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Southern Perceptions about the Union for the Mediterranean

With the launch of the Union for the Mediterranean, 2008 was the year of the big debate on the Mediterranean, its centrality and the complexity that characterizes the relations between its residents. Indeed not since 1995 has the Mediterranean project been so euphoric. Until this time the atmosphere was rather tainted with gloom especially after the summit of ten years of Partnership; this summit almost heralded the end of a process that had suffered for a long time, according to its detractors, from several deficiencies. The launch of the idea of a "Union" was, at first, a source of distrust and anxiety with regard to the future of the Process of Barcelona; the 'Union's' evolution and its final adaptation to the Euro Mediterranean Partnership have in fact acted as a lifebuoy for the earlier initiatives.

The caution and / or enthusiasm shown by the countries of the Maher can be explained to a large extent by a comparison between the approach now proposed for the UfM, and that already in operation within the Euro-Mediterranean framework. The global approach pursued within the latter framework was often deemed a handicap, given that the partners did not enjoy an equal status and were thus not managing to progress at a similar pace. Added to this situation is the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which has prevented any advancement of political dialogue. The differentiation approach adopted by the neighbourhood policy, although pragmatic, has not been sufficiently convincing in the view of the Southern Mediterranean, even if some southern countries are more interested by this approach than others. These same partners also believe that both the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP) and the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) are marred by too great a level of conditionality. Based on this premise, it was



unavoidable that the EU's North-African partners would be tempted, faced with France's announcement of a new project for the Mediterranean, to draw a negative balance on the Barcelona Process, as well as express a certain reticence concerning the ENP. As regards the first, leaders from the South have for many years voiced their criticism of the Process' inability to achieve its objectives; the resultant exasperation reached its climax during the tenth anniversary of the Barcelona Process, indicated by the absence of many Arab-Mediterranean leaders, while the majority of the southern Mediterranean experts present argued that the Process had not managed to reduce the existing asymmetries between the two shores of the Mediterranean. If anything, these differences persist and have continued to widen since the launch of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership.

By adhering to the Barcelona Process, the southern Mediterranean members had hoped to catch up with their European partners and resolve all their conflicts. Unfortunately, these expectations were distant from reality – a perception that explains the enthusiasm with which the project for the Mediterranean was then received by the Southern Mediterranean countries, that saw in it a new perspective responding to their will for change.

Despite the criticisms, the Southern Mediterranean leaders of the Maghreb region, as in the case of the Tunisian President, insisted on the importance of not detaching the new Union for the Mediterranean project from the EMP, believing that this union “will be called on to contribute towards a re-launching of the Euro Mediterranean Partnership, by working to assure a synergy with the existing Euro-Mediterranean instruments”. The evolution of this project, and its adoption during the European summit of 13 March 2008 as a continuation to the Barcelona Process, finally lends reason to those from the South who had expected this development and who were reassured by the participation of all the EU members thanks to the role of Germany. Once this was guaranteed, consensus rallied around the suggestion that this Union for the Mediterranean act instead as a new and improved version of the EMP. But will this vision translate into reality? This



question still remains difficult to confirm up to the present, especially since the EMP does not solely operate on a multilateral basis, but is primarily based on multi-bilateral (EU/Third-party) association agreements that, at least for now, are not scheduled to be revised. Certain elements of this “improved model” of the Barcelona Process have been given greater attention within the context of the Union for the Mediterranean, in response to demands from the Southern Mediterranean. The goal is to establish a level playing field that would allow all partners to contribute equally towards the elaboration of common projects. This form of equality was lacking within the Barcelona framework – a situation that did not help promote a sense of ownership amongst the Southern Mediterranean partners; these countries demand to be included more in the decision-making process.

Many of the Southern Mediterranean countries had been proposing for a long time a model of co-presidency, which they saw as a means of stimulating a rebalancing between the two partner groups. They argued that this solution would “make each state aware of its responsibility, actively engaging it in the process, or, at the very least, promoting a more global vision of affairs”. The European Union, for its part, declared its acceptance of this principle. The Action Plan drafted in Valencia, for example, states that this principle “is coherent with the essence of the Partnership and should be implemented as soon as possible”, though nonetheless advancing in other documents, and through associated statements, that this solution would not be efficient as long as the present situation, of differentiated relations between the various partners, remained in effect. The European Union has at its disposal internal mechanisms that permit it to coordinate the positions of its various member states and thus speak in a unified voice, while the divergences that characterise the Southern Mediterranean partners have prevented them from developing a similar facility. Even the coordination mechanism of the group of Arab states does not function appropriately. The principle of co-presidency has definitely been adopted within the framework of the Union for the Mediterranean. With the adoption of this principle a great deal of complication, lack of coordination and the political instrumentalisation of the new framework has begun.



The complications connected with the establishment of the new structures, and notably the secretariat, demonstrate how difficult it is to by-pass the political disputes which characterize the relations between partners particularly from the South.

The Union is already becoming infected by the same maladies that it had set out to heal. Steadily but surely, interactions in the UfM have lapsed back into the same old patterns of behaviour that the creation of the UfM was meant to end.

The UfM's problem is the hubris of 'linkage politics'. The term linkage politics is used to describe the vexed approach to world politics that many countries in the Euro-Mediterranean partnership favour, and which already threatens the health of the UfM. Last year's early beginnings of the UfM saw the issue of whether the League of Arab States was to be involved as the main north-south challenge. Israel and a number of EU countries feared that the adoption of this membership would eventually lead to the ousting of Israel from the process. Last October, Jordan postponed an important Euro-Med conference on water security so as to put pressure on the other UfM member states to accept the League's participation. An agreement was reached and the League was finally accepted as a participant. When the foreign ministers of UfM countries met in Marseilles, last November, a solution was found to the question of including the League. The compromise was that the League would be involved at all levels, albeit as an observer, while Israel was given a seat on the UfM's secretariat for the next three years, with the possibility of a further extension.

In another bout of linkage politics, Egypt, a few months later, suspended all UfM activities when the Gaza conflict erupted, although it could have instead put such activities at the top of the agenda as a way of tackling the crisis. More positively, Egypt later led the diplomatic effort to end the hostilities but the UfM's suspension has highlighted the way in which worthwhile initiatives can become hostages to other issues. This precedent will undermine the credibility of the UfM and further erode mutual trust in the region.

As regards the contents of the Union for the Mediterranean project the attitude of the South Mediterranean countries has also entered a state of suspense, fuelled by



competing national-specific ambitions. Morocco aspires to establish a new bilateral contract with the European Union, which would replace its current association agreement and hopefully guarantee it a privileged partner status. By developing its dialogue with the EU in the field of energy, Algeria aims to become a direct supplier to European consumers. And Tunisia, as the first Mediterranean country to have implemented its zone of free exchange with the EU, hopes to profit from this development to enhance cooperation and improve its standing as a partner. Tunisia is now working to start discussions on the access to the reinforced partnership, the so called Advanced Status (the statut avancé). This indicates that these countries have been focusing more on the advantages that they could gain from the full implementation of the action plans adopted within the framework of the ENP.

A Union for the Mediterranean rooted in the idea of a union of projects, focused on the domains where advances have already been achieved, seems to respond to some southern Mediterranean expectations. It nonetheless discards the aspirations vested in the model of integration as it was presented in the project's original version, where the aim was political integration, and which was greeted with strong enthusiasm. This initial orientation, structured around the ideal of integration, stalled at the reticence shown by certain European states and their desire for re-equilibrium – a response that resulted in a reframing of the project, explicitly adopting a cooperation logic that from then on prevailed over the prior rationale of integration. It was what some designated as a transformation from a “unifying project” into a “union of projects” – a change that emerged when the Mediterranean Union became the Union for the Mediterranean. The adoption of this project, during the last European summit, as a continuity of the Barcelona Process, somewhat confirms this movement away from the logic of cooperation.

It appears that the Southern Mediterranean countries are interested in the prospect of working on concrete projects, according to President Sarkozy's formula of “concrete projects in domains where agreement is rapidly established, such as sustainable development or energy integration”, and the list of potential projects is far from few, with



priority being given to strategic issues linked to water management and environmental protection, as well as to the exchange of knowledge within the region and the fight against pollution in the Mediterranean Sea.

Nonetheless, these same countries reveal differences in approach, as a result of the lessons learnt from the shortcomings of the Barcelona Process, namely a lack of means and of structures, deficiencies in the area of governance, shortcomings in the trans-Mediterranean market integration, and weaknesses in the network of small and medium enterprises. These problems, confronted more intensely in the South, require, according to a Tunisian expert, that this idea of a union of projects be closely guided; this would imply a greater involvement on the part of participating states. Even if priority has to be given to the economic and financial spheres, projects should be, as was demanded by the Tunisians, ambitious and structuring, and not simply operate as a multitude of small-scale initiatives. This would, however, require a far more significant financial engagement than that attainable through the financial instruments currently available. As such, and again according to Tunisia, the creation of an associated bank is indispensable – not merely a regular commercial bank, but rather a bank of construction and development that would act as a solidarity tool capable of promoting and steering the desired projects. In addition, a Moroccan ambassador, who is also an expert in the Euro-Mediterranean field, highlights the objective difficulties that in his opinion would be dangerous to deny, doubting the efficiency of the Monnet project methodology as regards to countries whose stability is threatened by terrorist, migratory or climatic challenges. Other problems (with the Sahara at the fore) persist between certain southern partners. These weigh heavily on public opinion and on the respective national governments, preventing the process of integration that is necessary before companies and private investors can be offered the desired and expected incentives for their subsequent involvement in projects within the scope of the Union for the Mediterranean.

But this concrete approach also faces a major problem, its lack of financial means. In the very early stages of the initiative, Algeria's President, Abdelaziz Bouteflika, drew



attention to this problem by asking how UfM projects were going to be financed, given that most of the appropriate EU funds had already been committed until 2013. The prospects that the EU will increase these funds from its own resources, or that sufficient private capital can be found to make up the shortfall, look increasingly dim in light of the global economic recession.

It is clear that the Union for the Mediterranean, as a new process, will, for some time, remain a work in progress. The organic link established during the European Summit in Brussels on 13th March 2008 and confirmed by the Euro-Mediterranean Summit in Paris on 14th July 2009 between the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership and the “project of the Union”, paves new paths for both this initiative, as well as for the Barcelona Process itself. But almost a year after the launch of the UfM, we are in a state of confusion where it is difficult to close one’s eyes and to proceed, as if no problem exists, while it is also quite difficult to reject all the Process and to retreat into ourselves; We need, on both shores of the Mediterranean, a solid partnership capable of resolving all the disputes; as long as this assertion will exist there will be some hope to reach it.

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