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Union for the Mediterranean: Last Call?

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The Union for the Mediterranean (UfM) is an intergovernmental institution formed by the 27 European Union (EU) member states and 16 countries on the Southern shores of the Mediterranean Sea, including Turkey, Israel and the Palestinian Authority. At its inception in July 2008, the idea was to replace the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP), a EU policy towards the Southern countries that were more the recipients of the initiative rather than equal-standing partners, with a structure not depending on EU institutions and instead based on a state-to-state relationship in which the full sovereignty of each participant would be guaranteed.¹

The previous EMP, launched in 1995 with the Barcelona process, aimed at creating a "Mediterranean region of peace, security and shared prosperity" but it manifestly failed its mission. Therefore, in 2008, under the French Presidency of the EU, the initiative to mark a new step in the Euro-Mediterranean relations was taken by the then President Nicolas Sarkozy who gathered 46 heads of state in Paris for a pompous ceremony that paved the way for the new Union for the Mediterranean.

The idea behind the project, expressed strongly by France, was that reforms would be engaged more seriously only

if partners of the Southern shores would take part in decisions, if they would feel more involved and co-responsible of the projects. Six main fields of action were created: the de-pollution of the Mediterranean, construction of highways, cooperation in civil protection, projects for the development of alternative energies, a more intense exchange in higher education and research and the promotion of Small and Medium Enterprises (SME). The UfM didn't aspire to solve political instability in the Middle East but to realize concrete projects, boost economic growth and cultural exchange and to create a common space in which political disputes could be solved more easily. One can find in this attitude the echo of the French policy at the beginning of the European integration and a reference to the "small-steps policy" and the "de facto solidarity" promoted by the then Foreign Minister Robert Schuman. In order to assure the co-ownership and the balance between all participants, the UfM established a co-presidency whereby France represented the EU countries and Egypt represented the Southern countries. A bi-annual summit of Heads of State would have taken place and the agenda would have been set by an annual conference of ministers. The secretariat was expected to implement the projects and would be headed by a secretary-general from a non-EU state.

Despite being a key aspect of Sarkozy's foreign policy, the UfM has been a complete failure over the past four years,

¹ Roberto Aliboni, "The State of Play of the Union for the Mediterranean in the Euro-Med Context" (*Istituto Affari Internazionali*, Documenti No. 17, September 2010).

a shell framework. The problems are both institutional and financial, but their source is political. It was only in 2010 that the first secretary-general, the Jordanian ambassador Ahmad Masa'deh, could be appointed. He then resigned in January 2011, denouncing the poor budget and lack of vision.² Since then, two other secretary-generals have been nominated; the Moroccan diplomat Fathallah Sijilmassi now holds the post. Moreover, the UfM relies on personnel seconded and paid by its member states, but funding for projects is still inadequate. However, the main problem is the intergovernmental structure of the UfM; instead of boosting cooperation among Arab partners, discord among the Southern countries is the main limit to the organization's effectiveness. As a matter of fact, in 2009 and 2010 ministerial meetings have been repeatedly postponed and the constitution of the UfM secretariat impeded by the veto of the Egyptian co-presidency to protest against Israel's invasion of the Gaza strip (December 2008).

In 2011, the Arab Spring showed that Europe's approach to the Mediterranean was based on misperception and a complete reshape of the EuroMed policy had to be undertaken. Countries that had chosen *realpolitik* and supported the authoritarian leader's grip on power during the first period of the regime changes have now lost credibility in the region. France, in particular, was hit by a scandal when it was reported that former Foreign Minister Michèle Alliot-Marie spent her Christmas holiday in 2010 in Tunisia as a guest of a businessman with close ties to former President Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali. A story similar also involved French former Prime Minister François Fillon.³ The French misunderstanding of events and preference for economic relations over geopolitical considerations has been striking. In the same way, the silence of the UfM, which should have been the main forum to discuss the change in the Mediterranean regimes, has been deafening. In the front of a historical shift on the Southern shores of the EU, the Union for the Mediterranean seems more and more "an anachronistic relic of a long-gone Euro-Mediterranean past".⁴

Which way forward?

Should the UfM be maintained with the same structure it has now and rendered fully operational, or transformed to make it more efficient, or simply be considered a failed experiment and abandoned? Those who criticize the UfM, in particular among the Northern European countries, think that the current economic crisis and the disappointing achievements are reasons enough to justify the end of the initiative. They maintain that it would

be a wiser decision to abolish it and save the money – €6.9 billion for the secretariat and €90 billion for the projects – rather than continuing to weight on taxpayers' pockets.⁵ But the UfM also has defenders. France and other countries are convinced that the UfM's elimination would give the impression that the EU is giving up its responsibilities in the Mediterranean, and that achieving concrete results between 2012 and 2014 would be impossible without the UfM.⁶

In our view, there is scope for the relaunch of the Union for the Mediterranean. There are already some promising elements. The appointment of Fathallah Sijilmassi gives stability to the organization, as will the engagement of the European Investment Bank (EIB) to finance those projects that are at an advanced stage between 2012 and 2013.⁷ Moreover, regime changes in the Arab countries and elections in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya, is a sign that a new era has started. Of course, there is little doubt that the democratic change in these countries is far from assured, and Syria is on the edge of a civil war. Nevertheless, the Euro-Mediterranean policy can be built on a new basis. A renewed UfM could not flourish without the contribution of France. In this respect, the election of the socialist François Hollande is promising. Laurent Fabius, current Foreign Minister, criticized Sarkozy's support to Ben Ali – "It is one thing to have state-to-state relations, it is another to pat a dictator on the back"⁸ – and another member of the government, Vincent Peillon, is a strong promoter of the UfM, on which he produced a report in 2010 during his mandate in the European Parliament. The revitalization of the UfM should be associated with a transformation of institutional framework and the allocation of a budget to match ambitions. First of all, the UfM should be more integrated in the EU, as it represents the policy of the whole Union and not solely of its Southern countries. In this respect, UfM reform must appreciate the decision taken last February by the Council of the EU to assign to the European institutions the co-presidency of the Northern partners. This process should be supported in order to have more coordination between the UfM and other EU institutions.

Secondly, the problem of the funding of projects should be solved, also through the synergies with already existing EU projects and funds. A new approach of the UfM has to include the civil society and work on micro-development projects as well, as this is where it is most likely to achieve short-term progress.

On top of that, an effective UfM cannot be achieved without clarifying its objectives. It is necessary that all par-

2 "La France veut donner un nouvel élan à l'Union pour la Méditerranée" (*Le Monde*, 27 January 2011).

3 Eric Pape, "Le Scandal" (*Foreign Policy/Argument*, 25 February 2011).

4 Nathalie Tocci, "One Year On: A Balance Sheet of the EU's Response to the Arab Spring" (*GMF/IAI: Op-Med*, May 2012).

5 Kristina Kausch, "Abolish the Union for the Mediterranean" (*The Fride Blog*, 11 April 2012).

6 Eduard Soler i Lecha, "The Union for the Mediterranean: Survival in a Time of Crisis" (*Opinión CIDOB*, No. 147, 3 May 2012).

7 *Ibid.*

8 Eric Pape, "Le Scandal" (*Foreign Policy/Argument*, 25 February 2011).



ticipants agree on the direction of the UfM. EU participation should be a part of a global strategy. This would also entail stronger EU participation in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In spite of the almost complete absence of results that has so far characterized the UfM's existence, the institution is a necessary tool to develop an ambitious cooperation between the two shores of the Mediterranean Sea. If the political will is found, it can still achieve the goals it has been designed for. The aftermath of the Arab Spring and the presence of new governments in some EU member states may help this process. However, after years of agony reforms have to be undertaken if UfM is to have a future. This might be the last call.

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