

The Union for the Mediterranean: The Difficulty of ‘Managing Proximity’

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At a time when regional integration was on the rise, the Mediterranean Region was like an orphan until the Barcelona Process appeared in 1995. The agreement was signed to create a balance between the northern and southern shores of the Mediterranean by creating a zone of peace and security. Yet in the space of a decade, the project, so welcomed at the start, had demonstrated its limits.

In 2007, Nicolas Sarkozy took note of this and proposed an ambitious Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP) project. In the face of objections expressed by certain EU Member States, the French initiative was ‘Europeanised’ and maintained continuity with the Barcelona Process. The aim of this new project has thus become rather opaque, all the more so since the obstacles that led to the failure of the latter have not disappeared, indeed, quite to the contrary. What remains of the French project? Should it be considered a short-lived utopian idea or a real challenge to be met insofar as the imperatives to be handled in this region are important?

The Need to Go Beyond the Barcelona Process

Evoking the need to go beyond the agreement signed in 1995 in the Catalan capital does not imply denying its strong points or its contributions.

In any case, conceived of in the context of the 1990s and after the Oslo Accords (1993), the evolution of the project was to reveal imbalances that were to grow ever greater, first among the Process’ three baskets, and secondly, between the partners on either

side of the Mediterranean. Decisions were made in Europe and had the value of norms for the ensemble of signatories.

This lack of symmetry became visible in the first decade of the new millennium, following the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 in the USA. The greater visibility can be attributed to three essential factors: increasing US presence in the region; the implementation of a neighbourhood policy often detrimental to the Southern countries; and the lack of progress in finding solutions to regional conflicts, the most significant being the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

The project thus seemed to be at variance with both its initial intention and the expectations of the different populations, in particular those of the South.

Considering the obvious disappointment arising therefrom, the project proposed by Nicolas Sarkozy, which aimed at “breathing new life into the Barcelona Process” thus seemed opportune insofar as substance, though maladroit with regard to method.

This new project could indeed find its *raison d'être* in the need to reduce the enormous gap in development between the countries on either shore. After the fall of the Berlin Wall, Europe turned towards the East, neglecting its Southern neighbours. The French project at first intended to correct this imbalance and prevent a conflict between Islam and the West, in particular on the definition of universal values.

In order to attain these two objectives, those having conceived of the French project, the advisors to the Head of State, with Henri Guaino in the fore, thought their plan would succeed in avoiding the major obstacles that the 1995 Process had run up against: absence of commitment to searching for a solution to regional conflicts (Israeli-Palestinian, Western Saharan, Turkish and Lebanese-Syrian conflicts); political governance problems in nearly all of the South Shore Countries; difficulty in containing terrorism; poor circulation of people and products, in particu-

lar agricultural ones, within the region; and lack of involvement of the civil society in the project.

Yet beyond these factors, well-known and often put forth, there are others, less often admitted, but which obstructed the Barcelona Process just as much. First of all, the Southern Countries were not willing to modify their form of governance. For the elite in place, there was no connection between the economic development expected from this project and their political practices. Moreover, very few countries truly conceived a development project. And finally, for the South Mediterranean Countries, the Barcelona Process did not constitute the appropriate framework for finding solutions to regional conflicts.

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By the same token, it is a fact that the EU has always failed to build a truly common policy with regard to its neighbours to the south, despite the geographical proximity, historical and cultural ties and the presence of a large immigrant community on EU territory. For the EU Member States, closing the southern borders would necessarily protect the northern Mediterranean shore from the arrival of illegal migrants and terrorism. This political position takes no account whatsoever of the antiquity and intensity of relations that have created networks of solidarity criss-crossing borders.¹

Above and beyond the grievances that one could impute to the countries in the North or South, there is also the fact that, in both cases, the political elite were unable to cease bilateral relations to the benefit of the multilateral relations advocated by the Barcelona Process. In this regard, it is not the Process that was to blame, but its application. On both sides

of the Mediterranean, the political elite lacked political audacity in applying the clauses. They feared that a drastic change might upset their relations.

In any case, these underlying causes of the Process' stalemate have been carefully concealed. For the sake of political and intellectual convenience, the regularly expressed argument to explain the stalemate was the worsening of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the impossibility of reinitiating talks between Israelis and Arabs.²

For all of these reasons, whether real or declared, ten years after it was launched, the Barcelona project no longer met the expectations of the Member States. On 27-28 November 2005, the summit that was to mark the Process' 10th anniversary was boycotted by the majority of Heads of State and Government from the South Mediterranean Countries. Only the Turkish Head of State and the President of the Palestinian Authority attended, along with the EU members.

France and its Neighbours to the South

It is in the context of this crisis in North-South Mediterranean relations that Nicolas Sarkozy proposed a new project, which he generally described at Tangier on his visit to Morocco in the autumn of 2007. In its initial version, the project undeniably expressed a certain number of specifically French concerns. It is true that, even more so than other European countries, France cannot ignore its southern neighbours due to their geographical proximity, a common past involving colonialism and the presence of a significant Maghrebi community that has been living in France for many years, and nearly half of which has French nationality today (approximately 3 million). Add to this links of a cultural order which bring the Maghreb even closer to France, as well as highly significant economic connections. These diverse factors have created very strong, particular ties between the two.

France felt it needed to redefine its relation with the countries of this region in order to turn over a new leaf after colonialism, while retaining an influence in an area coveted, in particular, by the United States. Paris thus had to rethink its ambitions and policy while

¹ Jean-Robert Henry. "La nouvelle question méditerranéenne," *Questions internationales*, No. 31, La Documentation Française, Paris, May-June 2008.

² Khadija Mohsen-Finan. "L'Union pour la Méditerranée : une ambition française de reconsidérer la Sud," Policy Paper, *Europe Visions* No. 3, IFRI, Brussels, December 2008. www.ifri.org

considering how to protect its interests in a globalised system that allowed the emergence of new actors such as China or Japan.

However, at the start of the 21st century, despite the intensity of historical ties, relations between Paris and the Maghreb have been marked by crises with Algiers and a sort of 'paternalism' vis-à-vis the Moroccan royal family, hardly conceivable from a perspective of international relations. The climate thus needs to be stabilised and these relations set within a more neutral framework with regard to the two major Maghreb countries. This neutrality is all the more difficult, since any diplomatic action judged as benevolent towards one of the two countries is interpreted as an aggression towards the other. This 'political paranoia,' whose roots lie in decolonisation, complicates political relations.

The tensions that have recurrently appeared over the past few years between France and Algeria essentially go back to historical reasons and divergences existing on the conception of the friendship project proposed by Jacques Chirac in 2003, which was never followed up.

This episode reveals the inability of both parties to come to an agreement and join forces to write a common past dispassionately. The historians who undertook this task have been interrupted, the political leaders believing they could stand in their stead. According to the official version, the French textbooks on the colonial period lend no space to the colonised peoples. Attesting to this is France's 23 February 2005 law on the positive nature of colonisation, perceived as a glorification of a terribly dark, difficult period for Algeria.

In reality, this law was but a pretext revealing the state to which relations between the two countries had fallen. These longstanding poor relations were fuelled by the issue of visas, considered of the utmost importance, since it prevents the circulation of peoples, whereas the circulation of ideas and, above all, products, is highly encouraged.

Without yielding to repentance or apologising to Algiers, Paris had to redefine relations, and the regional framework seemed ideal for overcoming the French-Algerian standoff.

The initial version of the project was at once strong and ambitious. Strong, because it took into consideration history, the area of primary concern and the shortcomings of the existing Process. Ambitious, because its aim was to balance two neighbouring regions that are interdependent in many respects.

Moreover, it was perceived as a project embodying the French desire to correct the Atlantic-oriented image attributed to Nicolas Sarkozy, and as a signal sent by France to the Arabic world –beyond the Maghreb– to indicate that France's friendliness towards Israel did not at all imply a lack of commitment towards it, whether the issue be the Syrian-Lebanese crisis or Israeli-Palestinian conflict. And finally, many saw this project as a political framework for Ankara, should Turkey not accede to the EU.

New North-South Relations

Beyond France's specific reasons for redefining relations between the two geographical and cultural areas, there are also factors concerning the ensemble of EU countries that were certainly taken into account in establishing this new project.

Indeed, the Mediterranean is the only area in the world where the gap between two shores is so wide. In terms of GDP, the difference is on a scale of one to ten, with an average of 30,000 dollars per inhabitant in the north shore countries as compared to only 3,000 on average in the south shore countries. According to the analysts of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), some 40 million jobs would have to be created by the year 2020, on the other side of the Mediterranean, for the current unemployment rate not to rise, considering the demographic growth in these countries.

Naturally, these figures, which show the imbalance between the two shores, are well known and various policies have been adopted and institutions created to mitigate this: the Euro-Arab Dialogue (European Economic Community and the Arab League) up until 1980, the 5+5 Dialogue launched in 1990 for multilateral cooperation on Western Mediterranean security issues, then the Conference on Security and Cooperation in the Mediterranean was held in 1991, the Mediterranean Forum in 1994 on the initiative of France and Egypt, the Barcelona Process in 1995, and finally, the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), created in 2002 to accelerate the integration of Eastern European countries, before being expanded to include the Mediterranean countries in order to strengthen bilateral cooperation initiatives.

For Nicolas Sarkozy, these institutions were useful in the past but are insufficient today; hence the idea of changing the method to go further and bring the Mediterranean as a whole back to the heart of

European geopolitics, relying on the coastal countries, which are the ones with the greatest interest in balancing the two shores.

Considered in its initial format, the project seemed all the more attractive because it intended to associate the countries of the South with the definition of a content that was left deliberately vague. But despite its allure, the project's application revealed two factors that seemed to have been neglected by Paris. On the one hand, France broke away from the EU countries, with which it had been engaged in the Barcelona Process, and on the other hand, the project did not sufficiently take into account the capacity of the Southern countries to act as real partners.

The 'Europeanisation' of the French Project

How can a regional Euro-Mediterranean project be conceived of without consulting the EU countries? Whatever the force of its project, by acting alone, France was implicitly imposing its leadership on the whole of the area concerned. The absence of consensus with Madrid or even Berlin was considered a will to marginalise the actors of the Barcelona Process and keep Germany away from the Mediterranean Region in order to launch a competing project directed by Paris. In order to prevent accusations and indictments, Spain quickly proposed turning the French initiative into a continuation of the Barcelona Process by considering it as 'Barcelona Plus'. Instead of the difference of nature imagined and sought by the Élysée Palace, Spanish Foreign Minister Miguel Ángel Moratinos counter-proposed a difference of degree. But it was the German position that was the determining factor for the project's future.

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Berlin opposed the project for two essential reasons: because the latter excluded the European countries not bordering the Mediterranean, and because it could contribute to dividing the EU. For Germany and other

countries such as Denmark, if the project is European, it must concern all EU countries. France, which could not turn its back on the EU countries on the eve of its term in the EU Presidency, thus had to reach a compromise.

During a meeting in Hanover in March 2008, a jointly developed text was submitted to the European Council. This document, which allowed 27 EU Member States and the European Commission to join the project, proposed the creation of a Union for the Mediterranean (UfM), conceived according to the German Chancellor as "an EU project with the South Mediterranean Countries."

It therefore consisted of extending the Barcelona Process by lending it new impulse. The only thing remaining of the French project is the ambition of organising the Euro-Mediterranean space in another way. The main change between the two projects resides in a greater symmetry between the North and South Mediterranean partners. The latter were invited to define the content and two new bodies were created to materialise their participation: the Presidency and the Secretariat of the UfM.

This Secretariat, which was in principle to be hosted by a country in the South and piloted by a significant individual from the South, was to play a very important role in the new organisation. It is indeed in charge of supervising cooperation projects and the replacement of the Euromed Committee by a meeting of high government officials and a joint Standing Committee. It shall deal with 'concrete projects' instead of defining general spheres of cooperation. These projects are relative to the de-pollution of the Mediterranean Sea, the development of maritime and land highways and the establishment of a Mediterranean energy market, activities already underway as part of the EMP, such as the Horizon 2020 programme. By the same token, the intention of making a clean sweep of all existing programmes was replaced by the continuation of activities already underway as part of the Barcelona Process, but henceforth gathered together under a single programme.

Though the projects are not wholly new, and the spheres covered are more or less the same, the institutional framework is not. The conclusions of the past few Euro-Mediterranean Ministerial Conferences already anticipated them and the co-presidency system is a French wish dating back several years now.³

³ See the conclusions and recommendations of the fourth, seventh and eighth Euro-Mediterranean Conferences, held respectively in Marseille (15-16 November 2000), Luxembourg (30 May 2005) and Tampere (27-28 November 2006).

In this case, to what extent are we really dealing with a new project? The continuation of a project, upon whose ruins the French project was to rise, creates a real problem of readability. On the pedagogical level, how can one explain to the civil society of the countries on both sides of the Mediterranean that one wishes to unite that this project is not fundamentally different from the one repudiated to justify the launching of the French project? What measures does the new project plan to undertake in order to overcome the obstacles encountered by the Barcelona Process?

Avoiding the Pitfalls of the Barcelona Process

To overcome the stalemate and create an area of peace and prosperity, a number of conditions seem requisite. Whatever the nature of the issues to be handled (de-pollution of the sea, education and so on), they should be pursued with a political will and debated on a popular level on both sides of the sea, which was never the case within the framework of the Barcelona Process.

On the economic level, we know how great the challenge is, given the difference in development levels between the countries along the north and south shores. To reduce the gap in standard of living, the EU has granted aid to substantial development, whether within the framework of EC policy or through bilateral relations, yet disregarding the matter of good governance in the States concerned. Though the clauses exist regarding cross-compliance, they have never been applied.

In any case, development assistance in the sphere of good governance cannot be limited to financial aid. In the South Mediterranean countries, the problem is not necessarily nor in all cases a lack of resources, but much more so poor governance (unequal distribution of wealth, machine politics, corruption and the like). On this fundamental issue, the UfM has included no particular clause.

These matters of governance complicate the symmetry between the two shores. The countries in the South experience numerous difficulties in being treated as full partners qualified to hold sway in decisions and define the content of a regional project together with the Europeans. This role as partners implies that they are at once co-financers and producers of ideas or counter-proposals. Apart from one

or two countries, the south shore is in a highly precarious situation: changing economies, populations primarily composed of youth struggling to find their place within a globalised world and at times in their home countries. These countries, moreover, are experiencing new forms of insecurity with the consolidation of radical Islam, which has allied itself to Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb.

There is also weak social mobility, an absence of Rule of Law and a supremacy of nationalist ideals that prevents them from perceiving the advantages of building an integrated region. As long as Rule of Law is deficient, the business community will continue to sanction the poor governance of these countries by refusing to invest in markets where there is no security for economic transactions. These difficulties are also related to the poor quality of both legal systems and policies for attracting and following up on investment.

Other factors render the implementation of this Union likewise difficult. They relate to an absence of trust among the countries on either shore. For the political elite of the South, the EU countries are concerned about nothing but their own interests. The projects accepted by the European Commission on 20 May 2008 go to prove this, as they did not correspond to any of the immediate priorities, whether they be de-pollution of the sea, the development of solar energy or cooperation on issues of protection against natural disaster. For the South, the Europeans wish first and foremost to sell off their products and consolidate their market shares in South Mediterranean countries, while curbing immigration and terrorism. Yet a climate of trust is also terribly lacking among the countries of the South, divergences and conflicts continuing to weigh upon diplomatic relations.

Though the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is often cited, it is not the only one. The issue of Cyprus has not been settled, and the political conflict between Damascus and Beirut, the problem of Western Sahara and, more generally, relations between Algiers and Rabat are some of the dissensions that could jam up the UfM.

Despite all of these obstacles, it must be kept in mind that this regional dynamic is absolutely necessary for both shores. The South has no other project for entering the globalised world and catching up with other regions. With regard to Europe, it must also be concerned with the countries bordering it to the South, as Germany has been with Eastern Europe and the United States with Latin America.