

The Union for the Mediterranean: Political Deadlock

Álvaro de Vasconcelos

Director

European Union Institute for Security Studies (EUISS),
Paris

The European Security Strategy (ESS) adopted in December 2003 with the title “A Secure Europe in a Better World,” the Solana Document, states that the resolution of the Arab/Israeli conflict is a strategic priority for Europe. The ESS stresses that “without this, there will be little chance of dealing with other problems in the Middle East.” The 2008 debate on the implementation of the ESS has confirmed this conclusion. However, at the same time, it is clear that, five years later, the lack of progress in the so-called peace process is affecting the overall Mediterranean policy of the EU.

The Palestinian question has surfaced again as the central question defining the viability and the space of the Euro-Mediterranean multilateral initiatives. The Barcelona Process was born in 1995 of the dynamic that came about with the progress in the peace process from Oslo to Madrid. The final declaration was signed in Barcelona on 27-28 November 1995 by two Nobel Peace laureates, Arafat and Peres. But already in 1995 the peace camp suffered a terrible blow with the murder of Yitzhak Rabin some days before, on 5 November 2005, by an Israeli extremist opposed to Rabin’s signing of the Oslo Accords. The Euro-Mediterranean Partnership survived until the Paris Summit of the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM) in July 2008 thanks to European leadership – a good example of European leadership playing a major role in moving forward in policies that deal with issues at the heart of European concerns.

The multilateral dimension of the Barcelona Process, that is to say, the meetings of high-level officials, was not able to deal with any substantive issue or pro-

mote any tangible cooperation in the field of foreign and security policy. Their unique merit was to continue meeting even when the Arab-Israeli conflict became more acute. The rotating presidency of the EU took on the leadership of those meetings and was able to maintain their schedule even in the most difficult moments, such as the war in Lebanon during the Finnish Presidency in 2006. But projects as simple as organising a seminar on non-proliferation inevitably faced the opposition of the Arab states to cooperating with Israel on political and security matters. The French proposal of approving a Euro-Mediterranean Charter for Security in 2000 failed for exactly the same reason. Those present at those high-level meetings of the Barcelona Process saw how they were paralysed by endless discussions between Israeli and Arab representatives.

However, even if the political consultations did not succeed, the communitarian dimension of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership conducted by the European Commission was able to follow a slow, gradual and long-term path. The Barcelona Summit of 2005 allowed for the introduction of new topics into the Euro-Mediterranean agenda, such as governance facility and women’s rights. These new problems, more links to the goal of democratic inclusion, came into being in particular with the launch in 2004 of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) and of its Action Plans.

The communitarian dimension of the Barcelona Process, born out of the experience of European enlargement, also had a multilateral dimension, and decisions on issues related to the first and third pillar of the EU were made in the Euro-Mediterranean Committee, but its dynamic was first and foremost bilateral in nature. It is true that many in the South have rightly considered the Barcelona Process as fundamentally asymmetric, and in a certain sense unilateral, because it was fully led by the EU.

One of the objectives of the UfM was specifically to end that asymmetry and build a Euro-Arab co-leadership of the Partnership of the Barcelona Process. Due to this transformation, the UfM became a classical intergovernmental organisation, and the communitarian dimension of the Barcelona Process was weakened. As a consequence, the Israeli-Arab question became a sticking point. The Egyptian Co-presidency of the UfM is the natural *porte-parole* of the enormous frustration of Arab public opinion with the lack of process of the so-called peace process. Inevitably this also allows for the instrumentalisation of the peace process for other domestic or international political agendas.

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The new institutional framework, coupled with the Middle East situation, has put the UfM in a state of quasi-paralysis. After the Paris Summit, all meetings, with the exception of the Marseille Ministerial, were blocked around the question of the representation of the Arab League. With the Gaza War, the Arab states have refused for many months to sit at the same table with Israel. The only high-level official meeting that has taken place since was simply an occasion for the affirmation of the reasons that were blocking all the processes. Because of the paralysis of the political multilateral framework of the UfM and its multilateral initiatives of economic cooperation, the bilateral dimension of Euro-Mediterranean relations has become predominant. This is because the bilateral agreements in the framework of the ENP are more immune to the contamination of Israel-Arab conflict. It is worth noting that it was during this period of paralysis in the UfM meetings that the EU signed an advanced status agreement with Morocco.

Today there is a belief that EU goals in the Mediterranean can only be fostered through bilateral Euro-Mediterranean relations. It is hoped that the advanced status agreement with Morocco, which gives it access to European programmes and to the European single market, will have a knock-on effect on other countries in the region as they try to emulate Morocco. But the multilateral dimension is of paramount importance in building a region of development, democracy and peace. It is the multilateral dimension that can facilitate the relations between neighbour countries of the Maghreb or the Middle East.

And certainly one day, if there is peace in the Middle East, regional cooperation between Israel and its neighbours will be the best way to consolidate peace and achieve development. The same can be said of the Maghreb, where the resolution of the Western Sahara conflict would open the borders between Algeria and Morocco and facilitate the rebirth of the Arab Maghreb Union (AMU). With the difficulties of the UfM, some might think that the way forward would be to avoid the Israeli-Palestinian issue or go back to a European-led initiative. However, there is no way back. The process being what it is to move forward today with an initiative like the UfM, it is necessary to act on two fronts. One, to build on the communitarian *acquis* of the Barcelona Process and to forge new initiatives in the fields of civil society, human rights and democracy supported by the European Commission; the other for the EU to define a clear policy for the Palestinian question. The window of opportunity is there after President Obama's speech in Cairo. This has put the Palestinian question back as a central issue in international politics, and allows for the EU to move forward in support of a "big bang" approach to implement what President Obama has defined as the need to find a solution for the Palestinian people who "have endured the pain of dislocation" and "the daily humiliations... that come with occupation," a situation that is, in his view, "intolerable." Such a policy would find strong support in the public opinion of the southern partners of the EU, including in certain sectors of the Israeli population.