

Arab States and the UfM

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Two years after launching the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM), the record of the new Euro-Mediterranean project is far from impressive. This, however, should not be surprising considering the record of the UfM's predecessor, i.e., the Barcelona Process. Apparently, the Mediterranean is still capable of defying grand visions of regionalism. This was the case with the Barcelona Process and continues to be the case with the UfM.

The reasons for the UfM's poor record are multiple. However, it is the Arab-Israeli conflict that has been the direct and immediate cause of failure in both cases. The negative impact of the Arab-Israeli conflict on regional integration in the Mediterranean testifies to the fact that the Mediterranean Region does not yet have a life of its own independent of other regional dynamics. It also demonstrates that the pro-integration forces in the Mediterranean have not yet been able to build sufficient momentum and energy to carry Mediterranean integration on against hostile regional forces.

It is safe to argue that the future of Mediterranean integration will continue to be determined by the Arab-Israeli conflict. The conflict between Arabs and Israel functions as the direct and immediate cause for the failure of Mediterranean integration. Deep causes, however, lie in two other places. First, there are EU politics that do not allow the proper development of Mediterranean policy. Second there are the dynamics of Arab politics, which in turn are significantly shaped by the Arab-Israeli conflict. This applies to the UfM now, just as it was earlier applicable to the Barcelona Process.

EU Mediterranean Policy

Although Mediterranean integration is a joint project between the EU and Mediterranean countries, the EU has always taken the lead in shaping policies of integration in the Mediterranean. The EU's Mediterranean policy, first embodied in the Barcelona Process and then the UfM, displays a number of characteristics, as follows:

1. EU Mediterranean policy is, to a large extent, a function of European policy in Eastern Europe, rather than a genuine policy based on the significance of the Mediterranean region for European interests. The disintegration of the Soviet Block in the late 1990s and the following EU Enlargement to the East created the dynamics that led up to the adoption of the Mediterranean integration policy. A few years later, when Europe developed the New Neighborhood Policy to accommodate the Eastern European non-EU member countries, the same policy was extended to the Mediterranean. The UfM is perhaps the first EU Mediterranean endeavor that is not inspired by EU policy in Eastern Europe. However, other factors still obstruct the proper implementation of this Mediterranean project.
2. Comprehensiveness: The EU policy is designed to cover all countries of the Mediterranean Basin. However, the Mediterranean is deeply divided between distinct sub-regions that European policy fails to consider. The "one-policy-fits-all" approach has caused a great deal of heterogeneity within Euromed structures, which has consequently obstructed the entire integration project.
3. Artificiality: EU-developed Mediterranean structures are, to a certain extent, artificial. The Mediterranean as a would-be integrated region is an intellectual construct rather than a reality. The

Mediterranean is a geographic reality but is not a distinct region from a political point of view. The consecutive EU Mediterranean structures have sought integration among strange bed-fellows, while cutting some Mediterranean countries off from their natural partners. This is particularly true of the Arab Mashreq countries, which have been cut off from the Arab Gulf States despite their deep economic, political and cultural interrelations.¹

4. Inconsistency: The EU-developed Mediterranean structures do not allow the EU to fully take advantage of its superior position in the Mediterranean in order to bring about the needed reforms and policies. Nor do they allow equitable structures that could encourage Mediterranean countries to further cooperate towards the establishment of an integrated Mediterranean area.

The UfM was developed to address the shortcomings of the Barcelona Process. However, the new structure is plagued by many of the problems that faced the earlier Mediterranean structure.

Mediterranean Integration in Arab Perspectives

This paper argues that there is no Arab Mediterranean policy. The Mediterranean, in the Arab perspectives, is made up of a number of country clusters. First of all, there are the southern European countries, which are important due to their individual economic and political power, but also primarily because they are members of the EU, the largest economic block in the world. Secondly, there are the Arab Mediterranean countries, which are perceived as Arab rather than Mediterranean, where inter-Arab politics are principally governed by their own dynamics and not mediated or influenced by any sort of Mediterranean dynamics. And finally, there are the Balkan countries, which have only a marginal importance for most, if not all, Arab countries. The fragmentation of the Mediterranean between these clusters of countries does not allow for the develop-

ment of a comprehensive Arab Mediterranean policy. Even though prominent Arab intellectuals have argued the existence of a Mediterranean identity, this is essentially an episode of the identity debate in the Arab World, where some modernisers sought to legitimize the Westernization of their societies. In the identity debate in the Arab World, the Mediterranean has served as a more acceptable detour towards the West than as a genuine construct of its own.

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There is no Arab Mediterranean policy(s); there are, however, Arab policies vis-à-vis the EU. Arab interest in the Mediterranean is a function of their interest in the EU rather than an interest in a Mediterranean standing by itself, independent of any other considerations.²

Mediterranean integration is a great opportunity to enhance development in the Arab World. However, Arab governments, generally speaking, are not yet prepared to restructure their economic policies so that they can reap the benefits of regional integration.³ The lack of capacity to integrate in the Arab World is not confined to Arab policy in the Mediterranean. Arab countries cannot integrate among themselves, including among Arab Mediterranean countries. Integration between like-minded states is likely, as demonstrated by the Agadir Bloc. But extending such integration to include all Mediterranean Arab states is not likely to happen in the short term. After five years of inception, the Agadir Agreement is still limited to the four founding countries: Morocco, Tunisia, Egypt and Jordan.⁴ Arab interest in the Mediterranean, however, will con-

¹ Edward BURKE, Ana ECHAGÜE and Richard YOUNGS, "Why the European Union Needs a Broader Middle East Policy," in Roberto ALIBONI, ed., *The Mediterranean: Opportunities to Develop EU-GCC Relations?* Rome: Istituto Affari Internazionali, English Series, No. 18, June 2010.

² The Mediterranean does not figure high in the policies of any Arab state. This can be clearly seen in two of the most important volumes on the foreign policies of Arab states: Bahgat KORANY and Ali E. HILLAL DESSOUKI, eds., *The Foreign Policies of Arab States: The Challenge of Globalization*, Cairo: AUC Press, 2008; and Raymond A. HINNEBUSCH and Anoushiravan EHTESHAMI, eds., *The Foreign Policies of Middle East States*, Colorado: Lynne Rienner Publishers Inc, 2002.

³ Bessma MAMANI, "The EU, the Middle East and Regional Integration," *World Economics*, Vol. 8, No. 1., Jan.-March 2007.

⁴ Steffen WIPPEL, *The Agadir Agreement and Open Regionalism*. EuroMesco Paper No. 45. Lisbon: EuroMesco, 2005.

tinue as long as it serves the objectives of their EU policies and as long as the EU maintains an interest in the Mediterranean. Mediterranean integration is essentially a European endeavor and Arab interest in it is primarily designed to appease their EU partners. This, however, is not a unique Arab position. Arab attitudes vis-à-vis the Mediterranean, in this respect, should be no different from the attitudes of other non-EU Mediterranean countries, namely the Balkans. In other words, integration in the Mediterranean does not occupy a central position in the policies of any of the blocs in the Mediterranean other than the EU. As Arab Mediterranean policy is essentially a function of EU interest in Mediterranean integration, the decline of EU interest in the Mediterranean is likely to cause a similar trend in the Arab World. Therefore, the EU should avoid demonstrating disinterest in the Mediterranean, if only in order to keep Mediterranean integration on the Arab agenda.

Arab Objectives in the Mediterranean

The secondary position of the Mediterranean in the foreign policy of Arab states does not mean that Arab states lack all interest in the Mediterranean. Arab governments need the Mediterranean as an additional multilateral venue to enhance access to European direct investment, markets, financial and technical assistance and outlets for surplus labor. The limited Arab interest in the Mediterranean, however, could be attributed to the fact that the added value of such multilateral frameworks is still minimal, and to the fact that bilateral relations between the EU and the individual Mediterranean countries continue to be more effective in serving the interests of these countries.

Arab states, however, wish to maintain the Mediterranean as a framework for relations with Europe. The Mediterranean frameworks, whether the Barcelona Process or the UfM, are manifestations of EU interest in the Mediterranean as a region and in its constituting countries. Downgrading these frameworks or eliminating them altogether would be seen as a sign of a decline in EU commitment to the region, which, from the perspective of Arab states, should not be allowed. Once a comprehensive framework for the Mediterranean is created to reflect a high level of EU interest in the region, its elimination would signal a decline of

EU interest in the region, a development which Arab countries would not like to see. Arab interest in securing EU engagement in the Mediterranean can be seen in the arguments made by Arab officials, particularly North Africans, who defended the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP) when the French Mediterranean Union proposal was deliberated.⁵ Arabs tended to interpret the French proposal as a sign of European disenchantment with the Mediterranean, a development that they are determined to resist.

Maintaining the Mediterranean framework, however, does not mean that such a framework should be utilized to its utmost potential. It is rather maintained to serve certain functions. The political and symbolic functions are highly important in this regard. The Mediterranean framework is a manifestation of the importance of the Mediterranean and its countries. It testifies to the fact that these countries are not marginal, no matter how effective and successful in achieving prosperity and democracy. Arab Mediterranean countries, by and large, did not welcome the European attempt to use the Mediterranean framework to pressure Arab governments for consolidated political and economic reform. However, Arab governments do not want the Mediterranean framework to wither away, since this could be interpreted as pronouncing reform in the Arab World a hopeless case.

The Mediterranean framework serves as a vehicle to mobilize additional resources badly needed to address development and reform needs in southern Mediterranean countries. Conditionality, nevertheless, is a main southern concern in this sense, which Arab governments have been able to defeat. EU attempts to integrate linkages and conditionality, particularly negative conditionality, into the Barcelona Process have been thwarted by Arab governments. In fact, the movement from the Barcelona Process to the UfM is a move toward a Mediterranean framework lacking any significant component of linkages and conditionality, a testimony to the effectiveness of Arab policies towards the shaping of the Mediterranean framework and the EU policy in this regard.

The Mediterranean framework also provides Arab governments with a forum where they can raise their political concerns. It allows Arab governments to express their views regarding the conflict with Israel, the number one issue on the Arab political agenda.

⁵ Ahmed DRISS, "North-African Perspectives," in Roberto ALIBONI et. al., *Putting the Mediterranean Union in Perspective*, EuroMesco Paper No. 45. Lisbon: EuroMesco, 2008.

Considering the limited options Arab governments are having regarding the Arab-Israeli conflict, diplomacy gains much importance, where Mediterranean frameworks offer Arab governments an additional diplomatic arena to make their voice heard and to pressure both Israel and the international community to consider Arab demands.

In sum, Mediterranean frameworks are designed to address new challenges, or to address old challenges through new means and policies, i.e., the policies of regional integration. However, Arab governments, which by and large continue to be interlocked in traditional security and political conflicts, tend to use Mediterranean frameworks to pursue old goals, and mostly using the old means. The conflicting European and Arab rational for the Mediterranean frameworks are thus among the most important reasons that have kept such frameworks underused since their inception in the mid-1990s.

Arab Strategies in the Mediterranean

Discussing Arab Mediterranean policy should not obscure the different policies and strategies applied by the different Arab countries. Generalization about Arab policies should not obstruct our ability to see the differences between the policies of the different Arab states.

A distinction could be made between three types of Mediterranean policies adopted by Arab states: the cooperationist, the reluctant and the balancer policies. Morocco provides the ideal example of a cooperationist country. Syria is the ideal example of a reluctant country, while Egypt is the ideal example of a balancer. The group of cooperationist countries includes Tunisia and Jordan in addition to Morocco. Algeria and Libya are part of the group of reluctant countries, while Lebanon can be labeled as a balancer.

The cooperationists are countries that have embarked upon developmental policies in which relations with the EU play a major role. For these countries, consolidating relations with the EU in any format and modality is expected to serve their national, and particularly their economic, interests.

Reluctant countries, on the other hand, are more concerned about security and legitimacy and pursue more of a hard-core, traditional nationalist foreign policy.

Regional integration for these countries is not a priority. On the contrary, for them, regional integration is more likely to have adverse effects on their perceived interests.

Most of the doubts about the UfM were expressed by actors, official or non-official, from the group of reluctant countries. Algeria was reluctant to participate in the first UfM summit and did not change course until a few days before the summit was held.⁶ Libya, on the other hand, boycotted the Paris Summit altogether and the Libyan leader later described the UfM as “a very dangerous project.”⁷

Balancers are countries that seek multiple goals that can hardly be prioritized. These are the countries that are equally concerned about economic and security needs. Due to geostrategic considerations, Egypt is deeply involved in the Arab-Israeli dispute. On the other hand, economic development is equally important for Egypt so that it can meet the demands of its increasing and progressively politicized population. Lebanon, on the other hand, faces what could be described as existential security concerns. Lebanon’s economic wellbeing is strongly dependent on both its external relations and security-related developments. Rather than pursuing strategies that would allow them to maximize their gains in either the security or the economic fields, they apply balancing strategies where they can obtain a bit of everything. Optimum balance rather than maximum gains is the goal sought by balancers.

Balancers, particularly Egypt, play an important role in bridging the gap between cooperationists and reluctant countries. It is no coincidence that Egypt, the major balancing power, was selected as the first Co-President of the UfM without objection. This does not mean that all Arab countries feel fully represented through Egypt’s Co-Presidency. But it certainly means that all countries feel “represented enough.”

Regardless of the different strategies applied by the various Arab governments, all Arab countries are subject to the effects of the Arab-Israeli conflict. Even in the Maghreb, where the impact is much less felt, the strength of the supra-national forces of culture, ideology and identity operating in the Arab World do not allow the Maghreb countries to ignore the impact of the Arab-Israeli conflict. This is likely to be the overriding dynamic in any inclusive Mediterranean framework, and the UfM is not an exception.

⁶ “Al-Jazeera Highlights Moroccan and Algerian Positions on Mediterranean Union.” BBC Monitoring Middle East, 13 July 2008.

⁷ “Libyan Leader Addresses Arab Writers, Warns against Union for Mediterranean.” BBC Monitoring Middle East, 22 October 2009.