

# A Euro-Mediterranean Union?

**Álvaro de Vasconcelos**

Director

European Union Institute for Security Studies,  
Paris

2006 was a difficult year in the Mediterranean; some have even called it a black year. The war in Lebanon, which fustigated a country that had held free elections and initiated a difficult democratic transition, and the worsening of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict confirmed the centrality of political issues and reinforced the idea, if there was any shadow of a doubt, that the issues of reforms and democracy are inevitable. This matter already marked the preparation of the 2005 Barcelona Summit, during which the action programme that was approved introduced—as did the European Neighbourhood Policy—the question of democracy and human rights as common objectives, lending a practical sense to what was jointly agreed in 1995.

However, progress made in European and southern Mediterranean thinking regarding the need to make the political reform agenda advance has not prevented the perspectives that place it in the background—whether economic or inspired by theories about the clash of civilisations, based on the absurd thesis of the incompatibility of Islam and democracy—from continuing to predominate and, unfortunately, marking the political debate.

The predominance of culturalist views of political action is clearly present in the European debate on the identity of the European Union (or of the nations themselves). Many saw the cartoon crisis as proof of the radical confrontation between political Islam and modernity. Despite the importance of the start of negotiations with Turkey, the growing opposition against its entry into the Union from certain significant political sectors is seen as a means to affirm Europe's

Christian identity. Reality, however, differs greatly: it is still marked by new, more or less democratic electoral processes in various countries, which underscores the need for the Partnership to be capable of responding to the emergence of a more active and demanding civil society in the South.

Nowadays the conclusions that numerous political leaders are drawing from Mediterranean crises, particularly from the emergence of political Islamism—and, in this regard, the caricature crisis was paradigmatic—are out of step with the course that needs to be followed to resolve the region's crisis situation. Most European leaders still believe that the problems are essentially economic and aim to prioritise development, seeing it as the best way to neutralise political Islamism, which many view as an undifferentiated whole and a serious threat. In this regard, many still share the point of view of some—although not all—Southern leaders. However, as demonstrated during the 2005 debate, the development-stability equation and, who knows, maybe one day democracy itself, has failed. Today we must prioritise democracy while supporting development. Only an effort that incorporates political opening and an efficient response to social needs can be successful—which involves accepting that Islamist parties are an inevitable trend and that the best option is to support the integration of parties that are ready to take part in the political process and reject violence as a means of gaining power. There are plenty of examples to verify this, including the emergence of democratic Muslim trends such as the Justice and Development Parties in Turkey and Morocco.

Evidently, such a contradiction has serious repercussions in the evaluation that must be made of the Barcelona Process and in the course of European politics in relation to the Mediterranean. The year 2007 has seen the rise in various European capitals, par-

ticularly in the South, of harsh criticism against the Barcelona Process and statements about it failing to meet the region's needs. Certain issues have been particularly emphasised: the limited nature of the resources made available to the Partnership, the institutional weakness with a real ownership problem, and the lack of commitment from Heads of State and Government.

It is highly likely that 2007 will be a transitional year in terms of Euro-Mediterranean relationships that should eventually lead towards the end of 2008 to a significant transformation of European policies during the French presidency of the EU. But for such an attempt to relaunch Euro-Mediterranean relations to have any chance of success, it is necessary for there to be no analysis errors and for the legacy of the Barcelona Process to be accepted—especially that which turns the Partnership into a project with few alternatives. As many have already come to understand, the most essential part of what was proposed by the Union to its Southern partners in 1995 was a long-term integration project, which was above all economic, inspired by the European model and which should create a common space of prosperity and freedom between the North and South. At the outset, the European Neighbourhood Policy, which clearly accepted this purpose during its launch under the formula “all but institutions”, was also understood in that light. It is true that the Barcelona Process is far from having achieved the objectives established, and a growing number of political leaders on both shores are realising this. Today people speak of the need to find alternatives or, at the very least, complementary projects to cover its deficiencies. In 2005 the debate focused on the best way of relaunching the Barcelona Process. Nothing should be done without revisiting that debate, since what is essential in terms of Euro-Mediterranean relations and the means of achieving the objectives set out in 1995 was discussed during the process that led to the Summit.

A vast intellectual heritage remains from that year, with a significant mobilisation of the civil society, which proves that Barcelona's most important achievement may precisely be having ceased to be merely a project of States. Furthermore, it is precisely at that level that the difficulties have been most significant, as shown by the absence of the Arab Heads of State at the Summit. But if today we carefully analyse the inter-governmental debate on this entire process, we realise that some have verified that Barcelona is not on a par with the region's needs. It is true that the absence of an overwhelming majority of southern Heads of State in Barcelona adds to that perception.

Most of the works conducted in the framework of the Summit's preparations already made a harsh evaluation of some of the aspects of the Partnership's ten years, but on the contrary to current criticism, it was believed that the Euro-Mediterranean framework was still the most adequate. The critics are now looking for an alternative framework. The argument is double: some consider it necessary to mobilise much more important resources than those of Barcelona for the Southern States to solve their current problems. A type of “Marshall Plan for the Mediterranean”, supported, for instance, by Luís Amado, the current Minister of Foreign Affairs of Portugal—which takes on the Union presidency during the second semester of 2007—who believes that “today's main priority for the EU is to confront the difficult situation faced by its southern Mediterranean border.” Meanwhile, during a recent intervention, Miguel Ángel Moratinos defended the creation of a Euro-Mediterranean Community. For others it would be forced to establish that the Mediterranean is, above all, a project of southern European countries and it is with them that the Mediterranean Partners can recreate the élan that enabled the Partnership to be launched in 1995. According to the new President of the French Republic, a Mediterranean Union with real institutions would be the adequate response.

All of these statements refer to the centrality of the Mediterranean problems and the depth of the crisis affecting the region. A verification that barely differs from the one made at the start of the eighties by President Mitterrand, who even then advocated the idea of holding a conference on the western Mediterranean that focused above all on economic affairs.

This verification on the economic and social situation is accompanied, as occurred back in the eighties, by a concern for the emergence of radical Islamism as the main alternative to the current regimes and problems of emigration, matter which, after all, motivated the Barcelona Summit of 2005.

It is not only desirable but also essential for the leaders of Mediterranean countries to voice the need for the Union to prioritise the region in a clearer, more unequivocal manner, but it is also necessary for them to get the remaining European members involved.

One of the most important aspects of the Union's Mediterranean policy following the fall of the Berlin Wall is that it has been developed in the framework of a common perspective, with the involvement not only of the Mediterranean countries but also of the Union as a whole. It was not accepted, nor should it have been, for Germany to focus on the East and the Southern Eu-

ropean countries on their North African and Middle Eastern neighbours. Moreover, the political statements subscribed by Mitterrand and Khol advocated the need to maintain a balance in the Union's policies between the East and South. And although it is true that the enlargement policy towards the East has concentrated the main efforts of the Union in the last decade, it is also true that during the same period the importance attributed by central and northern European countries to Mediterranean problems has increased. In 1998, Volker Perthes wrote a *EuroMeSCo Paper* with the revealing title *Germany Gradually Becoming a Mediterranean State*. Indeed, today the Union not only has a single market and currency, but also a single border. Germany's southern border is Spain's Mediterranean border, just as Poland and Estonia are Portugal's eastern borders. Proof that the EMP has become a common project was the presence of all European Heads of State and Government at the Barcelona Summit in 2005.

But one must also bear in mind the aspirations of Southern countries. There is no doubt that they all consider important the cooperation with their close neighbours, but their economic objectives—access to the European market—can only be satisfied by the Union. A meeting was held in Barcelona a few months ago that analysed the issue of Morocco's advanced status with the European Union. Many Moroccans aspire to active participation in common European policies without having to put forward the issue of membership, which they know is a simple chimera in these historic times. The "European Union" incentive continues to be a factor of political and economic transformation for certain countries including Morocco, and if this horizon disappears, eventually others will be sought, particularly in the Atlantic.

The enormous difficulties of political and security cooperation in the Barcelona Process will not be overcome in the framework of a simple Union project if no progress is made to create a Palestine State and, with it, to normalise the relationship between Israel and Arab countries. As in 1995, only a serious perspective of peace, which does not currently exist, will launch an ambitious initiative of multilateral cooperation involving all the States in the region.

It is also necessary to adequately treat the matter of Turkey. The future of Turkey's integration process is essential for Euro-Mediterranean relations. And it is so in multiple aspects. It is important to keep in mind two of them: the impact of that membership on the Union neighbouring countries and the role Ankara may play

in Euro-Mediterranean policies. The start of the negotiation process in 2005 was welcomed in countries with a Muslim majority as evidence that the Union was opening up to citizens of all religious faiths without discrimination. The uncertainty that currently surrounds the negotiation process has exactly the opposite effect: it is seen as evidence that the Union would be a Christian club. On the other hand, the Turkish equation is very simple: the more European, the more Mediterranean; the less European, the more reluctant to take part in European initiatives that may appear as alternatives to membership. The rejection of a Turkey that complies with the membership criteria would have very serious consequences for the credibility of the European project. The power of attraction of the European model would be deeply affected, as would the capacity to influence its neighbours' development. Europe must be diverse or otherwise it will cease to be the international public good that its founders hoped to build and that European leaders, despite their divisions, wish to reassert through the Berlin Declaration, which commemorates the 50 years of the construction of the European Union. A Mediterranean Union built to contain emigration would not be successful. The issue of emigration should be treated in keeping with the values of the Barcelona Declaration, of respect for human rights, and it cannot allow the proliferation of racism and xenophobia. From the outset, emigration has been regarded as a problem rather than an enormous means of progress in both the North and the South, and so far Euro-Mediterranean relations have not been capable of becoming free from that original sin that has prevented emigrants from becoming political and economic agents in regional relations.

Only the World Europe will be capable of building a Euro-Mediterranean Union. The project of a Euro-Mediterranean Community based on the values that have led to the success of European integration would certainly be a major project that would mobilise the region in coming decades. However, to be successful, it should be capable of clearly marking the objective of building a Community of Democratic States, as advocated in the EuroMeSCo report *Barcelona Plus: Towards a Euro-Mediterranean Community of Democratic States*, prepared for the Barcelona Summit.

Such an objective is incompatible with culturalist views or with a return to a purely developmental perspective that forgets the no less decisive nature of the most important political objectives of peace in the Middle East and of defence of democracy and human rights in the region.