



Euro-Mediterranean Cooperation, Between Regional Disarray and the Search for Common Interests

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Europe has vital interests in the southern Mediterranean region, such as stability or access to its markets and energy sources. The southern and eastern Mediterranean countries also have unavoidable interests in the European Union (EU): it not only represents the main trade partner, one of the main investors in the region and a major donor of funds to cooperation but is also the residence of almost eight million citizens from the southern Mediterranean. Moreover, it is the object of desire for tens of thousands of students from the southern countries that every year enrol in European universities. Despite this incredible interdependence, the relations between the EU and the southern and eastern Mediterranean countries are extremely asymmetrical and vertical, in an increasingly changing and unpredictable regional framework. In order to face these challenges, the EU has instruments and policies to strengthen cooperation with countries in the Mediterranean region. These cooperation instruments have finally prioritised the bilateral dimension to the detriment of multilateral dialogue, and have therefore diluted the Mediterranean as a regional subject in the world while gradually replacing cooperation instruments that mainly pursued human development in the region in the medium and long term with others that try to manage contingent crises in the short term.

Change of Diagnosis in the Region: New Conflicts and Asymmetrical Interdependencies¹

The tenth anniversary of the pompous Paris Summit of Euro-Mediterranean Heads of State and Government,² the first and only

summit held between EU and southern and eastern Mediterranean countries, will be commemorated in 2018. This meeting launched the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM), an intergovernmental organisation derived from the Barcelona Process that mainly promotes regional cooperation between the Euro-

1. The title and content of this article are those of a presentation delivered in the seminar *The Colonial Law in a Comparative Perspective and the Heritage of Colonialism: Crisis and Future of the European Identity* held at the University of Bologna on 19 and 20 October 2017.

2. http://ufmsecretariat.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/09/ufm_paris_declaration1.pdf



Mediterranean countries. In such a changing political, social and economic environment in the region it would be fallacious to try to link its evolution or involution with the meagre or outstanding results achieved by the UfM in these ten short years of history. What we can assert is that if there are still collateral doses of multilateralism in the Mediterranean region it is thanks to the UfM and the work promoted by its Secretariat General based in Barcelona.

The Mediterranean has substantially changed in the last twenty-five years and, in general, not for the better. Indeed, at the dawn of the launch of the Barcelona Process in 1995, the EU's diagnosis of the region was very different from the diagnosis in 2008 during the Paris Summit which, in its turn, was very different from the current one.

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Although at that time, in 1995, the most perennial conflicts in the region already existed, their nature and that of other conflicts that have emerged in the last ten years are very different. Even before the launch of the Barcelona Process, three conflicts that still exist today, with occasional escalations in tensions, could be glimpsed: the Arab-Israeli, Algerian-Moroccan, and Turkish-Cypriot conflicts. All three with geneses, developments and processes of very different intensities but with a varying impact on the development of Euro-Mediterranean regional cooperation. Despite the fact that the Arab-Israeli conflict had blocked and even floored the regional political dialogue in some episodes of the Barcelona Process and during the critical beginnings of the UfM, the three conflicts were not interconnected, and one

could be isolated from the other two, to the extent of articulating a relatively stable framework of regional order in the Mediterranean.

Since 2011, partly due to the Arab Springs but also to other dynamics and phenomena that have emerged in the region, the new conflicts and tensions are certainly strongly interrelated and generate other conflicts. Indeed, the popular uprisings from 2011 have resulted in armed conflicts in Syria and Libya which, in their turn, have placed the capacity of the Arab state to control and manage its own territory at the centre of the debate again. This has favoured the emergence of terrorism, in its own territory and neighbouring countries, and has revealed the lack of socioeconomic reforms and results that guarantee the future of the youngest generations. This, in turn, has finally enhanced the migration flows to Europe and created a crisis in some sectors of public opinion, which has strengthened the emergence of populist, xenophobic and anti-European political forces.

This happens in a context marked by a regional order that has proved to be weak and precarious, as well as by the decline of the presence in the region of the classic powers of the western world, be they the United States or some EU countries, which in turn has led to their replacement by other world or regional political powers, such as Russia, China, the Gulf countries and Iran.

This change of diagnosis in the situation of the region between 1995 and 2018 is also seen in the capacity of different initiatives gradually launched by the EU throughout this period to reduce the income difference between southern and northern Mediterranean countries and foster a regional convergence process.

There is a fertile history of asymmetrical and vertical interdependencies between northern and southern Mediterranean countries. On the one hand, 90% of interregional trade is concentrated in northern EU member countries while only 1% of trade is between southern

countries and the remaining 9% between EU and southern Mediterranean countries.³ This asymmetry has been worsened by a European policy – the European Neighbourhood Policy – that does not actively promote trade between southern countries through a free trade area at a regional level as stated by the Barcelona Process but advocates deepening the free trade agreements between the EU and each of the southern Mediterranean countries separately. In fact, it seems quite indicative that the last ministerial trade meeting held in Brussels last 19 May was the first one in eight years.

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Finally, the diagnosis is overwhelmingly disparate because in 1995, through the Barcelona Process, a positive agenda for the Mediterranean was created that consisted, of course, of permanent financial support, but above all of political dialogue, economic opportunities and rapprochement between countries and people that enabled a qualitative response to the challenges identified. However, in recent years, the response given by the EU institutions as well as some EU national governments does not lack vision about how we want to articulate relations between the EU and the Mediterranean countries in the long term but also limits the cooperation dynamics to a short-term approach that prioritises the resolution of new crises over a long-term vision to transform and develop the Mediterranean region.

All this leads me to conclude that, after over twenty years of comprehensive EU policies aimed at southern and eastern Mediterranean countries there is no room for satisfaction. Although there has been notable progress in the design and formulation of these policies, the results achieved are clearly below the expectations generated.

The Bilateralisation of the European Cooperation Instruments with the Southern Mediterranean. Where Is the Mediterranean Region?

The European institutions still lack powers to decide on specific external action policies. Indeed, security and defence policies continue to be the prerogatives of the EU member states, and even so, under the umbrella of the Treaty of Lisbon, the main European policy on the southern and eastern Mediterranean countries, the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), is a toolbox lacking the tools necessary to meet the long-standing or recent security challenges perpetuated in the region.

The necessary criticism of the EU action because of the lack of security policies in the region cannot cloud the overall opinion of the policy instruments implemented by the EU on the southern and eastern Mediterranean countries since 2004, particularly the ENP and the UfM.

The ENP, as a policy instrument conceived from the centre to the periphery, has been gradually adapting to the evolving ecosystem of southern and eastern Mediterranean countries. A first exercise was conducted in 2011 and later in 2015, with an overall review of the policy that enabled a more pragmatic adaptation between the objectives and instruments available,

3. Secretariat of the Union for the Mediterranean (2017: 13).

a more diaphanous realisation of the advocacy of EU interests and differentiated relations between the EU and each of the southern and eastern Mediterranean countries.

In fact this greater gradation of intensity in relations between the EU and the Mediterranean countries, which a priori corresponds to a logical need, insofar as each of these countries has throughout history shown a different will and interests when articulating their relations with the EU, has consequently entailed a gradual bilateralisation of relations with these countries to the detriment of a regional cooperation framework. In this respect, multilateral cooperation between countries is less effective when we allude to very asymmetrical national realities, with highly disparate interests or difficult stances, as is the case in the Euro-Mediterranean region, where even those countries that in principle share more similarities, such as the Mediterranean Arab countries, have developed disparate strategies in relation to the EU.

In this vein, since 2004, when the ENP was launched, we have witnessed a gradual deepening in the cooperative bonds in bilateral relations through different association agreements signed by the EU with almost all southern and eastern Mediterranean countries, which has not been transferred in the same way to regional cooperation. The EU institutions argue that the capacity of bilateral cooperation to resolve issues is too distanced from the regional and subregional cooperation between EU countries and those in the southern and eastern Mediterranean neighbourhood, or some of them, such as the Maghreb countries. The responsibility, in any case, is also particularly transferred to southern Mediterranean countries for not having been capable or not having wanted to decisively advance towards mutual integration and, therefore, not having been able to better conciliate as a whole the interests of the region with the EU.

For one reason or another, or both, the results in the field of cooperation and integration between southern and eastern Mediterranean countries are meagre, if not inexistent. There are some initiatives in the field of trade cooperation such as the Agadir Agreement, signed in 2004 between Morocco, Tunisia, Egypt and Jordan, and in 2016 by Palestine and Lebanon, which began to be implemented in 2007. The objective of this agreement is to advance towards the almost total elimination of all tariff and non-tariff barriers between the signatory countries, as well as developing cumulative rules of origin between these countries in order to secure preferential treatment for the entrance of goods exported to the EU.

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In any case, the instruments that the EU has been deploying and that form the core of the initiatives aimed at Mediterranean countries have not been able to come together in favour of greater integration between southern and eastern Mediterranean countries, to the extent that to date the costs derived from the lack of this integration continue to be particularly high.

The divergent reality prevails and the ENP has not prioritised among its objectives greater integration between the southern countries, even through the launch of negotiations to sign Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreements with Morocco in 2013 and with Tunisia in 2015. On the contrary, the European institutions have been strengthening their role within the UfM, which does have among its main objectives regional integration and human and sustainable development in the region. Indeed,

insofar as the initial resistance towards the UfM, as a result of how the intergovernmental organisation was conceived and launched in 2008, has been dispersing, the EU institutions have gradually recovered their central role in strengthening regional cooperation in the Mediterranean, as was already the case when the Barcelona Process took off.

In 2012, the EU took on the northern co-presidency of the UfM along with Jordan, and both the European External Action Service (EEAS) and the different directorates-general of the European Commission (EC) responsible for strengthening regional dialogue have unequally recovered their leading role in driving this process. It goes without saying that not all the EC sectors involved in this exercise are equally interested in this task and promote this initiative with the same determination. However, the EU institutions have found in the UfM a space from which to promote regional dialogue in multiple sectors and foster projects that favour regional integration.

New political conflicts and new fields have emerged with a notable regional impact and therefore they require responses that go beyond the nation-state and should be dealt with from a multilateral perspective.

Although it may seem an oxymoron and even counterproductive, one of the challenges with more scope for the UfM in the future concerns the need for politicising regional dialogue. Indeed, especially since the Paris Summit of Heads of State and Government in 2008, and given the political events that took place immediately after – the war in Gaza and the subsequent institutional blockage of Euro-Mediterranean cooperation –, the UfM has advanced at a technocratic and sectorial

level, and has relegated the issues of a more political nature.

It is obvious to acknowledge that the UfM was not created and will not be consolidated as a multilateral space for the resolution of conflicts in the region but that its foundational logic seeks to advance towards the stabilisation of the region through the improvement of human and sustainable development in the Mediterranean. Nevertheless, it is pertinent to remember that given the lack of spaces of permanent political dialogue between the Euro-Mediterranean countries, the UfM already has institutional structures and mechanisms created to favour multilateral dialogue, also in issues related to the resolution of crises in the region.

Another structural challenge of the UfM, which the EU institutions faced through the review of the ENP in November 2015, is the adaptation of the objectives and policies to a changing reality in the region, to which we referred above. Indeed, the priorities in regional cooperation in 2008, when the UfM was established, have evolved and will continue to evolve. New political conflicts and new fields have emerged with a notable regional impact and therefore they require responses that go beyond the nation-state and should be dealt with from a multilateral perspective.

In this respect, the UfM must be capable of integrating fields such as migrations, the fight against violent extremism or regional support for the Agenda 2030 for the sustainable development objectives at a similar work level as the remaining purposes identified in the 2008 Paris Declaration. To this end, during the last meeting of foreign affairs ministers held in January 2017 in Barcelona, all the UfM member states reflected some of these adaptive changes in a Roadmap,¹ but it falls to the institution itself to create the necessary conditions to carry it out.

4. <http://ufmsecretariat.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/UfM-Roadmap-for-action-2017.pdf>

Finally, it is not an empty exercise to remember the multiplicity of instruments and policies that co-exist in the cooperation between the European Union, or groups of some of its countries, and the southern Mediterranean region. This situation, which has been perpetuated since the genesis of the first European policies concerning the Mediterranean region such as the Global Mediterranean Policy (GMP), can lead to fragmentation, duplications, lack of coordination and loss of effectiveness in the pursuit of its objectives. In recent years, we have seen a growing interest from the EU in providing a more strategic vision to such a plethora of initiatives. This is why the Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign and Security Policy⁵ introduced by the EU in June 2016 attempts to give a meaning to all the initiatives and instruments under the same umbrella with the same goals.

Conclusions: Towards a Forward-Looking Vision for the Relations between the EU and the Southern Mediterranean?

Since the signing of the Treaty of Rome in 1957, all the initiatives of the European Economic Community and, later, the EU have been policies based on instruments through which the EU institutions have always taken the lead and proposed the initiatives, had financial instruments and imposed their agenda, priorities and objectives. Understandably, to some extent this has entailed reluctance and disenchantment towards these initiatives from some southern Mediterranean countries.

The Union for the Mediterranean is the only initiative that partially corrects this defect of the European dictate by working under the

principle of co-ownership that, a priori, gives equal power in the capacity of initiative and decision-making to EU and southern Mediterranean countries.

In this vein, the current exercise developed by the EU with Tunisia could go in the right direction. In the framework of a state visit in December 2016, the president of the Republic of Tunisia, Beji Caid Essebsi, offered his hand to the EU institutions to bring EU-Tunisian bilateral relations closer through the signing of an advanced partnership that could make it possible to go beyond the current association framework. The EC suggested that Tunisians should propose the characteristics of this new cooperation framework. In May 2018, Tunisia and the EU will hold a meeting of the Association Council that should not only lay the foundations of the priorities for the 2018-20 period but also address issues in the longer term concerning their relations.

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Goals and objectives must be established for the future of cooperation between the EU and southern and eastern Mediterranean countries in the long term. The only formula to continue advancing and expanding these relations is to formulate an overall vision of how we want the region to move forward and how we want the different countries and actors to cooperate and finally come together. The southern Mediterranean countries need these parameters so that their citizens continue to see in the EU

5. https://eeas.europa.eu/archives/docs/top_stories/pdf/eugs_review_web.pdf

a moral, political, economic and social reference in which it is worth combining efforts to continue cooperating. These parameters cannot overlook aspects as relevant for the socioeconomic reforms in these countries as access to the EU domestic market, the free movement of people in the region and the construction of a shared area of security and freedom. We know that these goals are not within the reach of these countries in the next ten years but we also know the costs for the future of the region of overlooking and ignoring a set of countries, and in short of societies, with which we maintain a close interdependence of interests, along with long-standing historical, cultural, social and emotional links.

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