

THE UNION FOR THE MEDITERRANEAN: THE FIRST DECADE

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ARTICLE

The various EC and, later, EU initiatives, such as the Global Mediterranean Policy of 1972, the Renovated Mediterranean Policy of 1990, the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP) in the framework of the Barcelona Process in 1995, and the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) of 2003, sought to make the Mediterranean region an area of peace, stability and prosperity. All these policies were supposed to promote the stabilisation of the region, mainly through the virtues of free trade. The EMP went slightly beyond this, in that it also contained a security basket supposed to facilitate political dialogue and a civil society basket supposed to enhance cooperation among national NGOs. But a consensus prevailed in 2007 that the EMP of 1995 and ENP of 2003 had not been a big success or had not yet shown palpable results. In that year the then French President Nicolas Sarkozy thought it was high time to do some serious stock-taking, intimating that the EMP and ENP were over-ambitious; better to concentrate simply on implementing large-scale transversal projects of interest to several Mediterranean riparian countries. After a lot of serious EU in-fighting, the idea of setting up a Union for the Mediterranean (UfM) emerged in the form of "A project's Union for a Union project". The Union would have its own institutions and decision-making procedures. In terms of contents, the UfM mainly overlaps with the second basket of the EMP, the economic one. But whereas the latter focused on trade *integration* (namely the creation of Free Trade Areas), the accent of the UfM should be on trade *facilitation*: infrastructure projects and improvement of production factors (e.g. educational and environmental projects). Thus far, the involvement of civil society in the workings of the UfM, a feature of the third basket of the EMP, seems minimal but is not totally absent. The most original idea in terms of methodology is "labelling", whereby the small UfM institutional infrastructure based in Pedralbes (Barcelona) comprising experts from the 43 UfM member countries closely studies different projects and eventually declares them as economically viable, something likely to induce potential public and private investors to come forward to finance the projects approved. The UfM had really taken off when the EU convinced itself about five years ago that the new organisation was not competing with on-going EU policy initiatives but was rather a modest complement, which in fact was well worth strongly supporting, even if the UfM is not strictly speaking part of the EU.

The UfM is an intergovernmental organisation made up by 43 members states (representing almost 800 million people), namely the 28 of the EU, and 15 other Mediterranean Non-Member

Countries (MNCs).¹ It is based in a wing of the Palacio de Pedralbes in Barcelona where about 60 public officials work, the prominent ones having a diplomatic status as well as their income paid by their countries. This executive, in the form of a Secretariat, is led by a Secretary General from the South elected for a maximum of six years. He is seconded by six Deputy Secretary Generals, three from the South and East and three from the North. The 60-plus person body is financed, as far as current expenditure is concerned, 50 per cent by the European Commission while the rest is paid in by the 43 member states on a voluntary basis. However, the UfM's own budget excludes the wages of those public officials sent by member states to work at the UfM and who are paid directly by them.

The Secretariat must report to the two Co-Presidents of the Council of the UfM, one from the North, the EU always represented by the relevant institutions; normally the High EU Representative leading the EEAS in Brussels and Vice-president of the Commission (currently Federica Mogherini); the other from the South voted by consensus by the 15 MNCs (at present Jordan). The UfM has been organising many ministerial meetings since 2012, even of Ministers of Foreign Affairs, no minor feat given the charged international atmosphere and the conflicts between different Mediterranean riparian countries (e.g. Syria and Turkey).

Until early 2018, it had labelled 50+ projects presented by international institutions, international development banks (such as the EIB or the EBRD), member states, higher education and research institutions and some by civil society. The private sector is really underrepresented (only 11%), which is a problem if not a shame, as this was the wish of the founders (particularly former President Sarkozy). Even though the world financial crisis is over, private investors are still conspicuous by their absence. These labelled projects if implemented would benefit more than 300,000 people and would require 5.3 billion euros to be invested. Projects are divided into different categories such as Higher Education and Research, Water and Environment, Business Development, Energy and Climate Action, Transport and Development and Social and Civil Affairs. Some of these projects have been launched and partially implemented (about 15 or more by now).

I will concentrate on two examples I know relatively well because Israel was heavily involved in both of them, related to Education and Research. The reason is that for the first six years the Deputy Director General for Education and Research was an Israeli, who I met several times.

The UfM approach is pragmatic. Of course, the UfM discusses and decides at the political level about projects presented to it, which must have a regional dimension. So it is important to understand that the regional projects that are eventually approved are politically backed by the 43 member states, all by consensus. That is then supposed to send a strong message to whoever would like to join in implementing the project, for example by investing funds.

With time it appears to every observer of the scene that it is the European Commission that runs the show in the UfM. Actually, the odds of future success of the UfM are high because

¹ In fact, both Jordan and Mauritania are counted as part of the 15 MNCs.

paradoxically the EU and particularly the European Commission has very much reversed its initial pretty hostile position towards President Sarkozy's project and realised that in fact the UfM needs the Commission more than the latter needs the UfM. In other words, once it became clear that the UfM was not rivalling the EU in any way or did not even minimally cast a shadow over EU bilateral and even multilateral relations with MNCs, the EU realised that keeping the UfM alive and actually providing generous funds for its running was a very rewarding operation that costs the EU taxpayer very little at all and apparently makes everybody happy, including Arab countries and Israel.

The second reason for being moderately optimistic is what could be called the "discrete charm of ownership", initially described as a gimmick of President Sarkozy. For example, Israel is happy to now belong to a club on a regional basis. Second, for some MNCs apparently getting involved and being accepted increases the motivation to participate in joint ventures, even if a cost is attached to it (be it in the form of obeying some rules or chipping in with money). Why? It seems clear that as proud independent countries, most MNCs do not like being bullied or having supra-national rules decided elsewhere imposed on them. Neither do they like trading potential economic gains for political concessions. More significant is that MNCs are part of the founding members of the UfM, and not latecomers joining an international organization (IO) after its creation (like Britain in the EEC, etc). Hence they do not pay the price of adjusting to something pre-existing.

On the downside, it must be noted that while each member state has a vote in deciding which projects deserve labelling in practice by consensus, this does not seem to appeal to most of the 43 countries that make up the UfM, whether governments or civil society.

Another clear downside of all this is that there is a strong flavour of inter-governmentalism in the work of the UfM; with no intention to pursue political and legal reform in the South; and using a classic functionalist approach of IOs, not a neo-functionalist approach à la EU.