

From the Euromed to the Union for the Mediterranean: Challenges and Answers

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RÉSUMÉ

Pour relever les défis de la transition de l'accord Partenariat euro-méditerranéen à l'UPM à partir d'un point de vue arabe, cet article fait valoir que la proposition française doit partir de l'acquis du Processus de Barcelone et renforcer les aspects de cette initiative qu'il n'a pas encore été en mesure de réaliser, et qui sont clairement exposés dans la Déclaration de Barcelone. Bien qu'il soit difficile d'améliorer cette Déclaration de principes, il est possible de l'appliquer de meilleure façon. En outre, pour que l'UPM soit un succès, il est important qu'elle prenne en considération aussi bien les résultats du processus de Barcelone et les causes de ses lacunes. La tendance à réinventer à partir de zéro peut être très coûteuse.

ABSTRACT

Addressing the challenges of transition from the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership to the UfM from an Arab perspective, this article argues that the French proposal must start from the achievements of the Barcelona process and strengthen that initiative in aspects it has not yet been able to achieve, and which the Barcelona Declaration explicitly expresses. Although difficult to improve this Declaration of Principles it is possible to apply it better. Moreover, for the UfM to be a success, it is important that it takes into consideration both the results of the Barcelona process and the causes of its lacunae. The tendency to re-invent from scratch could be very costly.

Introduction

More than thirteen years ago, with the Barcelona Declaration, the ambitious Euromediterranean project was born. It brought together countries of the European Union and all those along the south and east Mediterranean shore (except for Libya)¹. Up to then, cooperation between Europe and the

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Mediterranean had developed above all within the framework of the western Mediterranean (group 5+5) and centred on the idea – never put into practice – of holding a Conference of Security and Cooperation in the Mediterranean, inspired by the European conference of Helsinki. The Mediterranean Forum also constituted a specific framework for the “Mediterranean idea”².

The reasons why the 27 member states succeeded in signing the Barcelona Declaration had to do with the international and regional framework in which the Euromediterranean process was established. In general, the new international framework that followed the collapse of the USSR and the end of bipolarity contained within it the need to restructure alliances and establish new interstate regional frameworks. The transformations experienced by the global system affected the way the principle of security was interpreted; they produced new dynamics, such as a tendency towards fragmentation in relations between states, and a strengthening of economic interdependence. Specifically, the idea had been growing for a while amongst European members, and increasingly since the Gulf War, that the stability and security of the southern Mediterranean affected them directly, and that these matters depended largely on political relations and the intensity of economic links between the two shores. There was a clear political-strategic origin to Europe’s interest, especially of southern Europe, in strengthening cooperation with its Mediterranean neighbours. Thus, the EU’s Mediterranean policy was above all the product of initiatives launched by Spain, Italy and France, similar to the way that central Europe “specialised” in questions relating to eastern European countries. For southern Europe, stability was at stake above all on the southern flank, where socio-economic and political problems that affected all its countries constituted a potentially destabilising risk.

For their part, southern Mediterranean countries hoped to secure economic and financial advantages, in addition to an external guarantee for their vulnerable governments³.

From the point of view of the wording, the Barcelona Declaration that formed the basis of the Euromediterranean process of 1995 made an important qualitative leap in tackling relations between Europe and southern Mediterranean countries in a global way, and not just from the economic perspective that had prevailed until then. It seemed that participants had become aware that the best way of stabilising the region was, in addition to supporting liberal economic reform, also advancing the democratic political process, promoting the development of civil societies and opening up areas of

cultural encounter. Europeans aspired to recover presence and leadership in a region where they had been progressively absent since the Second World War in favour of bipolar jockeying between the superpowers. The initiative also coincided with a moment of certain enthusiasm in the light of what was called at the time the Palestine-Israeli “peace process”, so that it seemed likely that closer relations with Europe could produce a momentum for political openness.

Thirteen years later, events in the Middle East region have convulsed the area and revealed a discouraging scenario of crisis and war, in which Europeans have not been able to establish a convincing presence as mediators or as forces of political influence. The Union for the Mediterranean seeks to promote the Euromediterranean dynamic by reformulating the project.

The Road Ahead

The so-called “Oslo peace process” ran into the sand as many had predicted, among them the prestigious Palestinian intellectual Edward W. Said. Not only did it reach a dead end, but subsequent developments revealed a progressive degradation in which Jewish colonisation of occupied Palestinian territories increased to an alarming degree, and the imposition of Israeli unilateralism prevailed.

The appearance of terrorism carried out by Al-Qaeda, following the attacks of September 11, 2001, radically transformed the international picture and provided American neo-conservatives with the pretext they needed to try to transform the Middle East region, which brought chaos, violence and social frustration. The results were soon evident: an acute process of destabilisation in the Middle East, the use and abuse of the fight against terrorism which increased to an alarming degree the violation of human rights and the Geneva Convention, and a strengthening of authoritarianism in Arab regimes allied to Washington. In all this profound transformation of the region, Europeans, divided, could not influence American policy against Iraq, but looked on while the US monopolised political influence and economic interests throughout the Middle East. Even in the Maghreb, a region traditionally an area of European rather than American influence, Washington asserted itself after 11 September. Algerian-American relations, focused on the anti-terrorist struggle and access to hydrocarbons in the face of the privatisation of the Algerian national company Sonatrach, strengthened in recent years. And Morocco signed a free-trade agreement with the US in 2004, which, even though it could have

produced legal incompatibilities with an agreement previously signed with the EU, the Europeans decided not to contest⁴.

From 1995 to the present, the expected processes of democratic reform have in most cases stagnated. In this sense, it should be pointed out that the primary concern of the Euromediterranean Association to stabilise the southern states (as the Barcelona Declaration stipulates: “to create a zone of peace and stability that rests on the fundamental principles of respect for human rights and democracy”), has been interpreted with little concern for the real transformations in political forms of government. The criterion of political pragmatism has been applied to concentrate mainly on promoting economic liberalisation, in accordance with the theory that this will generate profound social changes that will inevitably lead to political liberalisation. However, this theoretical framework has not produced the expected results. The human rights situation has deteriorated in some countries on the southern coast of the Mediterranean, and we could even indicate that the partnership has ended up contributing symbolically and politically to the sustainability of regimes experiencing a great democratising “impasse”. For example, article 2 of the free-trade Accords, which agree respect for human rights and civil liberties, received little attention. And even though some human rights organisations have benefited from EU financial assistance, (especially the Euromediterranean Human Rights Network), the signals have been too timid to rectify the situation.

The economy has not fulfilled all that its transformative role promised, and therefore, the economic liberalisation that was supposed to lead to the independence of economic players from politicians, to competition, transparency and the suppression of unproductive and monopolistic practices, has met with obstacles and obstructions. Privatisations have been unambitious, and there has been insufficient emergence of the expected new players. Nor have the benefits been distributed among the people. The number of people who live on a dollar or two a day, and those who are below the poverty line has grown since the 1990s in the southern Mediterranean and the average income of every social layer has descended notably. Given that this increase in poverty has been accompanied by an increase in GNP per capita, everything seems to indicate that inequalities in the distribution of wealth have increased, and that one section of the population is becoming richer while the other, the majority, gets poorer⁵.

In the commercial sector, trade levels have varied little, and North-South

trade continues to be unbalanced. In general, the unstable political situation throughout the area weakens the practical extent of free trade agreements.

With regard to the hoped-for south-south cooperation, this continues to be embryonic. The historical concept of north-south economic relations, which structured the economies and trade flows of the south in accordance with European needs and not their complementarity, the enormous political distance between regimes, and their resistance to flexible frontiers permitting free movement for their nationals, are significant factors that continue to block south-south cooperation. In large part they are related to the internal problems of these states, which need to exert strict control over their citizenry⁶.

Semi-reforms undertaken have been modest, and privatisations insufficient. An enormous public sector continues to exist, and the private sector has not succeeded in crossing the threshold necessary to launch the momentum of private accumulation and strong sustained growth⁷.

Similarly, the weak level of direct foreign investment in the Mediterranean region is worrying, given that the concept of the Euromed association explicitly lays upon the private sector the responsibility to be the motor or “privileged instrument” of the sought-after convergence between the two shores “in the framework of a free trade zone” (and only 5% of European flows directed at emerging countries are directed at the total of the Mediterranean countries). Why is this region less attractive than others in the world that are no better provided with human and natural resources? Everything seems to indicate that it is due to a problem of poor working practices and lack of confidence: lack of social cohesion, unstable political systems, lack of transparency and juridical security, rigidity of the labour market and illiteracy).⁸

The limited success of the economic transition is perhaps not unrelated to the contradiction on which the concept of putting democratisation at the service of economic liberalisation is based. For this way traditional groups are politically favoured, elites that perpetuate themselves in power and enjoy economic privileges by means of their control of the country's income. These groups are the most likely to be weakened by transparency, the market economy, the institutionalisation of commercial exchange, and the emergence of new autonomous elites. They cannot, therefore, (because it is intrinsically against their interests) be motor of the structural economic change necessary for the European theory to work. That is, they have tried to square the circle by attempting to promote “reforms without reformists”.

It should also be added that the social dimension of the Euromediterranean association has not achieved the necessary development (the ministers of employment, social affairs and labour have almost never met). Social matters have received a little more attention through bilateral MEDA cooperation, but that operates rather as a lifeline for those most disadvantaged by structural adjustment. Even so, rationalising and guaranteeing popular access to this aid is made very difficult because of inefficient local management and clientelist distortions.

Simultaneously, it should not be forgotten that in March 2003, the EU introduced its New Neighbour Policy, established on the basis of its enlargement to 25 countries⁸. This new policy, despite integrating the Mediterranean flank, is based on a general view that includes all the areas that the neighbours of the EU comprise, which has not reinforced the Euromediterranean policy⁹.

A “Selective” Civil Society

The Barcelona Declaration established the principle of “contributing to a better mutual understanding among the peoples of the region, encouraging the emergence of a new active civil society.” Various initiatives have been carried out to create networks (for human rights, trade unions, cultural activities, youth...) and 10 civic forums have been held, together with numerous regional conferences and cooperation programmes. But this interest in developing civil society has favoured, apart from organisations linked to governments, secular or lay sectors. These, without doubt, are a qualitatively important component in these societies, but they are a minority and not very representative of the broad network of associative movements. Faced with this, all the various associative movements of Islamic or Islamist character have remained at the margin of the process, despite having an active presence in the social texture of Arab countries.

In reality, there is an entire world linked to the Islamic movement (*al-Haraka al-Islamiyya*) that is an extremely significant political and social component in today's Arab public arena, and which has not been taken into account by the Euromediterranean partnership.

In political terms, all this leads us to pose two important questions. First, the need to build a credible political process that satisfies the great aspirations for democracy and the rule of law that exist among peoples of the southern

Mediterranean, bearing in mind that their frustrations in this regard open up risks of radicalisation and identification with extremist options, especially amongst the large young population. Secondly, the participation of Islamist parties in these processes of democratisation. In this sense we must make clear that the Islamist tendency, which constitutes a political train of thought present throughout the contemporary history of the Middle East, is represented mainly by reformist parties respectful of the law and explicitly against violence.

The long term problem lies in the dominant view of Islamism in general that is based on the selection and media exaggeration of either the supporters of a fundamentalist discourse, or the most radical and extremist sectors. The predominant application of these criteria of selection of Islamic actors has hidden or silenced the majority of Islamist parties that are situated in reformist currents occupying the enormous central area usually concealed between fundamentalists and the people of violence. On the contrary, they form an important component of the socio-political landscape that cannot be left to one side or excluded, not only because this is contrary to the universal rights that secularised sectors demand, but because, furthermore, history shows that the costs of marginalising them are very high¹⁰.

In the heat of pondering the need to promote democracy in North African and Middle Eastern countries, the subject has become increasingly significant in international diplomacy: the EU's foreign affairs ministers presented for the first time at an informal meeting in Luxemburg on April 16, 2004, a report for discussion drawn up jointly by Javier Solana, responsible for the EU's foreign policy, and by Luxemburg's EU presidency. The report asked whether the moment had come to open dialogue with moderate Islamist opposition groups to encourage the democratic transition. The report said "up to now the EU has preferred to deal with the secular intelligentsia of Arab civil society at the expense of more representative organisations inspired by Islam," and it asked: "has the moment come for the EU to become more involved in the civil society with an Islamic base in those countries?". The question has without doubt entered the debate and the process of reflection, but has not taken shape at any practical level¹¹.

Cultural Factors

In general the Euromediterranean process has had little repercussion in public opinion, where above all relations between governments hold sway. The well known concern about the "dialogue between civilisations" has taken shape

in various inter-religious encounters in the form of big one-off conferences bringing together ulemas, rabbis and bishops. We have to ask whether these are really the fundamental players in the social and cultural breakdown in communication that exists in the Mediterranean basin.

It is true that positive steps have been taken in some areas, such as the creation of the Euromediterranean Human Rights Network. This has become a laboratory of vigilance that does not fail to denounce abuses and violations, independently from the limited influence it exerts over political authorities on the subject; and the initiative taken in 2003 to carry out a critical reflection within the framework of a “committee of wise men” on the “Dialogue among peoples and cultures in the Mediterranean area”. The report of proceedings offers an interesting analysis of the nature of communication and interchange in the Mediterranean and global political context.

However, the silence that greeted the report converted it into an exercise of good intentions whose demands and proposals were not taken into account by politicians. Subsequently the Anna Lindh Foundation for Dialogue between Cultures was created, with its headquarters in Alexandria, whose results have still not been evaluated given its relatively recent establishment, but which, in any case, conflict with the challenge of developing an effort to integrate plural and independent actors, since it is led by political representatives of the respective governments.

But in these times, the current difficult situation, marked by the extension of the terrorist phenomenon and by an exaggeration of the binary view of “us” and “them”, which seems to distance each other more than ever, demands important actions to help eliminate violence and social misunderstanding. This means confronting the real problems and challenges that afflict the region and which are present in the wording of the scarcely applied Barcelona Declaration.

No security apparatus, however efficient, can predict every attack planned by people prepared to die killing. Hence, any security response must be accompanied by a genuine opening of the political system and greater equality of socio-economic opportunities if we want to minimise the risks of terror attacks and instability. There is an enormous new generation of young people (60% of the total Arab population is under 20) alienated from political systems of patronage that exclude them and block possibilities for promotion in society or at work. Amongst this segment of the population the demand for the rule of law is a constant feature¹².

Similarly, the EU wants to involve itself in solving conflicts and tensions in this part of the world, aware that the proximity of a geo-political complex like the Middle East in acute crisis of stability and with high rates of underdevelopment implies an enormous challenge for the European area itself. But the evident lack of a common foreign policy prevents it from fulfilling this desired role. Meanwhile, the passage of time imposes a worrying situation, because societies with an accumulated sense of being humiliated, punished and subjected to arbitrary behaviour form a bad combination to avoid violent outcomes, and establish stability in a region with explosive contexts (Palestine, Lebanon, Iraq, Iran). We must bear in mind, furthermore, the particular framework in which this frustration has taken root and which makes it socially more complex. On the one hand, Arab and Muslim populations are mostly urban, and the extensive new generation of young people has had massive access to education, so we are dealing with societies where a substantial social sector is highly politicised. On the other hand, they have a collective memory acutely attuned to belonging to a specific part of the world (cradle of great civilisations, strategic situation of great geopolitical value, and the accumulation on their soil of the main sources of the world's hydrocarbons) which should give them influence and wellbeing, but whose benefits have remained for more than a century completely outside their control. All these sociological and psychological factors produce the reaction to which the most vulnerable sectors of these societies are exposed.

Another important component to bear in mind is the importance of strengthening the good functioning of structures and institutions, instead of choosing *a priori* players or leaders. We should not try to construct the perfect pro-Western, secular Arab man in the way that has become almost a caricature that often determines the desired aims of political decisions. This kind of intrusion has always produced disastrous and counterproductive results. We should promote transparent mechanisms of government and management, competitive and subject to law, independently of whether those who represent them belong to secular or Islamist circles. The citizens of the countries concerned are those who must plan their own future, choosing their representatives and the movements and political parties in which to place their confidence.

And, which is fundamental, we must break this dichotomy between “us” and “them”, because it represents nothing more than a narrow view of extremes, concealing an entire majority centre in which we are all mixed and interconnected. It is not a question of trying to bring together cultural world

views but establishing the principle that common civilisational values exist, which we have all historically contributed to forging, and which we must jointly share. Barbarism and civilisation exists on both sides. That's why it is necessary to advance towards an ethical and moral reconciliation between the western and the Muslim world, leaving aside feelings of cultural superiority that serve political domination. Culture has been used many times in history to strengthen hegemonic policies. The more that discourses about cultural and religious incompatibility are broadcast, and the supposed existence of monolithic and isolated civilisations, the more politics becomes bare-faced and oppressive: precisely to conceal the second from the first.

In reality, the roots of the misunderstanding lie in the abyss that exists between mutual perceptions. Western societies have been obsessed with the cultural and religious “problem”, seeking in Islam the explanation and *raison d'être* for everything that happens in the so-called Muslim world, as if it worked in an exceptional way with regard to the rest of the world, simply because they are Muslims. This is the specifically western “veil” that characterises our societies today, and which prevents them from understanding the profound political, social and economic reasons for what happens in the neighbouring countries of the south. However, what determines the attitude of the Arab and Muslim social majority towards Europe and the western world are its political actions, which are often arbitrary.

Therefore, the French proposal for a Union for the Mediterranean has not only launched the debate about Euromediterranean relations, but must start from the achievements of the Euromediterranean process and strengthen that initiative in aspects it has not yet been able to achieve, and which the Barcelona Declaration explicitly expresses. It is difficult to improve this Declaration of Principles but it is possible to apply it better. That is: “for the Union for the Mediterranean to be a success, it is important that it takes into consideration both the results of the Barcelona process and the causes of its lacunae, given the ambitious programme of the initial process. The tendency to ‘start from scratch’ could be very costly”¹³.

NOTES

1. Since the Marseille summit of 16 November 2000, Libya took part as an observer. However, it rejected full membership, as it did with the UfM.
2. The Mediterranean Forum was created as an informal and flexible structure for “selected” Mediterranean countries (Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Egypt, Turkey, Malta, Spain, France, Italy, Portugal and Greece) to come together to tackle the main questions affecting security and cooperation in the region. It grew from a proposal presented by Egypt to Spain and France in early November 1992 and was finally constituted in Alexandria in 1994. In addition to forming part of this dynamic of Euromediterranean cooperation, it was also, as Egypt’s proposal, linked to changes in foreign policy experienced by Egypt following the end of the bipolar world order. See in this respect Gema Martín Muñoz, “L’Egypte dans l’échiquier arabe face au mouvement islamiste”. *Hérodote. Revue de géographie et géopolitique*, 77, 1995, pp. 142-174.
3. See Gema Martín Muñoz, *El Estado Árabe. Crisis de legitimidad y contestación islamista*. Barcelona, Bellaterra, 2000.
4. G. Clyde & C. Brunel, *Maghreb Regional and Global Integration: A dream to be Fulfilled*. Peterson Institute for International Economics. Policy Analyses in International Economics, No. 86, October 2008.
5. Sophie Bessis, “Où en est le projet euro-méditerranéen dix ans après Barcelone?”. *Revue Internationale et Stratégique*, No. 59, Autumn 2005, pp. 129-137.
6. A schematic but detailed analysis of these shortcomings was presented in the outline paper of Azzam Mahjoub, “Dinamiques bilaterales et multilaterales. Quelles synergies ?”, seminar *Barcelona 2010. Euromediterranean relations*, ISS, Paris, 26 January 2009.
7. Gérard Kébabdjian, “Réformes économiques sans projet réformateur”. *Confluences Méditerranée*, 35, 2000, pp. 25-40.
8. Juan Badosa, “La cooperación económica desde la perspectiva de los países del Norte del Mediterráneo”. *II Foro Euromediterráneo de Formentor*. Edición de la Fundación Repsol, Madrid, 2001.
8. Comisión Europea, *L’Europe élargie et voisinage: un nouveau cadre pour les relations avec nos voisins de l’Est et du Sud*, March, 2003.
9. Roberto Aliboni, “The Geopolitical Implications of the European Neighbourhood Policy”, *European Foreign Affairs Review*, Vol. 10, No. 1, 2005, pp. 1-16.
10. Driss al-Yazami, “Ways and Conditions for the Participation of the Civil Society of Religious Inspiration in the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership” in *Bringing the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership Closer to People*, Friederich Ebert Stiftung, 2006.
11. K. Kausch, “Plus ça change: El diálogo directo de Europa con los islamistas moderados”, *Working Paper*, No. 75, FRIDE, January 2009.

12. See surveys conducted since 2003 by *The Pew Research Center for the People and the Press*.
13. “Union pour la Méditerranée. Le potentiel de l’acquis de Barcelone”, *ISS Report*, No. 3, November 2008, p. 6.