

## Euro-Mediterranean blues

*Rosa Balfour*

Since the grand launch in Paris two years ago, President Sarkozy's ambitious project of the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM) has been floundering. The latest episode was the cancellation (officially "postponed" to November) of the second Union for the Mediterranean Summit of heads of state and government planned for 7 June in Barcelona.

Ostensibly, it was cancelled to facilitate the proximity talks between Israel and the Palestinians. But many more issues were behind the impossibility of holding the summit. The Arab states had voiced their opposition to the planned presence of Israel's much-discussed Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman. The EU was concerned that there were no 'deliverables' for the conference: there were uncertainties over Syria's final signature to the Association Agreement negotiated with Brussels, and over Colonel Qaddafi's presence. There were also rumours that France and Egypt were not keen to give up their joint Presidency of the UfM, which is supposed to expire now.

The Union for the Mediterranean has turned out to be a riotous affair, dominated by squabbles over every decision and bureaucratic detail. Its achievements over the past two years have been meagre indeed. No high level meeting has taken place since Paris 2008. 2009 was a lost year due to the war in Gaza and the consequent blockages in political dialogue: the Conference of Foreign Ministers scheduled for November was also cancelled, the new Secretary General was agreed upon only in January 2010, and the Secretariat itself inaugurated in April with a low key event. Its budget was approved, after big disagreements, but only for four months, with staffing costs covered by the countries of each of the representatives.

There is much uncertainty over the next presidency. France has managed to hold on to its role, despite the fact that the UfM's declaration tied the presidency to that of the EU. So it appears that the new unwritten rule is to coordinate the duration of the presidency with that of the Southern co-presidency, also due to expire. On the Southern side though, no country has put forward its interest in taking over from Egypt. On the Northern side, Spain feels entitled to take over, but some EU Member States have complained. Even the projects, which were supposed to represent the pragmatic aspect of the UfM, have made little progress.

The EU has been losing ground in the Mediterranean and the Union for the Mediterranean has hardly countered this trend. Let us be clear. In political and security terms, the EU's influence on the region has always been limited, and is unlikely to change significantly despite Catherine Ashton's stronger statements. The regional context, especially in the Middle East, has been a downward spiral and no EU initiative could have changed that unless its member states took far more courageous decisions. Other actors beyond US predominance, such as China, Turkey and India (on the old Silk Road), Brazil, Russia, Japan - are increasingly playing a role in the area, changing the strategic landscape and gnawing on the economic hegemony that the EU has enjoyed so far, as the region's largest trade partner.

But ground has been lost even with respect to EU engagement and its stated aims, and the ways in which the EU articulates its initiatives has a part to play. So, however irrelevant the UfM seems to have become, it is worth understanding what elements of the set-up have contributed to marginalising Europe in the Mediterranean, also by comparison with the EU's previous initiative, the Barcelona Process.

It is paradoxical that the UfM is based on a political dialogue at the highest level while at the same time devised to avoid the key political problems. In this, it comes up against the same wall as the Barcelona Process: the pretence that it is not the unresolved security issues in the region that block the development of the Euro-Med dream of greater prosperity and stability around the

Mediterranean Sea. The conflicts over Western Sahara, Israel-Palestine, Israel-Lebanon, Lebanon-Syria, and Cyprus remain the key areas in which the EU as a whole has purposefully decided not to get seriously engaged beyond some declarations and humanitarian aid.

The war in Gaza and the deterioration of the situation in the Middle East put a big spanner in the UfM's works. This spillover occurred with the Barcelona Process too (in fact, one would have expected that to have been a lesson learnt). But the set-up and institutional framework of the UfM makes it even more vulnerable to being hijacked.

In contrast with the UfM, the Barcelona Process had set up structures for maintaining dialogue at different levels, with networks which could continue operating regardless of the context. Also, the Commission could provide continuity and policy input where members were floundering – a role it no longer enjoys. The shift from a multilayered multilateralism to an intergovernmental multilateralism, where each government has its say and without much mediation by other institutions and actors has not been helpful to building consensus.

Granting a higher standing to the south Mediterranean partners was seen as a way to put all partners on equal footing and give 'ownership' to those on the 'southern shore'. But these two years of ownership have hardly seen any attempt by the southern shore to develop common positions.

The UfM's paralysis has not necessarily implied a paralysis of relations between Europe and its southern shore. The EU has stepped up its engagement with Syria and Libya, and relations between individual member states develop regardless of the UfM, signalling a strengthening of bilateralism and piecemeal policies. Indeed, demography, energy, migration, terrorism, competition from other actors, and the strategic positioning of the whole region, are such that the Mediterranean is on the map of individual European states – but less so of the EU as such.

The result has been a growing fragmentation on both sides of the Mediterranean: we have moved from the intention of building regionalism to empty words that ring hollow against the blockade of Gaza.

For all its deficits, the Barcelona Process could tinker on the margins of Euro-Mediterranean relations even at times of crisis. Without being nostalgic or unaware of the profound political limitations to the EU's role and influence in the region, it would have been worth saving some of the external relations *acquis* acquired through the years of the Barcelona Process and Neighbourhood Policy. There might still be a few lessons to learn for the European External Action Service.

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