, after the fall of communism, became a strong attraction for the states in the former USSR area of influence. These countries would otherwise have become victims of regional and domestic conflicts frozen under communist dictatorships. People from Central and South Eastern Europe have proved an understanding, an unthinkable sacrificial capacity and an enviable solidarity. But Europe cannot be reduced to the sum total of the states and nations comprising it. Europe is not a wider nation; Europe is a vast ongoing experience, the experience of solidarity, differences and of equality in diversity.

That is why I believe the long way towards a European solidarity should start from the very heart of every nation, local community or even family, where we can often find many of the contradictions we describe as typical to the discrepancies between the North and the South, the East and the West, and worldwide. But here also lies the very place where we can find the identity binder of a common *ethos*.

We talk about a common European identity founded on shared values. What are these values which define the European identity? How could they be surpassed, without forgetting the specific features and even the national limits, on the way towards a common identity? The answer to these questions lies in the very heart of the European

projects, as well as within the European anxieties. If we continue to imagine projects without taking into account the inevitable anxieties involved by a political construction of half a billion inhabitants, we have poor chances of developing a powerful and united democratic Europe.

I am very interested in this discussion as, undoubtedly, in my capacity as professor, intellectual and statesman I have assumed most of the answers to these questions. Also because these ideas correspond entirely to the ones of the organizers of this conference. I truly believe in the future of Europe and I trust the capacity of young Europeans to conceive and build the Europe of tomorrow.

My generation is used to referring to European values, bringing democracy, freedom and citizens' equality into discussion, even getting to use these words without thinking of their substance. What means are there, in the age of global communication, to make Europe a participative democracy? To support the practice of frequent public consultations, to include the electronic referendum in the current institutional mechanisms, to conceive an administration not only local or national, but also European, which could reorganize itself as an e-governance, according to the new communication ways?

Undoubtedly, we should improve the informational methods; but what are the mental methods we are familiar with today? Europe, an important actor in a world quickly evolving, was not always known to give its citizens the place they were destined to occupy. A lot of citizens, most of them young, have doubts regarding Europe, regarding the way it is created and its development rhythm. The difficulty to conciliate the aspirations, even prejudices with this huge European project, should be confronted with proper intellectual and practical means, for often beyond the preconceived idea, there are real questions and problems, waiting for real answers from our present and future decision makers.

For instance, what should we do with history? The role of history in creating a specific Europe would be to examine the common features of different national cultures, to create fundamentally European events, to propose common places of memory in Europe. Of course, for two centuries, Europe's cornerstone was connected principally to national identities and it is not easy at all to integrate them as part of European history. Moreover, even if we could, we would risk to slide into Euro-centrism, often denounced as being a prejudice and even a tool for influence and domination. But what would European citizenship be without the European culture, including the great culture of the past, considered as an enriching culture, opposed to the consumption culture?

Of course, the modern world should finance the technical development, as it allows us to live and to progress during the time we live. But what is the future of technical innovation without developing the scientific fundamentals? The transfer of technology could take place in the absence of the transfer of the abilities necessary to use them and

of a system of values to assure proper usage? The technological development puts pressure upon the human resource. The precocious talents discovery and the management of their evolution becomes a science, which imposes itself on education and research to create new game fields and new players.

These are a few questions waiting for responses from the European decision makers. We must find ways to pass through without making sacrifices: to surpass the past without forgetting it, to enlarge our familiar linguistic and cultural horizon without forgetting our roots, to cross over the geopolitical areas, without losing our interests and our legitimate pride.

My generation has enlarged Europe founded by our parents, by tearing down the Berlin Wall. Now is time when the new generation should make a thorough start and amplify Europe's values to the extent of their aspirations. This new generation could build a new destiny, not only for our countries and for Europe, but also for the entire world.