

# The EU's Perspective of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership in 2008

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To say that 2008 was a year of change for the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership would be an understatement. This evolution actually started during 2007, when the Mediterranean emerged as one of the issues in the French presidential campaign. Ideas were circulating about innovative ways to address this crucial and sensitive region lying on our doorstep, attracting a great deal of interest among those of us who have been involved in Euro-Mediterranean issues for a number of years. The Barcelona Process, though certainly not the failure some have depicted it to be, appeared to have run out of steam. It was a good time to re-package the initiative and to give it a new focus.

The early months of 2008 saw intensive discussions within the EU on how to adapt to this new way of thinking and how to manage it in a manner that was compatible with the EU's own existing policies. This initiative stressed citizen-oriented projects in various fields, including energy, infrastructure, environment, higher education and others. It removed the emphasis on a political process, which was too frequently compromised by the many troubles that plague this region, premier among them the Arab-Israeli conflict. At the European Council in March 2008, the EU approved the principle of a Union for the Mediterranean to include the Member States of the EU and the non-EU Mediterranean coastal states.

The Paris Summit of 13 July 2008 was a very significant diplomatic event. Of course, it saw the launch

of the Union for the Mediterranean, which is essentially the next phase of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership. It was, however, much more than this. We witnessed bilateral meetings between the Presidents of Syria and Lebanon, signalling the start of a historic normalization between these two states. The importance of the event was such that the leaders of Syria and Israel overcame their differences, even if only for a few hours, to be present together at this meeting. Crucial exchanges were held between the Heads of Government of Israel and Palestine. In Paris, I was privileged to be present when the leaders of 43 countries committed themselves to revitalizing efforts to transform the Mediterranean into an area of peace, democracy, co-operation and prosperity, building on the *acquis* of the Barcelona Process. The Paris Declaration gave a new impulse to the Partnership by upgrading the political level of the relationship (including by introducing summits every two years), by increasing co-ownership (primarily by introducing a system of co-presidency) and, as mentioned earlier, by focusing on concrete projects. The Heads of State and Government entrusted their Ministers of Foreign Affairs with the task of setting out the modalities required to implement these principles.

The Ministers, meeting in Marseille in November 2008, elaborated these ideas further. It was agreed that a secretariat would be set up in Barcelona to manage the projects. In furtherance of the spirit of co-ownership, this body would be headed by a Secretary General from a Mediterranean Partner Country. It was felt that the new approach would place too much of a burden on the monthly Senior Officials meetings, and therefore a new Brussels-

based body, the Joint Permanent Committee, was set up to assist these Ambassadors in the running of the process.

There has been no shortage of challenges. The first few months after the Paris Summit were consumed by a controversy over the status conferred by the Declaration on the League of Arab States. That was resolved in time to allow the Marseille meeting to go ahead. Unfortunately, only a few weeks later the Israeli military operations in Gaza and, subsequently, the election of a new government in Israel led to a freeze in proceedings that has persisted, more or less, until now.

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There have been efforts to re-engage. I participated in a political dialogue meeting with the 43 states on 23 April, in an attempt to bring the parties to the

table. That meeting was, in itself, a success because the various delegations could express their views and feelings on the events of the previous weeks. Nevertheless, the time was not right to formally resume the regular schedule of meetings and events. I understand that some informal work has been able to go ahead in relation to the drafting of statutes for the new secretariat. It is important that, even if there are valid reasons to make a political statement, the entire process is not put at risk.

It is ironic that while an attempt was made to unhook the Partnership from the political obstacles, we find ourselves hampered by these issues in a way we had not been before. I am optimistic that as the situation in the region improves, we can put these difficult times behind us and concentrate on the main objectives of this initiative. There is a great deal of potential that we cannot afford to squander.

Irrespective of these problems, I feel that there is a great deal to look forward to. After the excitement of 2008, we need to flesh out the noble ambitions of this project and start ensuring that they are implemented in an efficient and effective manner. This is what our citizens, the almost 800 million people who inhabit this Partnership, expect of us.