



Southern perceptions about the Union for the Mediterranean

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This report was produced with the financial assistance of the European Commission, under contract MED-2005/109-063. The text is the sole responsibility of the authors and in no way reflects the official opinion of the European Commission.

With the launch of the Union for the Mediterranean, 2008 was the year of the big debate on the Mediterranean, its centrality and the complexity which characterizes the relations between its residents. Indeed never since 1995 the Mediterranean project was so euphoric, the atmosphere was rather stained with gloom especially after the summit of ten years of Partnership, summit which sounded almost the end of a process which suffered for a long time, according to its detractors, from several deficiencies.

The launch of the idea of a "Union" was at first source of distrust and anxiety with regard to the future of the Process of Barcelona; its evolution and its finale adaptation to the Euro Mediterranean Partnership will be finally the reasons for which it will be considered as a lifebouye for this one.

The prudence and / or enthusiasm shown by the countries of the Maghreb can be explained to a large extent through a comparison between the approach now proposed for the UfM, and that already in operation within the Euro-Mediterranean framework. The global approach pursued within this latter framework was often deemed a handicap, given that the partners did not enjoy an equal statut and were thus not managing to

progress at a similar pace. Adding to this situation is the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which has prevented any advancement in political dialogue. The differentiation approach adopted by the neighbourhood policy, although pragmatic, has not been sufficiently convincing in the view of the southern Mediterraneans, even if some southern countries are more interested by this approach than other. These same partners also believe that both the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP) and the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) are marred by too great a level of conditionality. Based on this premise, it was unavoidable that the EU's North-African partners would be tempted, faced with France's announcement of a new project for the Mediterranean, to draw a negative balance of the Barcelona Process, as well as express a certain reticence concerning the ENP. As regards the first, leaders from the South have for many years voiced their criticism of the Process's incapacity to achieve its objectives, with the resulting exasperation having reached its climax during the tenth anniversary of the Barcelona Process, noted for the absence of many Arab-Mediterranean leaders, when the majority of the southern Mediterranean experts present argued that the Process has not managed to reduce the existing asymmetries between the two shores of the Mediterranean. If anything, these differences persist and have continued to widen since the launch of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership.

By adhering to the Barcelona Process, the southern Mediterranean members hoped to catch up with their European partners and resolve all their conflicts. Unfortunately, these expectations were distanced from reality – a deception that explains the enthusiasm with which the project for the Mediterranean was then received by the southern Mediterranean countries, which saw in it a new perspective responding to their will for change.

Despite the criticisms, the southern Mediterranean leaders of the Maghreb region, as for the case of the Tunisian President, insisted on the importance of not detaching the new Union for the Mediterranean project from the EMP, believing that this union will be called on to contribute towards a re-launching of the Euro Mediterranean Partnership, by working to assure a synergy with the existing Euro-Mediterranean instruments. The evolution of this project, and its adoption during the European summit of 13 March 2008 as a continuity to the Barcelona Process, finally lends reason to those from the South who

expected this development and who were reassured by the participation of all the EU members thanks to the German role. This having been guaranteed, consensus rallied around the suggestion that this Union for the Mediterranean act instead as a new and improved version of the EMP. But will this vision translate into reality? A question which is still difficult to confirm till now, especially since the EMP does not solely operate on a multilateral basis, but primarily based on multi-bilateral (EU/Third-party) association agreements that, at least for now, are not scheduled to be revised. Certain elements of this 'improved model' of the Barcelona Process have been given greater attention within the context of the Union for the Mediterranean, in response to demands from the southern Mediterranean. The goal is to establish a level playing field that would allow all partners to contribute equally towards the elaboration of common projects. This form of equality was lacking within the Barcelona framework – a situation that did not aid in promoting a sense of appropriation amongst the southern Mediterranean partners. These countries demand to be more included in the decision-making process.

Many of the southern Mediterranean countries had for a long time been proposing a model of co-presidency, which they saw as a means to stimulate a rebalancing between the two partner groups. They argued that this solution would 'make aware each state of its responsibility, actively engaging it in the process, or in the very least promoting a more global vision of affairs'. The European Union, for its part, declared its acceptance of the principle. The Action Plan drafted in Valencia, for example, states that this principle 'is coherent with the essence of the Partnership and should be implemented as soon as possible', nonetheless advancing in other documents, and through associated statements, that this solution would not be efficient as long as the present situation, of differentiated relations between the various partners, remained in effect. The European Union disposes of internal mechanisms that permit it to coordinate the positions of its various member states and thus speak in a unified voice, while the divergences that characterise the southern Mediterranean partners have prevented them from developing a similar device. Even the coordination mechanism of the group of Arab states does not function appropriately. The principle of co-presidency is definitely adopted within the framework of the Union for the Mediterranean, With the adoption of this principle begin

the lot of complication, lack of coordination and the political instrumentalisation of the new framework.

The complications connected to the establishment of the new structures and notably the secretariat, show how much it is difficult to by-pass the political disputes which characterize the relations between partners in particular from the South.

The Union is already becoming infected by the same maladies that it had set out to heal. Steadily but surely, interactions in the UfM have relapsed back into the same old patterns of behaviour that the invention of the UfM was meant to end.

The UfM's problem is the hubris of linkage politics. The term linkage politics is used to describe the vexed approach to world politics that many countries in the Euro-Mediterranean partnership favour, and which already threatens the health of the UfM.

Last year's early beginnings of the UfM saw as the main north-south issue whether the League of Arab States was to be involved. Israel and a number of EU countries feared that its membership would eventually lead to the ousting of Israel from the process. Last October, Jordan postponed an important Euro-Med conference on water security so as to put pressure on the other UfM member states to accept the League's participation. An agreement was reached and the League is finally accepted to participate. When UfM countries foreign ministers met in Marseilles, last November, a solution was found to the question of including the League. The compromise was that the League would be involved at all levels, albeit as an Observer, while Israel was given a seat on the UfM's secretariat for the next three years, with the possibility of a further extension.

In another bout of linkage politics, Egypt suspended a few months later all UfM activities when the Gaza conflict erupted, although it could instead have put them at the top of the agenda as a way of tackling the crisis. More positively, Egypt then led the diplomatic effort to end the hostilities but the UfM's suspension had been then highlighted the way that worthwhile initiatives can become hostage to other issues. Which will undermine the credibility of the UfM and further eroded mutual trust in the region.

As regards the contents of the Union for the Mediterranean project the attitude of the South Mediterranean countries has also entered a state of suspense, fuelled by competing national-specific ambitions. Morocco aspires to establish a new bilateral

contract with the European Union, which would replace its current association agreement and hopefully assure it a privileged partner status. By developing its dialogue with the EU in the field of energy, Algeria aims to become a direct supplier to European consumers. And, Tunisia, as the first Mediterranean country to have implemented its zone of free exchange with the EU, hopes to profit from this development to enhance cooperation and improve its standing as a partner. Tunisia is now working to start discussions on the access to the reinforced partnership, the so called Advanced Statut (the statut avancé) which means that these countries were more focusing on the advantages that they could take from the fully implementation of the action plans adopted within the framework of the ENP.

A Union for the Mediterranean rooted in the idea of a union of projects, focused on the domains where advances have already been achieved, seems to respond to some southern Mediterranean expectations. It nonetheless discards the aspirations vested in the model of integration as it was presented in the project's original version, where the aim was political integration, and which was greeted with strong enthusiasm. This initial orientation, structured around the ideal of integration, stalled at the reticence shown by certain European states and their desire for re-equilibrium – a response that resulted in a reframing of the project, explicitly adopting a cooperation logic that from then on prevailed over the prior rationale of integration. It was what some designated as a transformation from a "unifying project" into a "union of projects" – a change that emerged when the Mediterranean Union became the Union for the Mediterranean. The adoption of this project, during the last European summit, as a continuity of the Barcelona Process, somewhat confirms this distancing from the logic of cooperation.

It appears that the southern Mediterranean countries are interested in the prospect of working on concrete projects, according to President Sarkozy's formula of "concrete projects in domains where agreement is rapidly established, such as sustainable development or energy integration", and the list of potential projects is far from sparse, with priority being given to strategic issues linked to water management and environmental protection, as well as to the exchange of knowledge within the region and the fight against pollution in the Mediterranean Sea. Nonetheless, these same countries reveal differences in approach, as a result of the lessons learnt from the failings of the

Barcelona Process, namely a lack of means and of structures, deficiencies in the area of governance, shortcomings in the trans-Mediterranean market integration, and weaknesses in the network of small and medium enterprises. These problems, confronted more intensely in the South, require, according to a Tunisian expert, that this idea of a union of projects be closely guided, which would imply a greater involvement on the part of participating states. Even if priority would have to be given to the economic and financial spheres, projects should be, as was demanded by the Tunisians, ambitious and structuring, and not simply operate as a multitude of small-scale initiatives. This would, however, require a far more significant financial engagement than that attainable through the financial instruments currently available. As such, and again according to Tunisia, the creation of an associated bank is indispensable ó not merely a regular commercial bank, but rather a bank of construction and development that would act as a solidarity tool capable of promoting and steering the desired projects. In addition, a Moroccan ambassador, who is also an expert in the Euro-Mediterranean field, highlights the objective difficulties that in his opinion would be dangerous to deny, doubting the efficiency of the Monnet project methodology as regards countries whose stability is threatened by terrorist, migratory or climactic challenges. Other problems (with Sahara at the fore) persist between certain southern partners. These weigh heavily on public opinion and on the respective national governments, preventing the process of integration that is necessary before companies and private investments can be offered the push desired and expected for their subsequent involvement in projects within the scope of the Union for the Mediterranean.

But this concret approach have also to face a major problem which is its lack of financial means. In the very early stages of the initiative, Algeria's President Abdelaziz Bouteflika drew attention to this problem by asking how UfM projects were going to be financed, given that most of the appropriate EU funds are already committed until 2013. The prospects that the EU will increase these funds from its own resources, or that sufficient private capital can be found to make up the shortfall, look increasingly dim because of the global economic recession.

It is clear that the Union for the Mediterranean, as a new process, will for some time remain a work in progress. The organic link established during the European Summit in

Brussels on 13 March 2008 and confirmed by the Euro-Mediterranean Summit in Paris on 14 July 2009 between the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership and the "project of the Union", paves new paths for both this initiative, as well as the Barcelona Process itself. But after almost a year after the launch of the UfM, we are in a situation of confusion where it is difficult to close eyes and to move, as if no problem exists, as it is also so difficult to reject all the Process and to retreat into ourselves; We both need, on both shores of the Mediterranean, a solid partnership capable of resolving all the disputes; as long as this assertion will exist there will be some hope to reach it.

This policy paper was written as a part of the project: "New EU Member States" Positions regarding the Union for the Mediterranean, realized by the Institute of Public Affairs together with the Centre Études Méditerranéennes Internationales in the scope of EuroMeSCo Network.

