

Moving Towards Inclusive Framework for EU-Mediterranean Partnership

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The neighbourhood of a common sea has long been a source of trade and exchange. It can be a source of conflict, but also of cooperation. This is especially true in the Mediterranean, where the unity of landscapes and challenges is particularly visible, and not only in the 21st century. Bilateral relations are longstanding and innumerable, while attempts to organise them multilaterally are much more recent. If geography unites the riparian countries, history has often divided them. The present time is no exception, especially with war and terrorism setting the Middle East ablaze. Even in calmer times, the views of many of the countries bordering the sea is proving troublesome, both to the North and to the South. The vision of “Euro-Mediterranean” relations reflects a fundamental misunderstanding that has persisted since the creation of the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM) in 2008.

On July 13, 2023, the UfM turned fifteen years old. It is not a turbulent

teenager. In fact, this young institution is rather discrete (compared to all other international organisations), although it is responsible for the sensitive issue of “Euro-Mediterranean” relations. Contrary to popular opinion, its difficulties are not solely due to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. On the contrary, the UfM, which has 43 members (with Syria suspended), is the only institution in which Israel and Palestine not only coexist, but also try (outside of times of intense conflict such as the current one, of course) to establish cooperation on technical issues such as energy, desalination of sea water and civil protection.

In reality, the organisation suffers from two constitutional shortcomings, which are partly linked to the initiator of the idea, President Sarkozy's France. The concept of a Mediterranean Union (as it was called at the time) was proposed by candidate Sarkozy during the 2007 election campaign (speech in Toulon,

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February). It was even his main foreign policy campaign proposal. This good idea was only partially implemented.

The French approach to the subject has been surprising, if not irritating:

- The Mediterranean Union was initially presented as an alternative to the European Union, and France thought it could do without the non-riparian countries, starting with Germany. This was not only the wrong approach, but also a conceptual mistake, as the aim should have been to draw the EU and its member states to the south. This *modus operandi*, which has left its mark on many governments, still prevents the UfM from functioning as a genuine development institution today;
- The “family photo” taken at the opening of the UfM at the Grand Palais in Paris on July 13, 2008, was a clear counter-publicity ploy. It shows numerous dictators who were challenged and/or disappeared in the wake of the Arab Spring. Apart from its structural inability to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the organisation’s inability to convey a genuine political message during and after the Arab Spring has closed off another field of action for it.

France is working tirelessly to increase the human and financial resources of this small organisation (€4 million budget), but still encounters a fundamental problem: the European Commission’s refusal to transfer development credits

to the UfM to enable it to partially finance projects. With a certain amount of bureaucracy, the UfM has to make do with “labelling” projects in the Mediterranean region.

Leaving aside the historical and political conditions that characterized the creation of the UfM, and leaving aside the institutional and financial issues, one may wonder whether the term “Euro-Mediterranean relations”, which has been used since the creation of the Barcelona Process in 1995, is not the cause of the difficulties. At the very least, is outdated:

- It gives the impression that Europe is alien to the Mediterranean, while Europe is in the Mediterranean, and increasingly so, and the Mediterranean is in Europe;
- the result is that the word Mediterranean has become synonymous with North Africa and the Middle East, which for people in Europe today, whether we like it or not, is at least synonymous with crisis, underdevelopment, migration and even terrorism; the Mediterranean, which was once a positive word, has ceased to be so;
- the term “Euro-Mediterranean” leads people to see the EU not as a partner but as a provider, at best, of official development assistance, at worst, of advice on good governance ill-suited to the situation on the ground;
- this term does not give the impression that we are facing the same problems in the North and South (which was not necessarily the case in 2008), in

particular climate change, rising sea levels, loss of biodiversity and even inequalities and the difficulties of the middle classes;

- this term is institutional and tends to describe relations between state(s) and state(s), while the Mediterranean and its current problems should be addressed by civil societies simultaneously with states (with and not instead of states), as France has started to do with the Two Shores Summit (Marseille June 24, 2019), the preparation of which... had begun with Germany a year earlier;
- since no one can really fill the term “Euro-Mediterranean” with content, there is a strong tendency to look beyond the Mediterranean and see it only as a corridor, although it is actually a separate area; hence the multiplication of strategies towards sub-Saharan Africa (for the western Mediterranean) or towards the Gulf (for the eastern Mediterranean). The development problems north and south of the Sahara are by no means the same, and there are more similarities between the countries of the eastern Mediterranean and those of southern Europe than between the former and the countries of the Gulf.

If we want to imagine a truly sustainable and inclusive development in the Mediterranean, then we must abandon the concept of “Euro-Mediterranean” and speak in other terms: Mediterranean relations, Mediterranean public policies, trans-Mediterranean relations, etc. There is no doubt that it would have been necessary to create a Mediterranean (development) bank: this has become impossible because many multilateral banks (European Investment Bank, European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, African Development Bank, Islamic Development Bank) are active in the region. As was shown once again in June 2023 at the summit organized in Paris for a new global financial pact, the countries of the South do not reject advocacy initiatives, but they demand that they be accompanied by financing. The UfM could be an institution working in this direction, provided that the EU commits to a genuine “Mediterranean Partnership” (just as there is an “Eastern Partnership”) and transfers development credits to the UfM, at least in certain areas.