

The UfM: Between Institutional Paralysis and Ambiguity

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The Mediterranean region underwent a number of significant changes in 2010. Political and socioeconomic dynamics in the countries on the southern shore of the Mediterranean cannot be attributed to merely the persistence of illiberal regimes acting upon apathetic societies. Instead, a number of trends at the societal level deriving from the growing globalisation of these societies contributed to sowing the seeds of the turmoil that engulfed the region at the end of 2010. This article will not look at these trends, as it is still too early to assess the unfolding events currently changing the face of some Arab Mediterranean countries; rather, it will examine the year from another perspective, for 2010 will also most likely be remembered as the year in which the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM) began its demise and collapse.

The blatant contrast between, on the one hand, the number of changes that have been taking place in the region and, on the other, the paralysis and crumbling of part of the architecture of the UfM cannot be overlooked and should prompt a thorough reassessment of Euro-Mediterranean cooperation. This article will deal with both the institutional component and the objectives of the UfM with a view to shedding light on the reasons behind the partial derailment of the process behind it. In the conclusions it will briefly touch on the perceptions of the states and societies involved, particularly on the southern shore, in order to find a possible way out of the current impasse.

Institutional and Financial Shortcomings

It took almost two years for the UfM to see the light. The initiative was launched in Paris in July 2008 as the new European policy towards the Mediterranean, although it had originally been presented as a national French initiative. However, immediately following the meeting of Foreign Ministers held in Marseille in early November 2008 that laid the foundations for its actual establishment and operations, the UfM was blocked and confined to a limbo due to the eruption of the events in Gaza in December 2008. It did not manage to emerge from the deadlock caused by the standoff between Israel and the Arab states until early 2010. These difficulties were to influence all subsequent developments.

One of the major accomplishments of the UfM in the first months of 2010 was the establishment of the institutional and operational headquarters in Barcelona and the start of consultations with the national governments to fill the different positions, from high-level posts to the technical and administrative staff. This led to the appointment of the Secretary General, on 4 March 2010, and of the six deputy secretaries, hailing from Greece, Israel, Italy, Malta, the Palestinian Territories and Turkey.

The allocation of these positions raises certain doubts in that they represent only Mediterranean countries. This clearly contrasts with the spirit of “Europeanisation” that ultimately inspired the UfM, making it a policy on which all EU Member States agreed. Furthermore, it is no secret that the entire process encountered many practical difficulties due to the scepticism of the national governments, which, with some exceptions, did not invest in the identification of the necessary pool of functionaries and technical staff best suited to hold these positions. As a result, one year after the creation of the

General Secretariat, it is still largely understaffed. Arguably, it took too long to define the institutional structure of the UfM and too much attention was devoted in 2010 to administrative issues to the detriment of the need to act and to start doing something to show the actual potential of this form of cooperation. This would indeed have provided the infant UfM with additional leverage and would have set in motion a virtuous cycle.

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None of the above is meant to cast doubt on the very real importance of having a well-established and solid institutional structure as a necessary starting point for a well-functioning project. However, the total lack of progress in terms of concrete actions was not compensated for by the limited progress on organisational matters and the whole endeavour suffered tremendously as a result from the mismatch between its stated objectives and its actual contributions towards their achievement. This situation has been made even worse by the problems the UfM has had mobilising funds. In November 2010, the high representatives of the governments of the UfM met in Brussels and successfully reached an agreement on three outstanding issues: the UfM's budget, the priorities of the work plan and the rules for the internal functioning of the Secretariat. In reality, though, the process of defining the budget is not yet over. What they have agreed upon is the need to have a financial endowment of €6.2 million, of which €3 million will be made available by the European Commission provided that other funds are mobilised to cover the entire sum. Notwithstanding some vague commitments made by Spain, France and Germany, nobody else has so far answered the call. This raises the question of whether other national

governments or non-governmental institutions will commit to covering the UfM's expenses and to funding its projects when hardly anything has been done to prove its actual ability to pursue its objectives.

“Low” vs. “High” Politics?

The whole architecture of the UfM has suffered from its inability to deliver concrete results. As far as the high-level representatives' meetings are concerned, the summit of the Heads of State and Government of the Member States of the UfM was postponed twice in 2010. This meeting had originally been scheduled for 7 June but was postponed, first, to November, due to the continuous deterioration of Arab-Israeli relations and the emergence of a rift between Turkey and Israel following the events of the Freedom Flotilla on 31 May. The situation, in other words, was not ripe to advance the dialogue among the parties within the framework of the UfM. The second attempt to hold the meeting, this time on 21 November, was likewise frustrated, and no indication was given on that occasion concerning the rescheduling of the summit to a later date. The situation appeared rather compromised despite the attempt made by France, Egypt and Spain – the countries that have arguably invested the most in ensuring the functioning of the UfM, albeit with poor results – to present the situation as not overly worrisome due to the alleged good progress made with the launch of the UfM's operational dimension. The three partners insisted on the fact that “Whilst waiting for this second summit, Egypt, France and Spain have invited the institutions of the Union for the Mediterranean to continue their action. They expressed their satisfaction regarding the progress of the projects corresponding to the priorities set by the Heads of State and Government at the Paris Summit on 13 July 2008. They have also taken note of the important steps made towards operational implementation of the Permanent Secretariat based in Barcelona, as well as towards the adoption of its budget and work programme, which will enable the Union for the Mediterranean to continue at a more constant pace with its actions to foster ever-closer cooperation between the two sides of the Mediterranean.”¹

¹ “Postponement of the Union for the Mediterranean Summit,” 15 November 2010. Available at: www.lamoncloa.gob.es/IDIOMAS/9/Gobierno/News/2010/15112010UnionMediterraneanSummit.htm. [Last accessed on 6 June 2011.]

This may sound like an attempt to find an excuse for the little progress achieved over the year and to deflect attention from the embarrassing situation of paralysis into which the UfM had fallen. Against this backdrop, a number of developments were about to take place in the region. The protests and revolutions that broke out less than two months later in Tunisia and Egypt, not to mention Jordan and Algeria, would strike a tremendous blow against the prospects for cooperation on the basis envisaged by the UfM. Another sign of the UfM's worsening institutional paralysis was the resignation of the Secretary General on 28 February 2011.

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The sectoral ministerial meetings have run up against the same difficulties, with the result that some have been complete failures while others have been cancelled ahead of their scheduled dates. One of the most striking examples of such failure was the Euro-Mediterranean Ministerial Conference on Water held in April 2010, in which a semantic battle raged throughout the session as to the use of "occupied territories" versus "territories under occupation" in reference to the occupied Palestinian, Syrian and Lebanese territories, leading to the failure to adopt the agreed Water Strategy. Similarly, a number of meetings intended to address higher education and agriculture had to be cancelled. This calls into question the assumption that by focusing on technical and socioeconomic cooperation the UfM can advance long-term political dialogue among the partners in the region. In other words, it casts doubt on the original notion that by sidelining political cooperation and focussing instead on a number of concrete sectoral projects on which the interests of the parties might converge, the countries could not only promote socioeconomic development but also create a situation more conducive to political cooperation.

The latent pitfalls of this idea have now been exposed in that it is not possible to decouple socioeconomic development from peace and improved domestic and regional political conditions. The persistence of physical and psychological barriers to political dialogue and cooperation among the countries in the region has led to a situation in which, even more than in the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP), agreement on infrastructural and economic projects must pursue five of the six key objectives of the UfM, with the exclusion of the Euro-Mediterranean University (EMUNI), and their implementation is hostage to the foreign and domestic politics of the individual southern and eastern Mediterranean countries.

This is related to the status granted to the Member States by the UfM. The shift from the EMP to the UfM has been accompanied by a trend towards the re-nationalisation of European policy in the Mediterranean. The EMP was an EU project in which the Commission played a substantial role and with which the southern Mediterranean countries were associated as partners on a subordinate level in terms of the decision-making process. With the emergence of the UfM, not only did the European governments begin to work directly with the southern and eastern Mediterranean governments and was the Commission effectively sidelined, but the Mediterranean partners were also able to maintain their sovereignty and participate in the initiative on an equal footing with the other members. In this inter-governmental framework, some southern and eastern Mediterranean partners have used their power not to advance virtuous cooperation but to block it out of preoccupations related to their security and foreign policies. As a result, today the southern Mediterranean partners are farther from each other and from Europe than in 1995 when the EMP was launched.

The UfM in the Broader Context of the EU's Mediterranean Policy

From the previous discussion it is clear that the UfM is going through a delicate phase of its development. Since its ability to function in future should not be taken for granted, a number of steps must be taken to revive it. First, it is necessary to clarify the ambiguity surrounding its principal aim and mission: sometimes it is presented as political dialogue, having been entrusted, as it was, with the functions

originally covered under the “political and security pillar” of the EMP, and sometimes as an economic one based on the sectoral projects. While the “low politics first, high politics later” approach would mean that the UfM should first strengthen the economic and project-oriented component, which affects the daily life of the Euro-Mediterranean population, with a view to eventually creating the necessary conditions to ensure effective political capability, the current political circumstances in which the initiative is bound to take place, most notably the Arab-Israeli conflict, remain a major obstacle for Euro-Mediterranean cooperation, at least in the eyes of the southern Mediterranean partners.

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Second, it must be remembered that the UfM does not act in a vacuum. It should thus seek positive synergies between its own projects and the programmes that the Commission already has in place in the Mediterranean region, some of whose economic focuses, such as the free movement of goods and the execution of large-scale infrastructure and transport projects, overlap significantly. This could offer a possible way around the problem of the shortage of funds that is currently affecting the UfM. However, the implementation and sustainability of the projects, as well as the functioning of the UfM’s institutional bodies, cannot be premised exclusively on the funds allocated by the Commission, as this would amount to a step backwards from the original plans.

Finally, and most importantly, it should be taken into account that each non-European Mediterranean partner has a different set of interests and expectations regarding its participation in the UfM. While for the countries in the eastern part of the Mediterranean – the Adriatic region – the UfM represents a welcome dimension of cooperation to strengthen their relations with the EU, it does not offer the same

prospects to the countries of North Africa and the Middle East. For most of these countries, the priorities lie with the Action Plans within the framework of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) and they thus strive to obtain as many advantages as possible in their bilateral relations with the EU. Furthermore, the Maghreb countries lament their marginalisation in the UfM when it comes to the secretaries. To address these shortcomings, Euro-Mediterranean cooperation both within and outside the UfM should increasingly be conducted along sub-regional lines with a view to appreciating and taking into account the specificities and the different needs of the partner countries. The positive examples of the “5+5 Dialogue” in the Western Mediterranean and the Adriatic Ionian Initiative, launched in 2000, should push the UfM in the direction of developing “variable geometry” schemes both geographically and thematically. All in all, taking a broader view, the EU needs to rethink its entire Mediterranean policy to take stock of and react to changing realities in the region.

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