

The State of the Union for the Mediterranean: 15 Years Later

H.E. Nasser Kamel

Secretary General

Union for the Mediterranean, Barcelona

This year, though still ongoing as I pen these lines, holds exceptional significance for the Euro-Mediterranean area. We are marking the 15th anniversary of the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM), concomitantly with Spain assuming the Presidency of the European Union, amid jarring geopolitical crises, which have further exacerbated food and energy issues in our region, and while we are still grappling with the Covid-19 pandemic's socioeconomic impacts. In line with the challenges from previous years, 2023 has not been without its complexities. In our steadfast pursuit to confront and surmount these multifaceted challenges, including the most urgent existential threat we face – the climate emergency – we are, however, armed with a timeless and effective tool for promoting peace, stability and integration: that of multilateralism and cooperation.

Looking back, I feel a deep sense of emotion as I reflect on the journey undertaken by the UfM in the past 15 years, navigating through the region's eventful, to say the least, and challenging reality. It is almost an exercise in introspection for someone like me, who experienced the creation of the UfM from within, as an Egyptian diplomat stationed in Paris in 2008, and who has taken on the responsibility of leading its Secretariat for the past five years. This year, 2023, holds crucial, even vital, importance as it allows us to conduct the exercise of gaining a realistic perspective on the achievements and challenges of the UfM, and helps us establish even stronger foundations for the years ahead. Through these lines, I will strive to provide an overarching and formative assessment of the past decade around

the region, from my professional, but also personal, point of view.

While the UfM has not yet fully achieved the goals it originally aimed for, this does not signify failure by any means; quite the opposite. Despite extremely challenging regional and international contexts, and despite our differences, the UfM has, 15 years after its launch, solidified its position by emerging as the leading multilateral institutional framework for dialogue and cooperation in the Mediterranean. The phrase “if it didn't exist, we would invent it” adopts its true meaning when evoking the organization. The reality of the region calls more than ever for multilateral cooperation, which can only achieve its full scope and potential through a structure such as the UfM.

Indeed, a decisive turning point for regional dialogue occurred in July 2008 with the Paris Summit Declaration, followed in November of the same year by the Marseille Declaration. These events marked the introduction of a more structured framework of cooperation, emphasizing co-ownership and equal footing between North and South, thus laying the foundations of the UfM as we know it today.

It is this coequal and pragmatic approach that allowed the UfM to establish itself as a regional organization that brings together 43 member states from both shores of the Mediterranean, despite their disparities, all working as one, towards a common vision. The organization encompasses not only these states, but also a growing number of institutional partners, project promoters, international financial institutions, governmental or national financial institutions, and private companies, which support the UfM's operations across three continents, two shores and one common sea. This cooperation dynamic has been the key element in minimizing the influence of the inevitable political divergences characteristic of this region. The UfM has injected new life into Euro-Medi-

terranean cooperation by introducing an unparalleled governance structure, based on principles of equality and consensus.

Today, more than a decade after Paris, the UfM has asserted itself, gradually becoming an indispensable player in Euro-Mediterranean relations. We have collectively succeeded in building trust and cultivating a culture of cooperation. As the only forum where our member states come together to discuss issues of common concern, requiring their coordination and mutual efforts, they have learned to engage in dialogue, negotiate and reach agreements. This is where much of our work lies, and it is where we have the most impact.

This ability to convene, what we like to call our “convening power,” has enabled the organization to define common goals, enhance cooperation and dialogue, and successfully work within our limited resources to promote women’s rights, stimulate regional integration, enhance connectivity between the two shores, build resilience in the face of environmental and climate emergencies, while promoting sustainable, inclusive and equitable jobs, as well as education and higher education.

I say limited resources because we need to be realistic and honest. And as the head of the organization myself, I must underline that the current situation and results are undeniably insufficient.

Therefore, it is appropriate to engage in a thorough reflection on the future prospects of the organization. In this regard, symbolic years always provide an opportunity to evaluate past achievements, while steadfastly looking forwards. Faced with the myriad challenges before us, including the consequences of climate change, biodiversity loss, pollution, growing socioeconomic inequalities, food and energy crises, water scarcity, and more, no country can address these issues in isolation. This is why a strengthened UfM is imperative. 15 years after its establishment, the objectives set for this organization remain more relevant than ever, and cooperation remains the only

path to achieving them, given that the sustainability of the region as we know it is currently at stake.

Certainly, this mission is complex, but the time is right to assert our Mediterranean ambition with vigour and give it concrete meaning that benefits all. We have a platform, and we must use it. As I am drafting these lines, the UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres stated in an interview: “*We have no power and no money. What we have is a voice, and the obligation to make it loud.*” Building on my experience of the past five years at the head of the UfM, I couldn’t concur further – as a multilateral organization, this is precisely the duty the UfM will perform in the Euro-Mediterranean region: voicing citizens’ concerns and aspirations, raising the Mediterranean’s challenges but also the solutions it carries to the global stage, and tapping into our significant collective potential for inclusive and sustainable growth.

As a result, the UfM must continue to evolve and adapt in accordance with the principles governing any organizational entity to confront present challenges, while building resilience for the future.

In response to calls from member states to review our cooperation model, operational methods and available resources to achieve established goals, the organization has embarked on a reflection aimed at optimizing our action, methodology, instruments and financial means – marking the first reform of the UfM since its launch. At a time of global tensions and multifaceted crises, we have worked on identifying common responses, building together on a positive agenda and strengthening our capacities to increase our impact and visibility across the region.

In this endeavour, I hold a deep conviction that the participation of every actor, every partner, including think tanks and action organizations such as the European Institute of the Mediterranean (IEMed), remains essential to continue building this ambitious Euro-Mediterranean community. This is precisely the mission of the UfM, just as it is the mission of this Mediterranean Yearbook.