

# A New Centrality for the Euro-Mediterranean Space

**Miguel Ángel Moratinos**

Under-Secretary-General,  
High Representative for the United Nations  
Alliance of Civilizations

We are witnessing a moment of transition in international governance. Everyone unanimously concludes that we are facing a multipolar world. This process of reconfiguration of international architecture leads us to consider the future of the Euro-Mediterranean area today. On the one hand, some analysts may see a serious danger of turning the Mediterranean into “a forgotten sea,” as I myself described it in an article from 1989. However, if we take a closer look at the new geopolitics in the world, and provided that policymakers are able to respond to these new challenges, I am convinced that the Euro-Mediterranean space will once again find a new centrality.

But before defining the current challenges that are manifested in this “space-movement” that is the Mediterranean, as defined by the great thinker Fernand Braudel, I think it would be appropriate to ask ourselves what we mean when we talk about the Mediterranean.

The first question we should ask ourselves is what we are referring to when we address the attractive and exciting concept of the Mediterranean. The Mediterranean is, first and foremost, a historical and geographical space. It is the place, in my opinion, where these two essential aspects of human existence intersect most intensely: space and time, that is, geography and history. If we fail to understand both dimensions interactively, it will be difficult to grasp the complexity of our object of study. For many, the Mediterranean has become a commonplace: the sea “amid lands,” in its terminological explanation. For others, it is that “blue sea” of artistic creation. Others

evoke the “Mare Nostrum” of the Romans, fragmented by wars and confrontations over the centuries. And for others it is “the White Sea,” as the Arab and Muslim countries call it; a space where a permanent dialectic is conjugated at every moment of life: war and peace, passion and reason, rejection and harmony. In short, unity and diversity.

Of the many definitions that different personalities in philosophy, history, politics and geography have given of the Mediterranean, perhaps the two that most stand out for me are those by the French historian Fernand Braudel, when he advocates a “greater Mediterranean,” that is, a “global Mediterranean,” adding to this “space-movement” something more than just the coastal countries, and I quote: “the Mediterranean will create a magnetic-electric force field, a luminous place where a dividing line is drawn between shadow and light,” in short, Braudel points out, “the Mediterranean is a space-movement of variable geometry working its way into deep Africa (trade from Sudan and Ghana via the caravan route) and extending through Northern Europe as far as Poland and Russia.” This is Braudel’s overall unitary approach and one that should inspire us when analysing today’s Mediterranean space.

But the second definition we need at the moment is that of the French-Lebanese writer Amin Maalouf, who argues that the Mediterranean cannot be defined as an existing reality, but rather one that must be built day by day.

Therefore, in order to proceed today with the construction of this new “Mediterranean centrality” within international geopolitics, we must begin by providing this process with secure foundations. We must ask ourselves what the soul, the *raison d’être* of the Mediterranean is. If we are not able to endow our philosophical political thinking with a future horizon, we will hardly be able to build this new centrality.

This is where the thoughts of the writer, philosopher, journalist and politician Albert Camus can serve as an essential reference.

Camus advocates what he calls “la pensée de midi” (midday thought). In other words, the thought of the South, which contrasts with that of the North. In his two most relevant books, *L'Homme Revolté* (*The Rebel*) and his posthumous autobiographical book *Le Premier Homme* (*The First Man*), he develops his theory. Faced with the world of the North, the balanced depth of the South –like Justice, measure against excess, light against the absurdity of a material world–, a balance must be sought between contradictory poles. In midday thought, when the sun shines fully is when we are able to see and observe the need for Justice and Freedom. In the face of Nietzsche's Germanic nihilism, we must rebel against the absurd. Camus vindicates Bizet's *Carmen* against Wagner's *Nibelungenlied*. He defends the man who struggles to find Freedom and Justice. Both must find their balance. Freedom alone will not achieve Justice. Justice without freedom will be incomplete.

It is this “midday thought” of the South that we have lost in the past few centuries, particularly in the last decades. Nothing will change in the Mediterranean, and therefore in the Middle East, if we follow the order and thought of the North, which has led to a disorder of tragic excess in our Mediterranean arena.

The history of Europe and the Mediterranean is long and turbulent. This is not the time to recount the different chapters that have unfolded throughout our shared history: from Ancient Greece to the 20th century, different moments took place in this space. Today we are going to address the reality of the 21st century, heir to the previous century, when it was decided to establish the essential parameters – still in force today – of the Mediterranean in general, but very particularly of what we now call the Middle East. After the dismemberment of the Ottoman Empire and the end of the First World War, the Paris and Versailles conferences of 1919 practically drew the current map of the Middle-Eastern Mediterranean. The Sykes-Picot Agreement had already clearly defined the territorial distribution of the various nations in the region. However, to further complicate matters, the United Kingdom would contribute with Lord Balfour's famous 1917 declaration proposing to H.M. the King of Great Britain the creation of a “national home for the Jewish people.”

At the end of the Second World War and after humanity's descent into hell due to the Jewish Holocaust, the conflict in Palestine began: after the departure of the United Kingdom from those territories, and with the decision of the United Nations to create two states, one Jewish and the other Arab. The “Palestinian Nakba” in 1948 and the recognition of the State of Israel by a large number of UN member countries marked what is to date one of the most intense conflicts in our recent history. It has been more than 100 years since Palestinians and Israelis have been confronting each other over a single land and territory. By the Madrid Peace Conference in 1991, over 57 peace plans had been put forward to resolve this conflict. The Spanish capital offered the first hope of peace through a definitive solution to the dispute. “Land for Peace” was offered at that time. No substantial progress was made and we had to wait until September 1993 for the Oslo Accords to change the approach to finding a solution to this difficult situation. Today, with a greater historical perspective, I can say that, although the intention of the promoters of the Oslo Accords was positive, in the end their approach and methodology did not help to resolve the multiple disputes between the peoples and, above all, they did not offer a definitive solution to the so-called peace process.

Today we are facing the moment of truth. Palestinians and Israelis are in an existential conflict. The Hamas attack of 7 October and Israel's response to it, which has now dragged on for more than nine months, starkly reflect the fact that what is at stake is the existence of both narratives and both nations. The two sides are now locked in a traumatic hour where reason and a political vision find it difficult to break through. There is no alternative to a two-state solution. It is therefore urgent that the international community mobilize as soon as possible to make this option a reality. The two-state solution, which is formally supported by the Security Council and the main international players, has been used politically to present it as an option for the future.

For Israel, and some Western countries, the Palestinians will only be eligible for statehood as a result of diplomatic negotiations with Israel, and on its terms. This approach, which many of us advocated in the past, must now be urgently abandoned. Recognition of the Palestinian State must be the first step in setting the diplomatic framework for a definitive solution

to the conflict. Moreover, at this time, and given the high level of polarization that has arisen within the Arab-Islamic world and international public opinion in the face of the dehumanizing and unacceptable situation that Gaza and all its citizens are experiencing, the two-state solution would also be beneficial and necessary in consolidating the recognition of Israel by the entire international community. The two-state solution is not an offer to satisfy the Palestinians, but rather the only proposal that can guarantee the future and existence of these two peoples and nations.

The important thing now is to stop the war and start a process of physical and political reconstruction of the two nations and peoples as soon as possible. Political leadership is needed on both sides that is capable of taking into account the future risks and initiating a new stage of reconciliation on an equal footing. In other words, two states that negotiate and discuss the outstanding issues (borders, settlements, refugees, Jerusalem). On the other hand, it would be advisable to prevent the conflict from expanding in the region, particularly in Lebanon, as it could lead to the involvement of third parties and further increase the risks of a larger-scale conflict.

Though this situation in Gaza and Israel is what should lead us to express our utmost concern for the stability, not only of the Mediterranean Levant, but of the entire Mediterranean region, we cannot ignore the other existing and potential risks and crises that threaten the stability and development of the entire Mediterranean Basin.

Today, we cannot simply concentrate our efforts on solving one problem, such as the case of Palestine and Israel, but should work to rebuild the centrality of the Euro-Mediterranean area.

The new Europe, which has just elected its latest political leaders after the recent European elections, cannot continue without looking to the South. There is a serious risk that the EU will forget its political commitment to its southern flank because of the war in Ukraine and a perceived new orientation of European institutions.

The Union for the Mediterranean, which has been largely silent during these months of crisis, should prepare to take up a more decisive political role than it has demonstrated thus far. We will only make progress in resolving the various conflicts affecting the Euro-Mediterranean region if we Mediterraneans truly address them and do not allow third actors to interfere in what are vital interests for our historical evolution.

In this regard, the European Union must begin to look geopolitically towards what the historian Braudel called the “Global Mediterranean.” The Mediterranean will regain its centrality if it develops a policy that articulates a geostrategic relationship between Africa and Europe through the Mediterranean Sea. This is our great challenge, the creation of a vertical where Africa, a continent of the future, looks to the North, and Europe, a continent of the past, looks to the South, so that together and thanks to the Mediterranean connection we can build our common future.