

EUROPEAN COOPERATION IN THE SOUTHERN MEDITERRANEAN POST-LISBON: THE MULTILATERALIZATION OF BILATERAL RELATIONS?

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To be published in the Special Issue “European cooperation outside Europe” of The Hague Journal of Diplomacy, vol.13, n.1 2018

Abstract

The article focuses on institutionalised forms of diplomatic cooperation among EU members in the Southern Mediterranean capitals and argues that European diplomatic cooperation represents a thin form of multilateralization of member states’ bilateral relations with Southern Mediterranean countries. By analysing the diplomatic presence on the ground, it shows that EUDs in the area are not only big, but also politically strong, and they interact with a large number of national diplomats. The article examines how EUDs in the Southern Mediterranean represent a diplomatic “site,” in which diplomacy occurs in the shape of information gathering, representation and negotiation, including among member states. This does not amount to a single European diplomatic system, though, as coordination remains so far thin and the agenda setting mechanisms for EUDs’ work and for European diplomatic cooperation have not (yet?) been fully developed.

Keywords: European cooperation, diplomacy, European foreign policy, Mediterranean, North Africa, Middle East, EU Delegations, European Neighbourhood Policy

Introduction

While the EU and its member state have a long history of presence on the ground in the Middle East and North Africa, there is a lingering doubt about the role of European cooperation in the area. What do the Europeans do that is distinctively ‘European’ in the Southern Mediterranean? What form does their cooperation take, and to what effects? In what ways, if any, is European cooperation able to change the way in which the Europeans relate to their Southern neighbours? Since the area seems to have shifted from a “ring of friends” to a “ring of fire,”¹ the EU has struggled to present a united front and a pro-active policy, thus bringing into sharper focus the role of cooperation not only of European diplomats in Brussels and in European capitals, but also on the ground, in Southern Mediterranean capitals.

¹ Carl Bildt, ‘The Fire Forging Europe,’ *Project Syndicate*, 28 September 2015. Available at <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/crises-lead-to-greater-european-integration-by-carl-bildt-2015-09?barrier=true>, last accessed 14 Dec. 16.

The focus here is on institutionalised forms of diplomatic cooperation among EU members in the Southern neighbourhood, which I will suggest represent a thin form of multilateralization of member states' bilateral relations with Southern Mediterranean countries. I will provide further evidence of the argument put forward in the Introduction that European diplomatic cooperation in countries outside the EU is a diplomatic "site"² in which diplomacy occurs in the shape of information gathering, representation and negotiation.³ But this is not (yet?) thick multilateralization, nor a single European diplomatic system, in which the strength of the structure and the quality of the diplomatic practices fundamentally transform participants' policies.⁴ This diplomatic site adds a layer of multilateralism, defined in a thin way, to existing member states' bilateral relations with host countries. European diplomatic cooperation in the Southern neighbourhood is 'a room with a limited view' as European diplomats gather regularly and express views, often summarised in one common view, but this by no means exhaust or transform other means of conducting international politics.⁵

Multilateralism can be defined in different ways. First, and at its most basic, it can be seen as adding a degree of openness to the otherwise secretive world of diplomacy, by making states indirectly accountable to each other. This is the direction that studies of multilateral diplomacy have tended to impress, for instance, with their emphasis on conference-like diplomacy.⁶ Second, multilateralism can be seen as an example of formal cooperation among a plurality of actors, as in "the practice of co-ordinating national policies in groups of three or more states,"⁷ Rather than the number of actors,⁸ it is the practice of coordination that matters. Finally, a substantive definition of multilateralism suggests that change has also to be inspired by a common set of principles. What is distinctive about multilateralism is that "it coordinates national policies in groups of three or more states [...] on the basis of certain principles of ordering relations among those states."⁹

In this article, I suggest that, on the basis of the evidence provided by European diplomatic cooperation in the Mediterranean, there is a trend towards multilateralization of bilateral relations in the first and – at times – second form of multilateralism.¹⁰ Diplomats meet and at

² (Neumann, 2012, p.4)

³ See article by Duquet, this collection.

⁴ Cf. Petrov, Petar, Sophie Vanhoonacker, and Karolina Pomorska, 'The Emerging EU Diplomatic System: Opportunities and Challenges after the Lisbon Treaty', *The Hague Journal of Diplomacy*, vol. 7, no. 1, 2012, pp. 1-9.

⁵ For a different analysis of multilateralism, see Lundin, Lars-Erik, 'Effective Multilateralism After Lisbon: The Added Value of the EEAS and the EU Delegation in Vienna', in David Spence and Jozef Batora (eds), *The European External Action Service. European Diplomacy Post-Westphalia*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2015.

⁶ See e.g. Claude, Inis L, 'Multilateralism—Diplomatic and otherwise', *International Organization*, vol. 12, no. 01, 1958, pp. 43-52.

⁷ Keohane, Robert O., 'Multilateralism: An Agenda for Research', *International Journal*, vol. 45, no. 4, 1990, pp. 731.

⁸ Finnemore, Martha, 'Fights about rules: the role of efficacy and power in changing multilateralism', *Review of International Studies*, vol. 31, no. 1, 2005, p.195.

⁹ Ruggie, John Gerard, 'Multilateralism: the Anatomy of an Institution', *International Organization*, vol. 46, no. 3, 1992, p.567.

¹⁰ This analysis thus differs from the one by Austermann, in which the focus is on centralisation, defined as "shifts in competences and decision making which are formal in nature, such as legal stipulation, but also informal ones, such as through bureaucratic practice." But it puts forward a similarly nuanced argument, in which the EEAS has not (yet) been able to lead the creation of a single European diplomatic system. See Austermann, Frauke, *European Union delegations in EU foreign policy : a diplomatic service of different speeds*, Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire : Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, p.16.

times do develop a common view,¹¹ but this does not provide a strong filter for bilateral relations.

One of the main limitations consists of the EEAS' relatively limited capacity for agenda-setting. This might seem surprising. The Lisbon Treaty assigned an agenda setting role to EUDs, which previously focused on implementation.¹² Moreover, EUDs have the means to provide momentum and set priorities, given their composition, as we are going to see. And EUDs have been negotiating Partnership Priorities with Southern Mediterranean countries, following the adoption of the revised European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) in November 2015. This mechanism is however too broad for setting the agenda of European cooperation and, in a crisis-ridden context, this is no small limitation in comparison to the well-established capacities of (most) national diplomacies. Structural conditions in favour of a more political role flounder on the absence of a mechanism for setting priorities and providing momentum to the multilateral discussion.

The evidence brought to bear in addressing these questions relies on research done on seven countries in the Southern Mediterranean: Algeria, Egypt, Israel, Jordan,¹³ Morocco, Palestine, and Tunisia. Libya and Syria, due to their protracted civil wars and scattered diplomatic scene, were not included. Beside data provided by the EEAS or available on EUDs' websites, the evidence is gathered from 36 semi-structured interviews with European diplomats, both in EUDs and in member states' embassies in Southern Mediterranean countries. The sample of interviews is relatively representative of the pool of EU Ambassadors for the Southern Mediterranean countries, 6 of whom (out of 8) I interviewed, in 2 cases twice. The sample is not fully representative of views held by national diplomats from member states, as I interviewed 25 Ambassadors out of a total of just over 200 scattered across the Southern Mediterranean. To increase representativeness, I focused on four countries (Egypt, Israel, Jordan and Palestine). For practical reasons, interviews were carried out over the period March 2013-February 2016 in Southern Mediterranean capitals, apart from 5 interviews conducted in Brussels. All interviews were confidential and are presented in the text as numbered and dated, but no indication of the role or name of the interviewee. I approached interviews as "intensive,"¹⁴ "dynamic events,"¹⁵ in which interviewees told me their "life stories,"¹⁶ rather than revealing an objective truth. Interviews were at least 30' long. Most were around 1h. Interviews were not taped and I will refer to my written notes. I am straddling across the boundary between interviewing and ethnography, with all the limitations but also the advantages that this entails.¹⁷

The article begins with an overview of the diplomatic scene in Southern Mediterranean countries. It then moves on to describe European diplomatic cooperation as a diplomatic site,

¹¹ Interview 4, 5 March 2013, Cairo; interview 9, 6 March 2013; interview 16, 23 April 2013, Jerusalem.

¹² Carta, Caterina, *The European Union Diplomatic Service: ideas, preferences and identities*, London, Routledge, 2012, pp.47-48.

¹³ Jordan is traditionally considered part of the "Mediterranean" group because of its deep involvement in the Arab-Israeli conflict.

¹⁴ (Rathbun, 2008)

¹⁵ Gusterson, Hugh, 'Ethnographic research', in Audie Klotz and Deepa Prakash (eds), *Qualitative Methods in International Relations: A Pluralist Guide*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2008, p.105.

¹⁶ Pouliot, Vincent, *International security in practice: the politics of NATO-Russia diplomacy*, Cambridge, UK/New York, Cambridge University Press, 2010, p.68.

¹⁷ E.g. Kuus, Merje, 'Foreign Policy and Ethnography: A Sceptical Intervention', *Geopolitics*, vol. 18, no. 1, 2013, pp. 115-131 and Vrsti, Wanda, 'The strange case of ethnography and international relations', *Millennium*, vol. 37, no. 2, 2008, pp. 279-301

stressing the thin multilateralization it produces. In the third section, it highlights the absence of an established agenda setting mechanism and how this limits the prospects of a single diplomatic system.

Crowded diplomatic landscape, robust EUDs

European cooperation in the Southern Mediterranean countries is a crowded affair. In this diplomatic landscape, member states have maintained and even increased their presence on the ground. EUDs also are robust, in terms of size and composition, compared to other EUDs across the world.

While Egypt and Israel are exceptional, the whole of the Southern Mediterranean is above average in terms of member states' diplomatic representations. In Egypt and in Israel, all member states apart from Luxembourg have a mission, alongside the EUD.¹⁸ But also elsewhere the number of diplomatic representations is higher than in other regions. This is the case especially in Palestine, Jordan and Tunisia, which host 17 diplomatic representations by member states. The pattern is also quite clear in terms of which member states are represented. At the low end of the spectrum, Luxembourg has no diplomatic representations in the Mediterranean,¹⁹ while the Baltic countries (Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania) have embassies only in Egypt and Israel. Croatia, Ireland, Slovenia and Slovakia have 3 missions each. On the contrary, smaller Southern European countries are well represented (with 5 missions for Malta, 7 for Cyprus and 9 for Greece) and so are Scandinavian countries (6 embassies for Denmark, 7 for Sweden and 8 for Finland). The remaining twelve member states have missions in every Southern Mediterranean country. There is a thin line in terms of the balance between coverage and stretch. As the Ambassador of a big member state put it with a degree of sympathy, most missions are “two men and a dog.”²⁰ This limits the nature of European cooperation because of the impossibility to ‘man’ all the working groups in which European diplomatic cooperation is articulated.

The relevance of the Southern Mediterranean country and the crowded diplomatic landscape are reflected also in the size of EU Delegations, which tend to be big (e.g. 90 staff in Egypt, 79 staff in Palestine and 73 staff in Morocco)²¹ and have a relatively strong EEAS component, ranging between 1/3 to half of the personnel (in the cases of Israel and Libya). The rest is composed of officials from the Commission.²² The size of EUDs means EU Ambassadors are often busy addressing issues of management, including mediation between EEAS and Commission officials within the EUD. An EU Ambassador reported that management of human resources was occupying ca. 60% of the working time,²³ in line with the findings of other studies on the subject.²⁴

¹⁸ It is only in Beijing, Moscow and Washington that all member states and the EU have a diplomatic mission.

¹⁹ It is generally represented by the Netherlands.

²⁰ Interview 33, 1 November 2015, Amman. See also interview 26, 28 September 2014, Jerusalem.

²¹ See data in the Introduction, on p.X

²² See data in the Introduction, on p.X

²³ Interview 27, 2 September 2015, Brussels.

²⁴ E.g. Austermann, Frauke, *European Union Delegations in EU foreign policy : a diplomatic service of different speeds*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014; Juncos, Ana E, and Karolina Pomorska, 'Manufacturing Esprit de Corps: The Case of the European External Action Service', *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies*, vol. 52, no. 2, 2014, pp. 302-319. Spence, David, and Jozef Bátora, (eds), *The European External Action Service: European Diplomacy post-Westphalia*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2014.

Post-Lisbon, Political Sections in EUDs across the Southern Mediterranean are ‘proper sections,’ hosting more than one person. At the very least, there is a head of section (often referred to as First Counsellor), as well as a political counsellor and a media officer. They are often flanked by local agents and at times also by other counsellors or first secretaries, for more specific tasks, such as culture. The size of Political Sections have boosted EUDs’ chances of playing a more political role, as a few EU Ambassadors have referred to the “activism” of the heads of Political Sections in e.g. drafting political reports for Brussels or maintaining an efficient network of political contacts.

Interestingly, EUDs in the Southern Mediterranean include several diplomats seconded from national diplomatic services.²⁵ First, several EU Ambassadors are or have been national diplomats.²⁶ Technically, the Head of Political Section can also be a national detached diplomat. However, this has created in the past, due to increased difficulties in dealing with the Commission officials. All interviews with national detached EU Ambassadors mention that they challenged the previous Delegation’s working style that relied almost exclusively on the implementation of cooperation projects. This has also entailed a different approach to relations with (authoritarian) governments. In one country, for instance, the EEAS in Brussels had suggested a tougher approach to authorities in a Southern Mediterranean country after an election round that just re-confirmed them in power. This was however mitigated by the local EU Ambassador, who stressed the need to cooperate with authorities on the ground, however unpalatable. As mentioned by the interviewee (an EU Ambassador),²⁷ it would not have been necessary to stress the need for political realism in a national diplomatic system.

A second aspect of the relatively strong national presence in EU Delegations is a specific contribution by Denmark in the area of human rights. This is part of a scheme of the Danish development assistance, which aims to beef up the reform programmes across the MENA region not only by supporting NGOs but also by seconding diplomats to strengthen the Political Sections of the EUDs. Danish diplomats focusing on human rights are thus deployed across the Southern Mediterranean, in Amman, Cairo, Rabat and Tunis.

Third, national diplomats are present in Southern Mediterranean EUDs as “security experts.”²⁸ The role was created in February 2015 to foster dialogues on counter-terrorism. The new security experts were put in place in EUDs around the Mediterranean after the summer 2015 to contribute to (and at times to initiate) such dialogues. They are funded by member states, which also select candidates (including a former head of an intelligence section, a general from Aviation, etc.). The job description is defined “en route,” as not all Mediterranean countries are expected to welcome or participate in counter-terrorism dialogues with the EU.

²⁵ These go under different names. Temporary agents that are diplomats from member states join the EEAS payroll for a period of generally four years, whereas seconded national experts remain on the payroll of the sending member states. For more information, see European External Action Service, *EEAS Human Resources Report 2015*, May 2016. Accessible at http://eeas.europa.eu/background/docs/eeas_hr_report_2015.pdf

²⁶ This last aspect is only partially unique to Southern Mediterranean, as national diplomats are deployed in EUDs more than in Brussels across the board. In 2015, ca. 43% of jobs in EUDs worldwide in the top layer (AD) were covered by member states’ diplomats, compared to 25.7% of AD jobs in the EEAS headquarters in Brussels. Moreover, 47% of EU Ambassadors world-wide were national diplomats. See European External Action Service, *EEAS Human Resources Report 2015*, May 2016, p.55 and p.81.

²⁷ Interview 27, 2 September 2015, Brussels.

²⁸ This post is to be distinguished from the more operational post assessing security threats to the EUDs on the ground.

In several ways, therefore, European diplomatic cooperation in Southern Mediterranean countries occurs in a dense diplomatic landscape, which includes politically well-equipped EUDs. There are many national diplomatic representations, which are able to directly represent and inform their capitals, or to negotiate on their behalf. This is matched by relatively big EUDs, which are also relatively well equipped in diplomatic terms, including national detached diplomats in three key posts: as EU Ambassadors, as officers with responsibilities for human rights and democracy, and as security experts.

European cooperation in the Southern Mediterranean as a diplomatic site for the thin multilateralization of bilateral relations

Within the densely populated landscape described above, capitals of Southern Mediterranean countries – and EUDs’ building in particular – have become a diplomatic site where diplomatic functions are performed and a thin version of multilateralism is achieved. European cooperation has acquired a rhythm and a momentum of its own, with a series of regular meetings and a shared routine of European diplomatic cooperation, centred on EUDs.

European cooperation develops in diplomatic gatherings, arranged by seniority and by competence, the highest of which is the ambassadorial level, chaired post-Lisbon by the EU Ambassador. Ambassadorial meetings are remarkably similar across the Mediterranean. They take place at least monthly, although ambassadors generally meet more often, as there might be ad hoc meetings (e.g. pre- and post-elections) or debriefings after visits (by e.g. EU institutions’ representatives, UN personnel, etc.). Meetings last ca. 2 hours on average, which, as remarked by an interviewee, is quite a long time for the French or British Ambassador in a busy Mediterranean country (and the appearance of a deputy Ambassador is generally considered to indicate lack of engagement).²⁹ At times of crisis, meetings could take place weekly, as was the case during the Arab uprisings and its immediate aftermath in Egypt. There is one example of ‘crisis room’ organised in the past, during the Gaza war in 2012, by the then still rotating Presidency, held by Ireland, at the Delegation in Jerusalem with the aim to follow events and exchange information. But this practice has not continued and the more recent Gaza war in 2014 was monitored with the UN agencies in the driving seat.

The current practice is to start meetings with a presentation, by an external speaker, the EU Ambassador or a national ambassador, followed by Q&A and a more general debate (to which external speakers do not participate). There are often recurring themes, such as commercial relations, elections or internal / external relations. In the case of Cairo, issues connected to the Arab League are also addressed.

The discussion is generally considered friendly and relatively open (quite informal³⁰). Ambassadors can have a frank and honest exchange of views – they argue, but also in a good way.³¹ It is not a testing ground for new ideas and personal views, however. This is business.³² But it is not for presenting official positions either, unless there is a specific document that is being drafted. Confidentiality is an issue that nearly all interviewees

²⁹ Interview 28, 3 September 2015, Brussels.

³⁰ Interview 14, 23 April 2013, Jerusalem.

³¹ Interview 23, 24 September 2014, Jerusalem.

³² Interview 3, 4 March 2013, Cairo.

mentioned and ultimately this limits also the degree of trust and cooperation between Ambassadors.³³

Participants differ in what they bring to and take away from meetings. Smaller member states look for information and political analysis. A national diplomat from a smaller country suggested that European cooperation would have to be invented³⁴ if it wasn't there, while another pointed to her experience in Iran (where no EU Delegation existed) and European cooperation was worth of gold³⁵ to understand what was going on. "Frankly, I benefit from it,"³⁶ adds another ambassador of a smaller member state. Bigger countries can be highly regarded,³⁷ but for them it is a one-way street.³⁸ They might be at times reluctant to share their sources, or aim to promote a specific view, something that can be done with very little effort,³⁹ but at the same time they are not deliberately misleading.⁴⁰ While this can lead to a situation in which several smaller states silently listen to bigger member states' interventions,⁴¹ there is variation on the ground. Ambassadorial meetings in Cairo were at one point a show of egos.⁴² But in other places, there is a degree of collegiality⁴³ and esprit de corps⁴⁴ – "surprisingly,"⁴⁵ as an EU Ambassador added. The bottom line is that for smaller countries, ambassadorial meetings tend to be the key sounding board for diplomatic action, whereas bigger countries have also other opportunities to do their thinking. Moreover, EU Ambassadors can make a difference in the quality of the debate and the type of we-feeling that develops. Some can be better at handling member states, rather than looking at ambassadorial meetings as a "box to be ticked," in the words of another national diplomat.

The ambassadorial meetings' format is mirrored at lower levels of the hierarchy. There are similar meetings of Heads of the Political Sections (which are in some places chaired by deputy Heads of EU Delegations), as well as meetings of the Heads of Cooperation, where the discussion is "pretty informal and less controversial."⁴⁶ There are also meetings of justice officials and, in some countries, of human rights officials, culture, etc. Meetings on consular cooperation are exceptional in the fact that they are chaired by the rotating national Presidency. Schengen meetings are instead chaired by the EU Delegation and everybody is invited, although non-Schengen countries tend not to show up. Table 4 summarises the pattern of European cooperation in one of the 4 countries examined in detail. The succession of meetings generally follows a specific rationale, with meetings of Political Officers preceding and preparing meetings of the Heads of Mission.

Table 4 – European cooperation in a South Mediterranean country

Meeting	Occurrence
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³³ Interview 7, 6 March 2013, Cairo.
³⁴ Interview 3, 4 March 2013, Cairo.
³⁵ Interview 12, 7 March 2013, Cairo.
³⁶ Interview 9, 6 March 2013, Cairo.
³⁷ Interview 21, 23 September 2014, Ramallah.
³⁸ Interview 2, 4 March 2013, Cairo.
³⁹ Interview 2, 4 March 2013, Cairo.
⁴⁰ Interview 14, 23 April 2013, Jerusalem.
⁴¹ Interview 25, 28 September 2014, Jerusalem.
⁴² Interview 5, 5 March 2013, Cairo.
⁴³ Interview 6, 5 March 2013, Cairo.
⁴⁴ Interview 30, 4 September 2015, Brussels.
⁴⁵ Interview 28, 3 September 2015, Brussels.
⁴⁶ Interview 18, 24 April 2013, Ramallah.

Heads of Mission	Monthly + ad hoc briefings about visits
Deputy Heads of Mission / Political officers	Monthly
Security	Monthly (but subject to variation)
Development and Humanitarian Affairs	Monthly
Trade and economic issues	Monthly
Human Rights	ca. 8 times per year
Culture	Every 2 months
Local Schengen coordination	5-6 times per year
Ad hocs meetings (e.g. death penalty etc.)	Ad hoc

The discussion flows in a similar way as in Ambassadorial meetings. It can also be introduced by a summary provided by the EU Delegation. This can be useful for new arrivals, but not for old timers that have been following developments on the ground. However, it creates a system in which basic information is shared by all.⁴⁷

Meetings are generally goal-oriented and outputs perform diplomatic functions of information-gathering, representation and negotiation. In terms of information-gathering, there are two different “products” issuing from European diplomatic cooperation. The first one is political reporting. EUDs produce political reports for the EEAS headquarters in Brussels in a way that is similar to political reports from national embassies to capitals. The format of political reporting tends to evolve. It includes ‘flash’ reports, which are expected to provide quick updates on urgent developments, and ‘thematic’ reports, which present more in depth analysis of topical issues. While the mantra is that the High Representative in Brussels needs to hear from EUDs “when she needs to hear from them,” there is leeway in which this is interpreted. While national reports tend to be short and frequent (generally daily), the frequency the EEAS seems to have settled on is closer to bi-weekly. Together with the High Representative, the addressees of political reports tend to include not only desk officials, directors and managing directors in Brussels, but also other EUDs in the region. Importantly, political reports are generally not shared with member states’ ambassadors, with the partial exception of Luxembourg during its presidency. This is due to the need of EEAS headquarters to have additional information (and ultimately, value) to direct the discussion in Brussels. However, it is also a point of attrition with smaller member states, which would benefit from having access to the EUDs’ political reports. Interviews with national representatives of smaller member states always included a short rant about the “lack of support” by the EUDs in terms of sharing political reporting, despite “the fact” that member states “own” the EEAS.

A different “product,” which fulfils a similar aim, is represented by Heads of Mission reports (so-called HoMs reports).⁴⁸ These are drafted by EUDs together with member states and are addressed to the Council hierarchies in Brussels, in our case the Maghreb-Machrek (MaMa) Working Group and the Political and Security Committee. The aim is to present the view from the ground in a single document summarising the assessment of local European representatives, as well as their recommendations for EU action. HoMs reports are longer than political reporting, ranging between a few pages and 10-12 pages. Some tend to be

⁴⁷ Interview 6, 5 March 2013, Cairo.

⁴⁸ On this, see (Bicchi, 2014a)

yearly (such as on human rights). However, interviews seem to point to a diminishing relevance of HoMs reports,⁴⁹ as several EU and national ambassadors mentioned how divisive the drafting of HoMs reports had been in the recent past and how unlikely it was that the experience was going to be repeated soon. This trend is difficult to quantify in the absence of any public data on HoMs reports post-2010. There are exceptions, such as the report on East Jerusalem and more generally HoMs reports produced in Ramallah, which tend to average 3-4 per year.

Representation works in the form of relations between the EU and the local government.⁵⁰ EUDs are often tasked with specific missions, which can take the form of demarches. Trade relations tend to predominate over political discussions, but there is also an established trend to delegate to the EU Ambassador political missions no member state is willing to take on when all see the need for a point to be made. A case in point is for instance the fights against the death penalty, a yearly appointment in connection to the European Day Against Death Penalty in early October. Traditionally, this is a cause that Scandinavian countries tend to support, as also emphasised by the more general Danish commitment to human rights.⁵¹ It is also a very delicate matter in the post-Arab spring context and in parallel with the wave of refugees issuing from the Syrian civil war. An example occurred in a country overburdened with Syrian refugees. Two North European member states wanted all HoMs to sign a letter (possibly a public one) denouncing the death penalty. However, several other member states considered this to be too strong a statement, given the local context. The final compromise centred on the EU Ambassador signing a (private) letter addressed to the minister of Foreign Affairs, which was considered a softer way to deliver the message. This shows that the EU presence on the ground can be bigger than smaller member states, but not as politically relevant as all member states together, in a paradoxical 'less than the sum of its parts' role. High level cases also have occurred, as in the case of the Catherine Ashton's trips to Egypt and her involvement in the attempted political solution to the crisis, prior to the military coup.

Negotiation can also centre explicitly on relations between member states' representatives and EU officials, a point most relevant for multilateralization. Most of the discussion in meetings at the various levels aims to negotiate a common position, with the EUDs generally cast in the role of mediators among clashing visions and interests. At the very least, the chair aims to provide national representatives with operational conclusions, referred to as "a line to take" or "talking points," summarised in minutes to be circulated after the meeting. The purpose of these is twofold. First, they serve as focal points for bilateral discussion between member states and the host country, thus ensuring agreed messages are passed on or at least not undermined by feigned ignorance or outright denial. Second, they are useful for the correspondence between national representatives and their capitals. Most national representatives interviewed, especially from smaller countries, have confirmed that ambassadorial meetings in the framework of European cooperation form the object of political reports to their capitals. Negotiations can occur to coordinate member states' actions. For instance, in the case of cooperation with the Palestinians, member states generally have

⁴⁹ Among others: Interview 16, 23 April 2013, Jerusalem; Interview 20, 22 September 2014, Jerusalem; Interview 38, 26 November 2015.

⁵⁰ On relations between EUDs and European citizens in the non-member country, see SD in this special issue.

⁵¹ Denmark was scaling down on its commitment in support of democracy promotion, in line with other donors, but it renewed its interest as a consequence of the Arab uprisings. See Boserup, Rasmus, 'The Arab Spring and Denmark's Promotion of Democracy in the Arab World', *Danish Foreign Policy Yearbook*, 2011, pp. 84-105. See also Johansson-Nogués, Elisabeth, 'Sweden: a 'supporting actor' to the EU?', in Timo Behr and Teija Tiilikainen (eds), *Northern Europe and the Making of the EU's Mediterranean Policies: Normative Leaders or Passive Bystanders?*, Farnham, Ashgate, 2015.

“different priorities, different sectors, different time cycles, different beneficiaries,”⁵² so the attempt by the EU to program development aid jointly has led to lengthy negotiations among member states.

Therefore, European diplomatic cooperation is able to deliver on the three main diplomatic functions of information gathering, representation and negotiation. However, the emphasis can differ from traditional national diplomacy and involves an often complex relationship with member states, which generally is limited to a thin form of multilateralization, as it entails predominantly a form of transparency and accountability vis à vis other member states and EUDs. Sporadically, member states also delegate to EUDs the task of delivering political messages. But this is not (yet?) inspired by common principles or a robust form of coordination.

No agenda setting, no single diplomatic system

So far, this article has shown that there are diplomatic sites in which diplomatic functions are performed across Southern Mediterranean countries, which amounts to a thin form of multilateralization. A significant obstacle to a stronger form of coordination lies in the lack of an established mechanism for agenda-setting within the EEAS, and partly also within European diplomatic cooperation, as the six-month programme that used to characterise the rotating presidency has been discontinued. While the Lisbon Treaty has tasked the EEAS with leading European foreign policy making, neither the Treaty nor subsequent decisions have specified how priorities are to be set. This is problematic in the Southern Mediterranean, as complex crises in the area have often tested member states’ unity, thus putting additional strains on the EUDs’ resources.

The only common mechanism for setting priorities within EUDs is a weekly discussion. On the first morning of the working week, be it Monday or Sunday (where the calendar follows local practice), a meeting takes place including the EU Ambassador and his/her deputy (if there is one), the heads of the sections (and their deputies, if relevant) and officials in charge of governance and/or human rights. This management team might extend to heads of sub-section of the Cooperation section for a total of ca. 10-11 people. Sections then have their internal meetings right after the meeting of the management team. Therefore, the first meeting might be 9-10am on Sunday mornings, followed by a 10-11am meeting of sections, such as the Political Section, Trade, Cooperation, etc. In bigger countries, such as Egypt, the management meets twice per week. It is evident, however, that this limits EUDs to tactical priorities and there is very little planning and agenda setting.⁵³ The reticence with which interviewees addressed this point is also proof to the sensitivity of the issue. All EUDs interviewees showed signs of discomfort when asked this question and national diplomats too were negative on this aspect.

Local attempts at deciding priorities have occurred in the past. There have been cases of away-days involving national ambassadors or lower levels of the hierarchy, usually in a location other than the EUD building and, given the authoritarian context, in which sensitive political material can be discussed. This has led to walks in the desert and visits to monasteries. In one case,⁵⁴ the away day involved the EUD itself. The planning was done by each EUD section putting forward objectives, which were then reviewed by the EU

⁵² Interview 18, 24 April 2013, Ramallah.

⁵³ Interview 24, 24 September 2013, Jerusalem.

⁵⁴ Interview 28, 3 September 2015, Brussels.

Ambassador and discussed at the away-day. The objective was to achieve a yearly plan for the EUD's work, "something short and pragmatic," which people would "own and use in their daily work". Other EUDs have organised more informal sessions with national ambassadors, aimed at discussing substance as well as working methods, be it at a Christmas lunch or through a questionnaire.

The agenda setting problem goes beyond the level of local capitals. Straightening himself on the chair, one EU Ambassador voiced the opinion that there is no such a plan in Brussels, so there is no such a thing in the local capital. Relaxing his shoulders with resignation, he adds that there is a plan for meetings, both in Brussels and at the local level, but there are no priorities attached.⁵⁵ The agenda is about "scheduling meetings."⁵⁶ Another EU Ambassador stressed that if he had no objectives, "there would be no objectives,"⁵⁷ and when a new programme is launched every day, "there is no real programme."

Brussels does deliver a number of broad policy points. The European Neighbourhood Policy, which was revised at the end of 2015, and the EU Security Strategy, revised in 2016, both put forward a number of points to be discussed with local hosts and a number of documents to be negotiated, most importantly in the form of Partnership Priorities. But the way in which this translates into a local agenda is not smooth. A national ambassador acknowledged:

"What is done here in Cairo is more of a 'follow up' of what needs doing on the ground to implement what has been decided in Brussels. We also try to feed advice when it is possible to detect a pattern on the ground. But we are not in a position to dictate policies. [...] We feed the debate in Brussels, but how influential we are, I am not sure"⁵⁸

There is a degree of malaise in relations between the local level and Brussels. Interviewees, both in EUDs and national embassies, reported a sense of puzzlement, which verged at times on bafflement, about the role that political reporting and HoMs reports play in Brussels. When prodded, they admitted that it was difficult to understand what precisely was happening in Brussels to these documents and what purpose they served. Political reports and HoMs reports seemed to "take a life of their own,"⁵⁹ or just die out, once they reached Brussels. Instead of being integrated in a policy cycle that valued fresh information, these documents resembled messages in a bottle sent across the treacherous waters of the Mediterranean.⁶⁰ As a national ambassador put it, it worked better before enlargement 2004. Everybody knew everybody then, and Brussels was more responsive.⁶¹

This limitation is particularly relevant in the context of the Southern Mediterranean. Since the Arab uprisings in 2011, this area has morphed into a region of quasi-permanent instability, with a vast range of crisis (from military to humanitarian) sweeping the Arab world and beyond.(Gerges, 2014; Kamrava, 2016; Lynch, 2014)⁶² Member states have been divided on

⁵⁵ Interview 30, 4 September 2015, Brussels.

⁵⁶ Interview 24, 24 September 2014, Jerusalem.

⁵⁷ Interview 28, 3 September 2015, Brussels.

⁵⁸ Interview 1, 4 March 2013, Cairo. The quote is from my notes.

⁵⁹ Interview 20, 22 September 2014, Jerusalem.

⁶⁰ But contra, interview 30, 4 September 2015. Brussels.

⁶¹ Interview 2, 4 March 2013, Cairo.

⁶² See, among others, Gerges, Fawaz, (ed.) *The New Middle East. Protest and Revolution in the Arab World*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2014; Lynch, Marc, *The Arab uprisings explained : new contentious politics in the Middle East*, Edited by Marc Lynch, West Sussex, England : Columbia University Press, 2014; Kamrava, Mehran, *Fragile politics : weak states in the greater Middle East*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2016.

the appropriate responses.⁶³ Security threats have highlighted once again the different approach member states have to the use of force, as in the Libyan crisis.⁶⁴ Developments in Egypt have shown three ways splits (favour/oppose/don't know) on all key issues: human rights, security and trade.⁶⁵ As mentioned by a South European Ambassador, “countries such as Italy, France and the UK have a ‘special interest’ in Egypt and play on their own (although this depends on the Ambassador)”.⁶⁶ Complex situations, such as in Morocco and in Algeria, have also shown the limits of a reactive EU policy in the case of hostile initiatives by local governments (in response of the Western Sahara’s pronouncement by the European Court of Justice and in relation to changes to the trade agreement, respectively).

It is fair to question the extent to which an agenda is necessary. Interviewees mentioned the existence of other forms of networked diplomacy that worked very well without one. In Cairo, for instance, there is the so-called informal Ambassadors’ group, which includes 20-25 male ambassadors, including Russia, Saudi Arabia, Singapore, India, Belgium, France, Germany (but not the US, considered “too big”). It meets every fortnight, on Monday evenings, no agenda, no ties, and Chatham rules apply:

“We know each other very well, it is very useful. We start with small talk over drinks and then move on to dinner. It provides me with a totally different angle on the topic of the day, by discussing with Ambassadors of countries with very different positions.”⁶⁷

A similar perspective is provided by the group of Women Ambassadors in Cairo, which however meets less regularly, as well as by other European groupings (the Nordic group being a particularly active one). In the case of Jerusalem, there is the Quint (US+big four EU member states). The absence of an agenda setting mechanisms, beyond light coordination, does not hamper these informal groups. But there is no pressure either to reach a common view or a common initiative.

Given that the agenda setting process is not smooth, the work tends to be event-driven and reactive,⁶⁸ and EUDs’ resources risk to be completely absorbed in mediating between member states’ different interests. Agenda setting is not the only challenge in terms of EU foreign policy in the area, as decision making and implementation can also be problematic. However, if the setting of preferred priorities is difficult to pursue, the process cannot unfold and crises might grab the attention more easily.

Conclusions

This article has showed how, across the Southern Mediterranean, European diplomatic cooperation post-Lisbon has developed into a diplomatic site, centred on the EUDs. There is a routine to consultations and the roomful of diplomats that regularly gather is able and at times willing to express a view. Diplomatic functions can be performed in the name of the

⁶³ See e.g. ‘Lost in transition:’ EU Foreign Policy and the European Neighbourhood Policy Post-Arab Spring’, *L’Europe en Formation*, no. 1, 2014; Huber, Daniela, *Democracy promotion and foreign policy : identity and interests in US, EU and non-Western democracies*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2015; Kaunert, Christian, *Western foreign policy and the Middle East*, London / New York, Routledge, 2015.

⁶⁴ Menon, Anand, ‘European Defence Policy from Lisbon to Libya’, *Survival*, vol. 53, no. 3, 2011, pp. 75-90; Adler-Nissen, Rebecca, and Vincent Pouliot, ‘Power in practice: Negotiating the international intervention in Libya’, *European Journal of International Relations*, vol. 20, no. 4, 2014, pp. 889-911.

⁶⁵ Interview 4, 5 March 2013, Cairo; interview 13, 7 March 2013, Cairo.

⁶⁶ Interview 1, 4 March 2013, Cairo.

⁶⁷ Interview 10, 7 March 2013, Cairo. Quotation from my notes.

⁶⁸ Interview 29, 3 September 2015, Brussels; interview 36, 3 November 2015, Amman.

EU. But there are limitations to what has been achieved in terms of multilateralization of bilateral relations, and the main limitation consists in the absence of an established mechanism for setting local priorities, able to transform the general input arriving from Brussels into a coherent agenda. Given the crisis-ridden context, this absence hampers the formulation of a more pro-active EU policy and leaves instead room for national initiatives.

The evidence gathered during 2013-16 thus suggests that there is a degree of multilateralization of bilateral relations, as member states consult, cooperate and coordinate their actions. However, there is little to suggest that this reflects a thicker understanding of multilateralism, as a process inspired by common substantive principles, and rather points in the direction of a degree of public discussion (in the room) accompanied by some form of accountability and action. Hence a thinner definition of multilateralism applies to the set of cases analysed.

Can this evolve in the future? European diplomatic cooperation is not predetermined and can thus develop in all possible directions. However, a better focus on agenda setting mechanisms and a stronger coordination with Brussels within the EEAS emerge as key conditions for a thicker form of multilateralism to emerge – and the room to express not just a view, but also a view triggering principled action.

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