

AFTER THE “ARAB SPRING”: IS IT TIME FOR THE EURO-MEDITERRANEAN ORDER TO BE RETHOUGHT?

DOROTHÉE SCHMID

Research Fellow. Institut français des relations internationales (IFRI)

Introduction: Another Political Regression

In spite of their own purposes, the revolts that have been shaking the Arab world since the beginning of 2011 very likely announce the end of an ineffectual political order: the Euro-Mediterranean political order, consolidated since 1995 upon an unspoken fundamental asymmetry.

The Euro-Mediterranean Political “Shock”

The institutional asymmetry that exists between the European Union (EU) and its southern neighbours has been frequently underlined and discussed.¹ Today other asymmetries of a strictly political nature are becoming impossible to deny: a difference in the nature of regimes, incompatibility of political values and practices, the continuing existence in the South of conflicts that are regularly frozen in time and which bring with them, most notably in the case of the “hottest” of them – the Israeli-Palestinian conflict – resurgences of violence between states. Since the setting up of the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM) in 2008, with the aim of strengthening and rebalancing Euro-Mediterranean institutions while promoting a co-ownership, political differences have emerged precisely as a result of concrete cooperation (following a last-ditch attempt on the part of the French conceivers of this highly idealistic project to avoid them). Up to this point, the prevailing bureaucratic wisdom in Brussels for European institutions deemed that the so-considered over-politicization of the process may put an end to cooperation in the Mediterranean. For the first time with the UfM, it was clearly demonstrated that it is actually impossible to intensify cooperation without involving any politics at all: after several months of diplomatic soundings the UfM ship appeared to be foundered, once and for all, on the Israeli-Palestinian rocks.² As a result of the intentional blocking of the mechanism by the States in conflict, it was the whole regular social exchange between members of the Euromed system during summits, meetings and working groups – one of the essential legacies of the 1990s – that was itself being called into question. From then on, it has been impossible to hold any follow-up summit of the UfM and barely possible to arrange meetings at a ministerial level

Among publicly voiced disagreements and the growing introversion of the players concerned – both in the North and South –, the fiction of even minimal agreement on common issues has become increasingly harder to maintain. It was at this point, with the onset of the uprisings in the Arab Mediterranean countries, that the second major political development came into play. These completely escaped the grasp of the European nations, not only during their onsets but also during their later evolutions. With no possible steering from the North, there is no other option than to simply support them. Notwithstanding, Europe no longer knows how to choose from the new political menu now on offer in the South.

1. See especially the section “institutional asymmetry and ownership” from the EuroMeSCo report “Barcelona plus. Vers une communauté euro-méditerranéenne d’Etats démocratiques”, April 2005.

2. Interview with Dorothée Schmid, “Le Sommet de Paris est un bricolage diplomatique à court terme”, *Euractiv*, 10th July 2008.

The Arab Spring: an Opportunity to Assess and Re-launch the Barcelona Process?

The current upheavals present a unique opportunity to draw up a complete and honest assessment on the deterioration of the Barcelona Process, and move on to something else, because crises at least offer the opportunity for renewal. It is a balance which has for long rested on inertia but also, paradoxically, on excessive goodwill: how to stop the immense Euromed machine, when there is unanimous agreement that, while not exactly productive, it nevertheless constitutes the most comprehensive and sophisticated multilateral working tool available for cooperation in the Mediterranean area. It is by no means easy to give up on the Partnership, knowing it has survived a range of transformations that have not always been improvements, starting out with the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) and ending with the UfM.

As can be seen from the Survey carried out by the IEMed, the level of disenchantment of experts, administrations and representatives of civil society involved in Euro-Mediterranean activities is stunning. At the same time, there is some comfort to be found from reading between the lines. The truth remains that the Arab crisis in effect confirms the accuracy of the diagnosis which European countries have made of their Mediterranean partners since 1990: insufficient growth, fuelling growing social tensions, and regimes chronically lacking in legitimacy. The only surprise was that the crises which the Euromed machinery aimed to prevent, or at least contain, erupted suddenly and largely spread, in a spontaneous and extremely violent way. Looking beyond the ongoing accuracy of the diagnosis of risk in the Mediterranean area, the Euro-Mediterranean strategies and work methods have not been rendered entirely useless either. It will be necessary to wait for the political changes on the southern shore to become defined which, by allowing the emergence of more socially responsible interlocutors, will be eventually reveal the full potential of Euro-Mediterranean cooperation.

I. From Political Ineffectiveness to Inability to Act: The Deteriorated Image of Euro-Mediterranean Cooperation

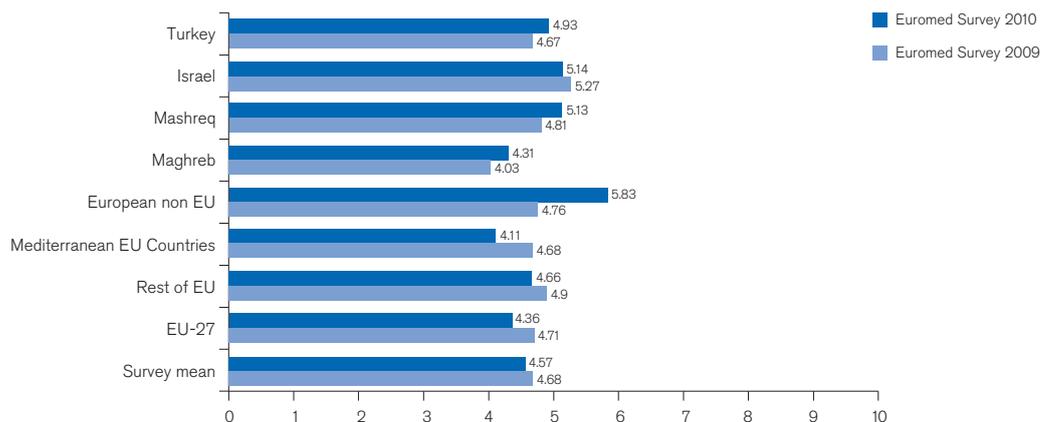
Since 2008 events and the official launch of the UfM, all the parties involved have had a sense of progressive deterioration of the Euro-Mediterranean process. The recent criticism has, nonetheless, been slightly different from that traditionally expressed within the Partnership. Today, at a time when this is absolutely necessary, the blockage of the institutions impedes any exercise in medium-term planning on any subject. Notwithstanding, beyond that matter and more importantly, there is a tangible loss of purpose within the Euro-Mediterranean project.

1.1. A Shared Sense of Increasing Deterioration

The first finding turned up by the IEMed Survey is that of a generalised disenchantment over the outcome of Euro-Mediterranean cooperation. Such disappointment has undoubtedly existed since the early days of the Partnership, and could have been interpreted for long as a version of the capability/expectations gap described by Christopher Hill: expectations with respect to Europe were so great that any European project would be headed for disappointment.³ In the Mediterranean, the expectation-gap appears to have arisen first and foremost from the mismatch between the task being undertaken and the means made available. Notwithstanding, the maintenance of a certain level of expectations with respect to Europe can be positively considered. Since the Survey exhaustively (assesses the vast majority of the existing European policies towards the Mediterranean, the disappointment that emerged from the results report seems logical.

3. Hill, Ch., "The Capability-Expectations Gap or Conceptualising Europe's International Role", *Journal of Common Market Studies* 31/3, 1993 pp. 305-328.

Graph 1: Global assessment of the results of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership/Union for the Mediterranean
(average on a scale of 0-10, where 0 stands for very disappointing, and 10 for very positive)



■ **Euromed Survey 2010:** What is your global assessment of the results of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership/Union for the Mediterranean in the **July 2008-September 2010** period?

■ **Euromed Survey 2009:** What is your global assessment of the results of Euro-Mediterranean PartnerShip in the 2005-2009 period?

Source: Compiled by the IEMed based on the results of the 2nd Euromed Survey

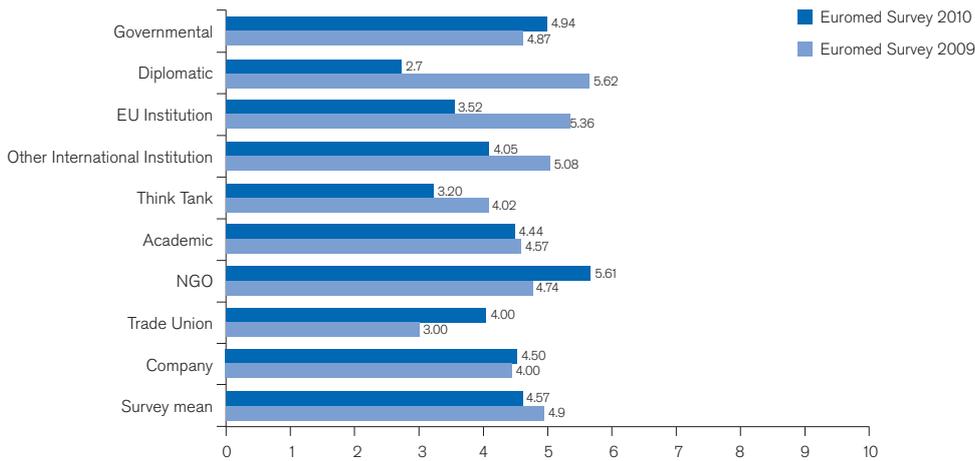
Aside from its origin, what exactly is the nature of such disappointment? If one refers back to the ideals initially set out by the Barcelona Conference in November 1995, the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership aimed at the stabilisation of the Mediterranean region by pursuing the intermediary objectives of economic prosperity, political progress and a rapprochement between peoples. However, none of these intermediate objectives has been achieved over the fifteen years of North/South cooperation. As for the overarching aim of stability and security, at the moment this too seems increasingly farther away, as a result of the events of the Arab spring, whose strategic implications cannot – at this time – be estimated.⁴

But it could also be suggested that, as a general principle, in a sort of reflex reaction of resistance, the Partnership has always been contested. Initially, this resistance came mainly from parties from the civil society actors who considered themselves marginalised in the Euro-Mediterranean process. This opposition resulted in the institutionalisation of relations between the European Commission and civil society via the multiplication of civil forums and the creation of the Anna Lindh Foundation and the non-governmental Euromed platform.

Similarly, certain Mediterranean Partner Countries have always been somewhat critical of European efforts. Aside from Syria, which never really entered into constructive dialogue with the EU, it should be recalled that Algeria, or even Egypt, showed an important scepticism at the time of the ENP was launched. What strikes an observer today is that the popularity of the Euromed system is declining among all parties concerned and not just those who still seek recognition and/or integration within this very same system. The UfM has even disclosed the ineffectiveness of contributions of those countries, both in the North and on the Southern shore, which up to now have guaranteed the functioning of the system. From now on, all the institutions, including the European institutions themselves (European Commission and Parliament) can join the game of criticism or even self-criticism.

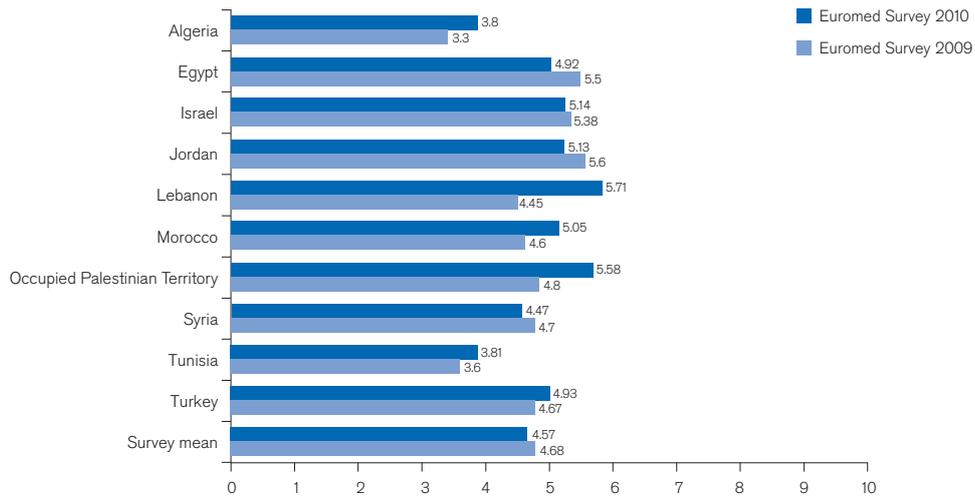
4. Paris, G., "Le 'printemps arabe' et les Européens", *Le Monde*, 8th April 2011.

Graph 2: Global assessment of the results of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership/Union for the Mediterranean
 (average on a scale of 0-10, where 0 stands for very disappointing, and 10 for very positive)



Source: Compiled by the IEMed based on the results of the 2nd Euromed Survey

Graph 3: Global assessment of the results of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership/Union for the Mediterranean
 (average on a scale of 0-10, where 0 stands for very disappointing, and 10 for very positive)

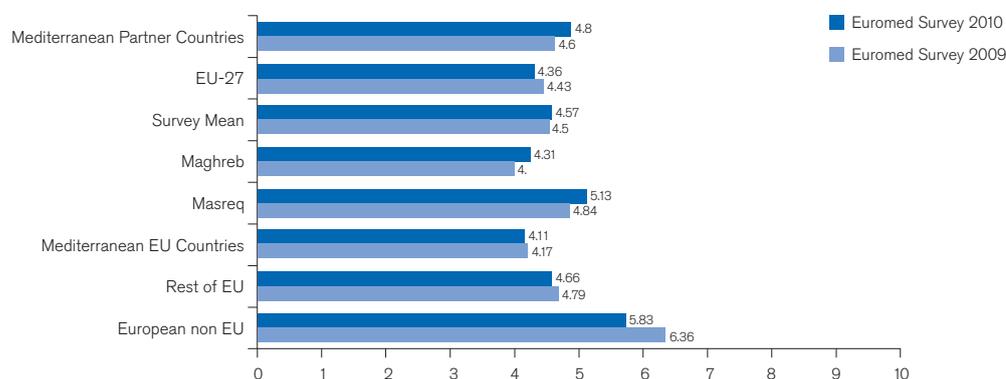


Source: Compiled by the IEMed based on the results of the 2nd Euromed Survey

1.2. An Escalating Confusion

This multifaceted resistance clearly complicates the search for a new common line to jointly work on as Euro-Mediterranean cooperation now has a poor reputation. The difficulty of meeting aims, public expectations and results has always hindered the European message regarding Euro-Mediterranean cooperation. This difficulty is growing over time, as European efforts become diffused and their exact content becomes increasingly vague. Thus, Euro-Mediterranean cooperation contains within itself the very mechanism of disappointment production: the EU insists on having its say, but has nothing in particular to propose.

Graph 4: Global assessment of the results of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership/Union for the Mediterranean (average on a scale of 0-10, where 0 stands for very disappointing, and 10 for very positive)



■ **Euromed Survey 2010:** What is your global assessment of the results of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership/Union for the Mediterranean in the July 2008-September 2010 period?

■ **Euromed Survey 2009:** What is your global assessment of the results of Euro-Mediterranean Partnership in the 2005-2009 period?

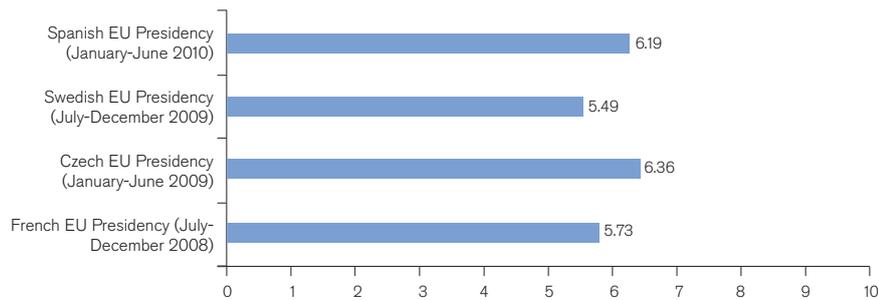
Source: Compiled by the IEMed based on the results of the 2nd Euromed Survey

In addition, the UfM's difficult launching followed by its impractical setting-up have accentuated the perception of European impuissance. From the responses to the IEMed Survey a double paradox is plain to see: those surveyed now know enough about the Euro-Mediterranean institutions to criticise them, but not in enough detail to make them progress. As criticisms are rather more general and intuitive than founded on empirical facts, they have progressively become less constructive. The UfM has added a further dose of confusion to an already complex system. Not only are the limits and the working tools of the European action towards the Mediterranean increasingly hard to define or enumerate, but the French initiative has strongly reactivated competition between Member States to appropriate and manage the Euro-Mediterranean process. In putting itself forward as its leader, France has, at first, irritated a certain number of Member States which normally take an interest in the Mediterranean (Spain, Italy, then Germany). Since the UfM was returned to the fold of European politics, France has continued to act as if the Co-Presidency were hers by right and exempted her from the consensus effort common to all community matters.⁵ The traditional mistrust between the European Commission and French national institutions in the Mediterranean arena has thus been clearly exacerbated. From the MPC point of view, the Spanish initiative in re-launching the Euro-Mediterranean agenda in 2010 appears as a doomed attempt to resuscitate a terminally-ill institution, simply to show up French diplomatic incompetence (as has perhaps happened at other times in the past).⁶

5. For a French and European critique on French diplomatic behaviour surrounding the UfM, see Sylvie Goulard (2008), *Il faut cultiver notre jardin européen*, Le Seuil, Paris, 2008 and Dorothee Schmid, "French ambitions through the Union for the Mediterranean: Changing the name or changing the game?", *Hellenic Studies*, 2/17, 2009 pp. 67-84.

Graph 5: Grading the action of the different EU Presidencies and Co-Presidencies of the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM)

(average on a scale of 0-10, where 0 stands for very negative, and 10 for very positive)



Source: Compiled by the IEMed based on the results of the 2nd Euromed Survey

Aside from this confusion over responsibilities, the aims of Euro-Mediterranean cooperation themselves appear increasingly hard to identify. Should the focus be on the aims and objectives set out within the framework of the UfM, all of which could in practice be classed under the heading of “sustainable development”? Or, should regard be given to the highly political messages being sent out from then on by the states exercising the joint presidency? (i.e. following the example of Nicolas Sarkozy, using this joint presidency to affirm his role at the time of the Gaza crisis in early 2009).

1.3 From Lost Faith to Open Resentment

The feeling of stalemate is now everywhere and shared by all, even exaggeratedly so, and goes beyond what we have traditionally seen (broadly speaking, prior to the launch of the UfM). Today, it is the myth of the Euro-Mediterranean project’s failure that is being constructed. Now, pessimistic perceptions are more spread and less specific than in the past.

Therefore, it is of the utmost importance to take this spreading vision of failure seriously (a vision which Euromed has for long played down). Today we are witnessing a shift in the Euromed belief system. Up to the launch of the UfM, the liberal consensus prevailing in the Mediterranean area was founded on a strong belief in ineluctable progress. Conceived not long after the fall of the Soviet Empire, the Partnership adhered to the late 1990s liberal mantra which by confusing democracy with the market economy, considered that free trade will lead to an automatic redistribution of prosperity and the harmonisation of political values. Fifteen years of laboriously putting in place the economic and financial Partnership have served to demonstrate the inappropriateness of this approach given the regional conditions: subsistence economies which preclude any industrial diversification and appropriation of wealth by élites which, even if they are not reform-minded, they are, nonetheless, ready to avail themselves either directly or indirectly of the financial returns accruing from Euro-Mediterranean cooperation.⁷

The blind belief in the liberal notion of economic development is no longer pertinent. At a more strictly economic level, it could be said that what we are witnessing today is a reversal of expectations: the Euro-Mediterranean project is no longer convincing nor marketable. Thus, there is a need to find an alternative development model. Whatever the final model will be, the cumulative social and political frustration recorded over all these years must be seriously taken in consideration. Exactly the very same frustration that Europeans, with the complicity of Southern Mediterranean regimes and in order to prevent the system collapse,

6. Spanish Presidencies generally following French Presidencies some time soon after, allowing open agendas to mature so as to apply the appropriate treatment (French Presidency first semester 1995 / Spanish Presidency in second semester; French Presidency in 2000 / Spanish in 2002; French Presidency in 2008 / Spanish in 2010).

7. Jacques Ould Aoudia (2008), *Croissance et réformes dans les pays arabes méditerranéens*, Paris, Karthala.

were conscientiously seeking to alleviate. Today the system is about to collapse due to the lack of a valid spokesperson. And, as a political turnaround appears to be taking place in the South, the next interlocutors with the Europeans may become more demanding, if there is no confidence in the EU's capacity to manage common concerns.

II. The Frustration of an Unequal Relationship: Which Euro-Mediterranean Balance should be Adopted in a Context that is Challenging the Traditional International Order?

Since its beginning, the Euro-Mediterranean system has operated on a recurring North/South imbalance. The origin of this imbalance is to be found in several aspects: the EU is richer, better institutionally developed and politically more homogeneous than the Southern Mediterranean region. In addition, The EU is at the origin of the Euro-Mediterranean cooperation structure and accordingly assures its management. This unequal relationship between the EU and its partners has always been criticised and led to a number of attempts to rebalance it.

The political upheavals underway in the Arab world may lead to the end of the era of control in the Mediterranean area and so render the system obsolete once and for all. Either way, this unequal North/South relationship is increasingly rejected within an international context that not only is witnessing the rise in power of the bigger emerging nations but also ready to challenge the established order. How can the European Union – a progressively weaker player in the international arena – continue to unilaterally decide on the very direction of events while coping with partners who are rediscovering their self-confidence?

2.1. The Dissolution of North/South Imbalance through Fragmentation

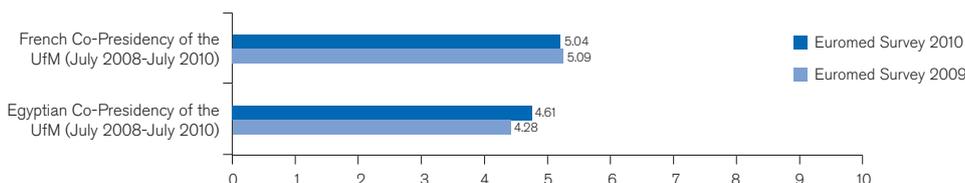
The sustained fundamental economic and political differential between the North and South of the Mediterranean has always been translated within the Partnership as an institutional inequality, which the latest reforms linked to the UfM did not really manage to overcome. The results of the IEMed Survey show that this inequality continues to cause unease among MPCs participants. They feel systematically disadvantaged in relation to the North, even when this perception of disadvantage serves at times to assign responsibility for the aforementioned failures to the Europeans.

The Euromed institutions broadly speaking assume two different functions: assuring the representation of participants in the Euro-Mediterranean political process and managing the budget headings devoted to North/South cooperation. Co-ownership in the application of these two functions remains an ideal that is hard to put into practice.

For a long time it has been possible to discern a certain superficial equality within the first of these functions. However, this equality does not extend to the Euro-Mediterranean decision-making process. MPC Representation on the Euromed Committee for the Barcelona Process (BP), or in the Euromed Parliamentary Assembly (EMPA), does not confer influence in directing operations, which essentially remains in European states' hands (as demonstrated by the brutal French appropriation of the BP in 2008). Since the advent of the UfM, this function of representing the political interests of the totality of the members has been renewed and reinforced thanks to the institution of a Joint Euro-Mediterranean Presidency. The IEMed Survey responses show however that, while such a joint presidency has contributed to symbolically and institutionally rebalance the Partnership, its exact role is seen as vague. Moreover, the dual co-presidency is itself analysed as being an unequal tandem; the performance of its French component, while strongly criticised, is nonetheless regarded as more convincing than the Egyptian one.

Graph 6: Grading the action of the different EU Presidencies and Co-Presidencies of the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM). Comparing 2009 and 2010 results

(average on a scale of 0-10, where 0 stands for very negative, and 10 for very positive)

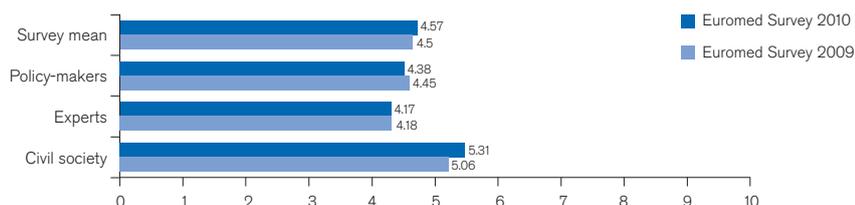


Source: Compiled by the IEMed based on the results of the 2nd Euromed Survey

As for the second function, i.e. the management of the cooperation process, the rebalancing was meant to occur through the establishment of the UfM Secretariat. Expectations were high in respect to the Secretariat, but, so far, it has not succeeded in functioning as it should have. One year after his appointment, Secretary-General Ahmad Massadeh's resignation in January 2011, – probably linked to the starting of political upheavals – has not served the UfM to surmount its own deadlock. Lacking a credible budget and dominated by stagnated conflicts, the Secretariat has not been trusted with the management of some European Commission cooperation tasks (including neither the selection of cooperation projects nor their implementation).

Graph 7: Compared assessment of the UfM and EMP

(average on a scale of 0-10, where 0 stands for very negative, and 10 for very positive)



- How would you assess progress made regarding the setting up of the UfM Secretariat between November 2008 and September 2010?
- What is your global assessment of the results of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership/Union for the Mediterranean in the July 2008-September 2010 period?

Source: Compiled by the IEMed based on the results of the 2nd Euromed Survey

In sum, another severe blow which openly reveals the lack of a Euro-Mediterranean consensus. Under such conditions, even parity of representation within the institutions – once more manifested through the appointment of a new Secretary-General, this time Moroccan – makes little sense. Disruption is now the rule in a Mediterranean area that is more than ever polarised along multiple axes, where the North/South disjunction is now crumbling from all directions in new mini-crises, including some among the European states themselves. Intra-European competition – now openly disclosed and encouraged by a divergence of understanding among Member States on their own ability to define the most relevant regional perspectives – substantially complicates the definition of a new regional consensus. The French unilateralism has left behind a trail of serious consequences, legitimising through a *fait accompli* an outbreak of re-nationalisation of Europeans policies that had been kept in check relatively well up to then by the discipline of community action. Even the creation of the common foreign policy service, an institution symbolising the advancing of a common foreign perspective, clearly inspires doubts in conscious observers. Faced with the disastrous example of European lack of consensus, the fear is that Mediterranean states may not yet feel encouraged to operate through the bilateral channels, relying on European disunity to protect their own national interests.

2.2 Where are the Advances for the South?

Another inequality that causes problems for the Partnership concerns the shortfall in the involvement of civil society in the process of cooperation. This flagrant shortcoming is most spontaneously expressed when it comes to relevant parties that have not been integrated in the state apparatus. Despite the intentions that were initially set out – and regularly reiterated⁸ – the UfM has not addressed in any serious way this criticism aimed at the Europeans since the first summit in Barcelona in 1995 – immediately replicated by the parallel Civil Forum and subsequently becoming a regular feature.

This failure to take into account the needs and ideas of civil society is largely the result of authoritarian obstruction by regimes that were the rule in the South.⁹ While, in the North, civil society manages to a greater or lesser extent to be part of the decision-making process, at least as the instigator of issues, attempts in the South at political and social dissent have always been reined in at source. Now the failure of states themselves to reach agreement to ensure that Euro-Mediterranean aims are met is the result of an overwhelming political vacuum: the absence of political summits and ministerial conferences since the Gaza crisis reaffirms the idea that the UfM is well and truly dead. As a result, the voice of civil society is becoming increasingly audible. In particular, developments on the political scene to the South have brought to the negotiating table parties that had long been marginalised, coming out of a civil society for long denied any useful participation in affairs. While awaiting the political leaders of tomorrow, the Europeans are concentrating on those who work for change via social networks, and are following the lead of the French Foreign Minister, who recently invited such protagonists to the Arab World Institute to discuss political transitions. He recognised at this event that he had asked his ambassadors “to extend the spectrum of their interlocutors to the full range of protagonists in civil society.”¹⁰ Some degree of unblocking, then, is underway.

Beyond these on-going occasional contacts with political actors, new and stable relationships will be required, once new, or renewed, governing élites are confirmed. But the growing rejection of a unilaterally imposed European order at least reveals one thing: partner countries once took the Euromed process seriously since they were seeking to become active actors. After fifteen years of learning experience, administrations and citizens are generally better informed and more motivated towards a greater involvement. Available data suggests that, for a comparable demographic profile, the degree of information nowadays possessed by civil society and institutions in the North and the South is converging, thus creating the necessary basis to make more equitable institutions function in the future in a more satisfactory way.

Once the existence of new and probably highly motivated actors has been acknowledged as has the effective recovery of the expertise achieved over the years, the question that will inevitably arise is about the capacity of partner countries to agree on redefining, beyond rhetoric, common objectives for the region. Europe is in crisis; a crisis certainly less spectacular than the Arab upheavals, but it could nevertheless lead to a withdrawal towards its traditional spheres of influence. In the South, the future will tell whether the wave of change invading political systems can lead to a new common awareness of the issues involved. It is not impossible that the long-awaited opening may finally be happening within states that are often kept in an artificial atmosphere of antagonism by regimes protecting their privileges, and who use fear of the neighbour as a means of battering down the domestic political scene. The involvement of the diasporas existing in Europe, of which a number of representatives have been returning to their country of origin to take part in the construction of a new political

8. Civil society is still one of the priorities of the new Secretary-General, Youssef Amrani : “Un diplomate marocain nommé secrétaire général de l’UPM”, LEMONDE.FR with AFP, 25th May 2011.

9. Dorothee Schmid (1997), “Les Programmes Med : une expérience européenne de coopération décentralisée”, *Maghreb-Machrek, Monde arabe* n°153.

10. Alain Juppé added: “For too long, we have knowingly or unknowingly been a bit too limited in our contacts, confined to the powers that be, if I can put it like that”; Arab spring symposium, closing speech by Secretary of State Alain Juppé, Minister of Foreign and European Affairs, to the Arab World Institute, Paris, 16th April 2011; at <http://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/>.

order, could thus play an important role in undoing political superstitions and helping to consolidate a new relationship of confidence with Europe. The new regimes, born out of parallel dissident movements with broadly similar roots, would be able to enter into a new dynamic of dialogue, and unify their efforts to produce a discourse on a regional scale, faced with a scarcely effective Europe that is increasingly declining to assume responsibilities on the foreign affairs agenda. Nevertheless, the new Arab governments will not have that much room for manoeuvre, given the economic urgency.

III. Going into Action... and its Consequences

The shared diagnosis among a great majority of analysts is that the Arab revolutions took everyone by surprise. Accustomed to reasoning within a framework of authoritarian stability, European experts regularly used to agree that all the conditions for an eruption were there but, for some unknown reason, it had not happened, and most likely never would.

The start of the violent events that are shaking the Arab world seems to be driven by despair and courage, which generates a strong shockwave for the Europeans, since it demonstrates that the unjust socio-economic order imposed until now by increasingly illegitimate regimes was simply untenable. The reaction of Arab populations could, for the first time since their independence, give rise to similarly inspired, copycat unrest in a European Union which is itself facing a major crisis of solidarity, in its response to the failure of its own southern economies. Whatever the reason, what is required for now to prevent the Arab political revolutions from running out of steam is to ensure that change takes root by forestalling the looming economic catastrophe.

3.1. The Core of Arab Dissent: Economic Priorities Confirmed

Since the Barcelona Process was launched in 1995, the EU gave priority to the economy as the driving force for change in the Mediterranean. While the relevance of the Europeans' incomplete liberal methodology has been challenged even by economists,¹¹ the central role of the economy remains today the appropriate starting point for a strategy of action, most especially for an European power struggling to produce an exportable political model. This option seems even more relevant these days given that the current revolutions were sparked off by a discontent precisely of socio-economic origin, even if their consequences are eminently political.

Economic inequality, lack of social justice and a failing representation: these are the three combined causes to be found behind the Arab revolts in the Southern Mediterranean. But the immediate trigger for the movement is to be found first and foremost in the shape of economic and social inequalities. The sacrificial death of the young Mohammed Bouazizi in Tunisia on 4th January 2011 constitutes the historical starting point of the political tidal wave which hit North Africa first. This young graduate set fire to himself in public as a highly radical protest against unemployment in his country; this act of despair struck the imaginations of Europeans in a special way, more used, as they are, to immolations with a political message. In its execution, this immolation effectively has brought with it a widespread political movement, leading to the dismissal/dismantlement of the Tunisian regime, followed by its Egyptian neighbour.

The chain of events casts a light on the extreme overlap between political and economical control in Southern Mediterranean Countries, where the authoritarian closure acts together with a mechanism of systematic robbery of national wealth. While speculation on the amount and location of the deposed Egyptian president's fortune is progressing at a fine old rate, it

11. Tovas, A., "Economic Liberalism between Theory and Practice", in Adler, E., Bicchi, F., Crawford, B., and Del Sarto, R., (dir.), *The Convergence of Civilizations: Constructing a Mediterranean Region*, Toronto, Toronto University Press, 2006 pp.191-211.

is useful to recall the background analyses produced by some political economists since the year 2000, who noted the remarkable ability of certain Arab élites in appropriating the benefits of economic reforms required by Europe: with family privatisations and misappropriation of financial cooperation, the elites in power were steadily able to consolidate their hold over their countries' economies.¹² With growth coming from a subsistence economy with unequal distribution of wealth and demographic pressure, the socio-economic backdrop for authoritarian regimes placed them in constant danger, thus obliging them to ever more repressive practices to repress a social backlash that continually threatened them.

If the European choice of economic cooperation is therefore appropriate and inevitable, it will still be necessary to handle this in a credible way. The basic parameters for European action remain the same: long-term working, organising Partnerships for progress while emphasising partners' fundamental infrastructure requirements. But from now on assistance needs to be focused on setting up a more equitable and redistributive economic system. Sustainable development requires joining the management of the territory and social justice. In addition, the EU must necessarily be at the forefront in organising an urgent pool of aid that joins together bilateral and multilateral funding providers during the stabilisation period for the new political teams in the South. So the EU would be acting from its core competences.

3.2. An Opportunity to Overcome the Political Roadblock? Impasse...

Since its foundation, the Euro-Mediterranean Process has run up against two political obstacles: conflicts in the Mediterranean area, on the one hand, and the nature of regimes prevailing in the Southern Mediterranean, on the other. As previously mentioned, facing these political difficulties, the Europeans have adopted automatically a strategy of avoiding confrontation: it was a matter of working outside the political arena, confining problems so as to avoid a negative contaminating effect that could be set off by the slightest event. In attempting to avoid all political issues, in the end the EU ran the risk of allowing them to fester. The EU is still today unable to influence as a collective actor in the development of Mediterranean conflicts – thus, the individual Member States can be left to assume the responsibilities they choose for themselves – the democratic question is wide open.

Ambitions for political progress cherished by the EU in the Mediterranean area, theoretically in place since the Barcelona Declaration, have long been reduced to a minimum: political conditionality that has remained ignored and a system of bilateral negotiation with each partner country that has probably contributed to consolidating authoritarian regimes, rather than shaking them up.¹³ The question of the nature of regimes thus remained purely rhetorical within the Partnership at least until the US intervention in Iraq, which forced a debate in a brutal and ineffective way over the road to democracy in the Middle East, without leading to a credible *aggiornamento* of European orthodoxy. If the Neighbourhood Policy theoretically introduced the possibility of strengthened conditionality, it is thus held hostage to an enforced bilateralism that has resulted in neutralising any reforming pretension on the part of the Europeans. Besides, the Mediterranean area has not been where democratic shake-ups have been most conspicuous; Central European “neighbours” underwent complex developments in a matter of a few years. In the Southern Mediterranean stability seemed well established and political short-sightedness had become a matter of routine, as is clearly shown by the Tunisian case, regularly bandied as an exemplary country in the Euro-Mediterranean club, the only one that had managed to absorb the shock of opening up economically.

12. Dillman, B., “Facing the market in North Africa”, *Middle East Journal* 55/2, 2001 pp. 198-215; Kienle, E., *Politics from Above, Politics from Below: The Middle East in the Age of Economic Reform*, Saqi, London, 2003.

13. In line with the well-judged intuition of Béatrice Hibou and Luis Martinez as revealed in “Le Partenariat euro-maghrébin : un mariage blanc ?”, *Les Etudes du CERJ* no. 47, November 1998. See also “The European Union’s democratization agenda in the Mediterranean: a critical inside-out approach,” special issue of *Democratization* 16/1, 2009.

Today, the authoritarian obstacle can be overcome, even without the Europeans taking much trouble to achieve this. Here we have a great opportunity to restart a political dialogue that was severely stalled by the events of 9/11 and its consequences. Circumstances now permit the Euro-Mediterranean economic objective contract to be overhauled. They also permit a more extended dialogue to be held on a wider scale on all political issues studiously avoided up to now, ranging from corruption to the reliability of systems of representation. If it is to achieve its mission in the Mediterranean, Europe must not renounce its call for democracy: political convergence needs to become an objective with the same weight as economic convergence, as it is on these two pillars together that an equal and peaceful relationship will be established in the future between the European Union and its Mediterranean partners.