

Researching the Mediterranean

Prologue

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A meeting was held in March 2006 in Barcelona of British and Spanish researchers focusing on Mediterranean and Arab World studies, organised by the British Council with the collaboration of the Universidad Autónoma de Barcelona, the European Mediterranean Institute (IEMed) and the CIDOB Foundation's Mediterranean Programme. Given the quality of the studies, lectures and discussions at the encounter, the three institutions have decided to go ahead with this publication.

The CIDOB Foundation believes that exchange between Spanish and British academics (as well as with other EU researchers) must be consolidated if Europe is to aspire to quality research standards. It is our hope that this Spanish-British Encounter will contribute as far as possible to the aim of combining forces and enhancing contacts between countries which have already established a critical research mass.

From the Spanish standpoint but also from that of the United Kingdom and the EU, the Mediterranean and the Arab World must be central to all our political and research agendas. The Mediterranean has been a leading priority for Spanish foreign policy, not just because of the historic links between the two shores but also as a consequence of their increasing interdependence. What we must in fact ask is to what point events in Morocco, Algeria or the Middle East are strictly questions of international policy or whether it is yet again becoming clear that the frontier between domestic and international matters is tending to blur.

Developments such as the situation in Iraq or in the Palestinian territories, or the Israel-Lebanon crisis make it clear that the whole world closely monitors events in the Mediterranean and the Arab World. These phenomena may in turn have repercussions in other parts of the globe and even in neighbourhoods in many European cities.

It should be expected that the centrality of the Mediterranean and the Arab World in international relations would translate into a thorough and detailed European understanding of this region. There is however on our continent insufficient knowledge of the region's languages, such as Arabic, Tamashek¹, Hebrew, Turkish or Farsi, plus an often simplistic perception of its political, economic and social processes.

1. Tamashek is a Berber language used mainly among the Tuareg community

Research has to be enhanced if these factors are to be remedied, with the promotion of fieldwork and language-training, and encouraging the creation of cross-border networks among universities and programmes allowing for student and teacher exchanges. This must all enable us to better understand phenomena such as the rise of political Islam, the development of the pan-African migration routes, the influence of media like Al Jazeera o Al Arabiya, social changes in Iran, the likely impact of Turkish EU membership on its surroundings, and many other aspects we do not grasp in their entire complexity.

Encounters such as the one in Barcelona must enable our researchers to build bridges with other universities, forge personal contacts with other researchers, exchange experiences and see how research agendas can differ and yet be complementary. Thus, step-by-step, European research in the Mediterranean and the Arab World will become more comprehensive, more powerful and have more impact.