

New Pact for the Mediterranean. The Future of Euro-Mediterranean Relations on the 30th Anniversary of the Barcelona Process

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Anniversaries often prompt reflection on both successes and shortcomings, as well as on the path ahead. The 30th anniversary of the Barcelona Declaration is no exception for EU-southern Mediterranean cooperation. It offers a timely moment to take stock – and the overall assessment remains mixed, with many challenges still unresolved.

Since the launch of the Barcelona Declaration in 1995, the European Union has aimed to build closer ties with its Southern Neighbourhood based on shared peace, economic development and cultural exchange. While the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership set out an ambitious vision, its outcomes have been uneven. For example, the untapped potential in trade between the EU and southern Mediterranean countries is significant, with unrealized trade estimated at around USD 108.6 billion – meaning that only about half of the possible export levels projected for 2029 have been achieved so far.²

Successive policy updates, including the 2015 review of the European Neighbourhood Policy, have tried to respond to persistent instability, governance challenges, economic disparities and environmental pressures in the region. Security issues and chang-

ing migration patterns have added further complexity. Acknowledging these difficulties, the EU released a Joint Communication in 2021 outlining a New Agenda for the Mediterranean that prioritized investment and financial tools and targeted projects to inject new momentum into the partnership.

Building on these efforts, the EU is currently developing a new Pact for the Mediterranean. The Pact is being co-developed by the European External Action Service (EEAS) and the newly established Directorate-General for the Mediterranean (DG MENA), which also includes a dedicated commissioner role focused exclusively on Mediterranean relations – a significant shift from the previous arrangement where southern Mediterranean countries were grouped together with the Eastern Neighbourhood under DG NEAR. This change signals the EU's intention to give greater importance to its partnerships with southern Mediterranean countries and acknowledges that cooperation with states without a membership perspective requires a different approach. At the same time, moving the Gulf countries, previously managed by the Directorate-General for International Partnerships, into the new DG reflects an updated understanding of the interconnections between the Southern Neighbourhood and its Gulf neighbours.³ It also represents a step beyond the New Agenda, which, while highlighting the need for triangular cooperation, did not provide concrete ideas on how to achieve it.

¹ The views expressed in the text are solely those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the EUISS.

² EUROMED TRADE HELP DESK. <https://euromed.tradehelpdesk.org/en>.

³ Despite Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries now being covered by the new Directorate-General (DG MENA), they will not fall under the New Pact. Instead, the EU-GCC relationship will be governed by the Joint Communication on a "Strategic Partnership with the Gulf." Individual strategic partnership agreements with individual Gulf countries are under development as well. See: EUROPEAN EXTERNAL ACTION SERVICE. "Joint Communication on a 'Strategic Partnership with the Gulf.'" Brussels: European External Action Service, 18 May 2022. www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/joint-communication-%E2%80%9Cstrategic-partnership-gulf%E2%80%9D_en.

The New Pact: What We Know So Far

While the New Pact for the Mediterranean is still being finalized, with publication expected in the third quarter of 2025, several aspects have already been outlined. It is designed as an overarching framework that will connect bilateral partnerships with broader regional cooperation between the EU and Mediterranean countries. The Pact will operate on two levels: tailored strategic agreements with individual states and regional initiatives intended to engage all willing partners. These regional efforts will focus on three main pillars: people, economy and security and resilience. Planned projects include establishing the Mediterranean University Network and advancing the Trans-Mediterranean Energy and Clean Tech Cooperation Initiative. Priority areas will also involve further developing Talent Partnerships, creating legal pathways for labour migration, while addressing irregular migration and enhancing cooperation on renewable energy, climate action and digital infrastructure. Existing bilateral arrangements – including the 2023 Memorandum of Understanding with Tunisia, the 2025 Strategic and Comprehensive Partnership with Jordan and the 2024 Joint Declaration with Egypt – will be incorporated into the Pact. The plan is also to eventually include other countries in the region, including Syria (the European Union suspended all bilateral cooperation with the Syrian government in 2011, with relations resumed following the fall of the Assad regime in December 2024).

Key Decisions Ahead: The What, the How and the with Whom

The key challenges in developing the New Pact for the Mediterranean revolve around three critical dimensions: defining clear priorities and focus areas, designing practical mechanisms to deliver them and forging effective partnerships to ensure shared ownership. These dimensions correspond to identifying what needs to be addressed, how it will be implemented through concrete projects and investment strategies and with whom this cooperation will be developed. Together, they will determine the success of efforts to move beyond declarations toward a more results-oriented, inclusive and sustainable framework for EU–Southern Neighbourhood relations.

The What

The New Pact, like any major policy initiative, represents an effort to mark a fresh start in EU–Southern Neighbourhood relations. In this case, the preparation process has been notable for its different approach to consultation: rather than asking stakeholders to respond to a draft prepared by the EU, the process began with open-ended discussions aimed at identifying priority areas and generating project ideas before any drafting took place. This more participatory, bottom-up method was intended to produce a Pact that better reflects shared interests, needs and ambitions, fostering greater buy-in from partner countries and stakeholders across the region.

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As drafting progresses, it will be essential to revisit the four cooperation sectors laid out in the Economic and Investment Plan (EIP) that accompanied the 2021 New Agenda for the Mediterranean: (i) human development, good governance and the rule of law; (ii) resilience, prosperity and digital transition; (iii) migration and mobility; and (iv) the green transition, covering climate resilience, energy and environmental sustainability. Each sector included flagship investment priorities at both national and regional levels, intended to address complex, cross-cutting challenges through targeted projects. Reviewing what has already been delivered under the EIP – and critically evaluating its actual impact – can help refine and prioritize the ideas emerging from these recent consultations. The New Pact is not starting from scratch; it has the benefit of decades of Euro-Mediterranean cooperation, offering important lessons on what has worked, what has failed and why.

Beyond investment priorities, it is equally important to consider the core themes identified in the 2015 review of the European Neighbourhood Policy. Among these were conflict prevention, counter-terrorism and

anti-radicalization – topics that, although sometimes less prominent in recent policy discussions, remain critically important given the persistent, overlapping conflicts across the southern Mediterranean. The conflict in Gaza and Russia's ongoing war against Ukraine have both had a destabilizing effect, contributing to a heightened terrorism threat within the EU by spreading extremist narratives, encouraging radicalization and fuelling violence. Meanwhile, the recent collapse of Assad's regime in Syria and the emergence of a government led by Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) have introduced new security concerns. These include questions about the new administration's ability to manage terrorist threats, the potential for foreign extremists to travel to the region and the fate of ISIS-linked detainees with EU citizenship currently held in camps in Syria.

Taken together, these dynamics present a growing medium and long-term security challenge for the EU. In addition to Islamist threats, there is also a rising risk from far-right terrorism in 2025, driven by extremists capitalizing on social tensions, deepening political polarization and anti-immigrant sentiment in western Europe. Addressing these security issues requires sustained counter-terrorism and anti-radicalization efforts, which remain shared priorities for the EU, its Southern Neighbourhood partners, and the Gulf states alike – offering scope for deeper, more effective triangular cooperation in the years ahead.

The How

The regional investment pillar of the New Pact is intended to provide a clear and structured list of concrete projects linked to each flagship or priority area. The goal is to develop initiatives with genuine region-wide scope that can engage all interested countries, delivering broader, more meaningful impact than narrowly focused, small-scale efforts. As emphasized during the consultation phase, this approach aims to encourage deeper regional integration through practical cooperation on shared projects, rather than relying solely on top-down political agreements. This vision draws inspiration from the origins of European integration itself. After World War II, the Euro-

pean Economic Community was founded on the idea that economic interdependence would reduce the risk of renewed conflict. That logic remains relevant in the southern Mediterranean, where efforts to strengthen regional integration have been a consistent, though challenging, goal since the 1995 Barcelona Declaration. By focusing on tangible, collaborative projects, the New Pact aims to overcome persistent barriers to integration by supporting “coalitions of the willing” that include both EU and southern Mediterranean partners.

However, it will be essential to clarify what will truly distinguish these new projects from the regional initiatives launched under the New Agenda for the Mediterranean. If the ambition is to scale them up, then questions about financing become even more pressing, especially since, unlike in the past, the New Pact does not come with a dedicated financial envelope. Financially, this marks a significant change in approach. While existing bilateral agreements will continue to provide support through grants, investments and concessional loans, the regional investment pillar will depend heavily on mobilizing private-sector funding.

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This reliance on private investment makes it critical to assess how effectively the New Agenda delivered on similar ambitions. That strategy aimed to leverage up to EUR 30 billion in private funds, or EUR 10 for every EUR 1 of EU spending under the NDICI – Global Europe framework.⁴ Evaluating how much was actually raised, which types of projects attracted strong investor interest and where scepticism limited private participation will be crucial – especially since these targets were already seen as both highly ambitious and potentially insufficient to meet the re-

⁴ SIDŁO, Katarzyna and COHEN-HADRIA, Emmanuel. “A new agenda for the Mediterranean: Are the EU tools and means of action up to its ambitions?” Brussels: European Parliament, Policy Department for External Policies, May 2022. [www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2022/702558/EXPO_STU\(2022\)702558_EN.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2022/702558/EXPO_STU(2022)702558_EN.pdf).

gion's complex needs. A clear understanding of these lessons will be essential to ensure the New Pact's regional investment pillar achieves its goals and delivers real, lasting impact.

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The with Whom

As already noted, the preparation of the New Pact – particularly its regional investment pillar – included extensive consultations with a wide range of stakeholders, using multiple formats. This process involved an online expert survey (conducted by the IEMed⁵), in-person discussions with think tanks, academics, civil society organizations and NGOs, as well as direct talks with governments and the private sector. The scale and breadth of these consultations is a welcome development, especially given the limited stakeholder engagement during the drafting of the New Agenda. In many ways, it recalls the more inclusive consultative process that preceded the 2015 review of the European Neighbourhood Policy. However, this consultative approach also creates a demanding task for the EU: it has set high expectations for incorporating the ideas and inputs received into the final version of the Pact. Stakeholder contributions have often been diverse – even conflicting – and, at times, unrealistic. The EU has effectively raised the bar for itself, and there will be close scrutiny of how well it manages to reflect these varied perspectives. The extent to which feedback is meaningfully integrated will directly affect the credibility of both the process and the Pact itself. At the same time, it is of course unrealistic to expect that every sugges-

tion can be adopted. Governments and citizens do not always share the same priorities, and the interests of civil society, academia and the business sector can diverge significantly. For the Pact to succeed, it will be important not only to make clear which feedback has been taken on board but also to explain why certain inputs could not be included.

Another important question is whether this extensive consultation will translate into genuine partnership and ownership in practice. The 2015 review of the European Neighbourhood Policy was also widely consulted before its launch, yet it did not lead to significantly greater ownership from southern Mediterranean partner countries. Ensuring that the New Pact avoids repeating this pattern will be a key test of its success.

The limited transparency and lack of broad stakeholder involvement in negotiating such bilateral deals stand in contrast to the more participatory approach used for the regional dimension of the New Pact

By contrast, the bilateral agreements set to be incorporated into the Pact have followed a very different path, with far more limited consultation, which has contributed to their criticism. The Memorandum of Understanding with Tunisia, focusing primarily on border security and migration management to reduce irregular migration to Europe, is a clear example, with some Member States, the European Parliament, NGOs and civil society expressing serious concerns about human rights abuses and the treatment of migrants, while its overall effectiveness remains highly contested.⁶

The limited transparency and lack of broad stakeholder involvement in negotiating such bilateral deals stand in contrast to the more participatory approach used for the regional dimension of the New Pact. This difference underscores the need for greater consistency in consultation and dialogue if the Pact

⁵ IEMed "Shaping Policy: Regional Consultation on the New Pact for the Mediterranean." *Euromed Survey*, n. 15, IEMed/EuroMeSCo, 2025. www.iemed.org/euromed-survey/shaping-policy-regional-consultation-on-the-new-pact-for-the-mediterranean/.

⁶ TOWNSEND, Mark. "EU states expressed 'incomprehension' at Tunisia migration pact, says Borrell." *The Guardian*, 18 September 2023. www.theguardian.com/world/2023/sep/18/eu-states-expressed-incomprehension-at-tunisia-migration-pact-says-borrell?utm_source=chatgpt.com; www.politico.eu/article/eu-lawmakers-parliament-fumed-by-the-european-commission-tunisia-migration-deal/.

as a whole is to deliver on its promise of fostering genuine partnership and shared ownership across the region.

Conclusions

The New Pact for the Mediterranean comes at a critical juncture, as the EU and its Southern Neighbourhood mark thirty years since the Barcelona Declaration first set out an ambitious vision of shared peace, prosperity and partnership. That original promise remains only partially fulfilled, with persistent economic disparities, security challenges, migration pressures and environmental vulnerabilities still defining much of the region's landscape. The Pact seeks to address these enduring problems not simply with renewed declarations, but by proposing a more structured, realistic and inclusive framework for cooperation.

The EU's approach reflects an evolution toward greater pragmatism and a clearer focus on shared interests – a direction that aligns with broader global trends and is often seen by partner countries as a more transparent and honest way of engaging. Recognizing the limits of what the EU can realistically deliver may initially lead to disappointment among some stakeholders, but it is vital for managing expectations and avoiding deeper frustration over time. Importantly, this pragmatic stance is not entirely new: the 2015 review of the European Neighbourhood Policy already signalled a move toward balancing interests with values and adopting a more practical, realistic approach in working with an often volatile region. The ambition for genuine co-ownership with

southern Mediterranean partners remains just as relevant – and necessary – today.

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At the same time, there remains a lack of clarity about how the New Pact will connect with the existing frameworks it is intended to build on – notably the New Agenda for the Mediterranean and its accompanying Economic and Investment Plan. Without clearer articulation of this continuity, there is a risk of fragmented or overlapping efforts. A thorough review of the New Agenda (originally envisaged as a mid-term review for 2024) would be especially valuable in drawing out lessons learned. Understanding which initiatives delivered meaningful results, and which fell short and why will be essential to ensuring that the New Pact is both credible and effective.

Ultimately, the success of the New Pact will depend on its capacity to turn consultation into genuine partnership, to balance ambition with realism and to show it has learned from past experience. Only by meeting these challenges can it deliver a more results-oriented, inclusive and sustainable basis for Euro-Mediterranean cooperation in the years ahead.