

# **Restarting the Mediterranean Union?!**

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## *Abstract*

*The Mediterranean Union, more commonly referred to as “Sarkozy’s child” has certainly endured numerous ups and downs. Starting in 2007 as Sarkozy’s idea, while running for president, it aimed to form a Union in the image of the European Union. The idea itself was not welcomed among European partners and was thought of as a fake promise for presidential points. After Sarkozy was elected the Mediterranean Union or Barcelona process was launched on the Paris Summit for the Mediterranean held on 13 July 2008, with 43 Heads of State and Government from the Euro-Mediterranean region. The main goal was to form a free trade area. The Mediterranean Union undoubtedly has an economic potential, but due to the market barriers that are hard to eliminate this part barely functions. There are also doubts about the originality of this plan. The Med Union is especially similar to the “Great Middle East” project as well as the NATO’s Mediterranean dialogue from 1994. The Union has trouble functioning due to the conflicts in the region that unable any kind of progress. This paper will examine the reasons for creation of the Mediterranean Union as well as its functions following with the issues that caused its deadlock. The paper will also try to answer the final question whether the existence of the Mediterranean Union should be terminated or should the EU try to restart the Mediterranean Union and help with all its resources and institutions?*

**Key words: Mediterranean Union, Barcelona Process, Sarkozy, EU**

The process of the creation of the Union began with an electoral promise by President Nicolas Sarkozy back in 2007. France wanted to reestablish itself again as a regional factor in the EU, so the idea and creation of the Union of the Mediterranean was perceived as the ticket for success. Sarkozy's proposal focused on creation of a Union which will contain partners from the EU and states from the Middle East and Africa, and was perceived both with skepticism and positive comments. His primary objective was to bring together the nations that bordered the Mediterranean countries. On February of 2007, Nicolas Sarkozy made a speech in Toulon where he declared "The countries in the Mediterranean must take control of their destiny that geography and history has created for them."<sup>1</sup>

It was not long after that the initial criticism arrived. First one was from Merkel that said "This would create a situation I would qualify as dangerous. A situation could be created where Germany would be drawn to Central and Eastern Europe and France to the Mediterranean. This would create tension that I would not like."<sup>2</sup> Germany held its stance for a longer period, but during several working meetings managed to reach an agreement with France. Italy and Spain were also against the UFM, because they believed that it will undermine the Barcelona Process from 1995. Turkey was also against the idea because it assumed that the UFM was offered to them with pity, since the country did not join the EU. "This is not the only occasion when President Sarkozy has made an impulsive and ill-defined proposal on a subject of strategic importance of the EU, his proposal to dilute the independence of the European Central Bank having been another one. Both propositions put France's most important diplomatic asset at risk, namely its alliance with Germany."<sup>3</sup>

Despite his efforts to co-opt partners, President Sarkozy's enthusiasm is not shared by many: the official policy of the EU institutions, other Member States and most South Mediterranean countries is to 'wait and see' what final shape the project takes, without making great efforts to hide their unease in the meantime. Euro-Mediterranean foreign ministers merely took note of the initiative, but underlined their expectation that it would be "complementary to the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership". A few have been outspokenly critical. German Chancellor Angela Merkel, in particular, openly accused France of excluding non-Mediterranean countries in an attempt to sideline existing EU policies and hijack European funds to support French foreign policy initiatives. London announced that it would not spend an extra penny on the project, and Ankara denounced the plan as a ploy to bar Turkey from EU

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<sup>1</sup> The Union of the Mediterranean, a sinking ship? <http://owni.eu/2011/03/02/the-union-for-the-mediterranean-a-sinking-ship/> (September 2011)

<sup>2</sup> Angela Merkel, speech before Konvent für Deutschland, 5 December 2007.

<sup>3</sup> Emerson. M, Making sense of Sarkozy's Union of the Mediterranean, (Centre for European Policy Studies,2008), pp.1

membership (although it said that it would participate as long as the project did not damage its path to EU accession).<sup>4</sup> After many negotiations during a summit in Paris, the Union of the Mediterranean was formally created on July 13, 2008.

The main areas where the UFM was envisioned to function were: politics and security, economics and trade, socio-cultural and justice and interior affairs. The Union of the Mediterranean was composed of 43 countries, from which 27 are EU member states, 12 are EMP partners on the southern Mediterranean rim and it has 4 new additions, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, Montenegro, and Monaco).

As an addition to these four chapters of cooperation, in Marseilles on November 2008<sup>5</sup> six concrete projects were identified. These projects targeted specific needs of the Euro-Mediterranean regions, such as:

- **De-pollution of the Mediterranean.** This broad project encompasses many initiatives that target good environmental governance, access to drinkable water, water management, pollution reduction and protection of the Mediterranean biodiversity.
- **Maritime and land highways.** The purpose of this project is to increase and improve the circulation of commodities and people throughout the Euro-Mediterranean region by improving its ports, and building highways and railways. Specifically, the Paris and Marseilles Declarations refer to the construction of both a Trans-Maghrebi railway and highway systems, connecting Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia.
- **Civil protection.** The civil protection project aims at improving the prevention, preparedness and response to both natural and man-made disasters. The ultimate goal is to “bring the Mediterranean Partner Countries progressively closer to the European Civil Protection Mechanism”.
- **Alternative energies: Mediterranean solar plan.** The goal of this project is to promote the production and use of renewable energies. More specifically, it aims at turning the Mediterranean partner countries into producers of solar energy and then circulating the resulting electricity through the Euro-Mediterranean region.

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<sup>4</sup> Balfour, R & Schmidt. Union of the Mediterranean, disunity for the EU (European Policy Centre,2008), pp.1

<sup>5</sup> Final Statement of the Marseille Meeting of the Euro-Mediterranean Ministers of Foreign Affairs (Marseille, 2008), 19-22

- **Higher education and research: Euro-Mediterranean University.** The inauguration of the Euro-Mediterranean University in Slovenia (Piran, 9 June 2008) marked an important step in building cultural and educational bridges between the North and South of the Mediterranean. This achievement will certainly encourage cooperation in higher education, following up the objectives of the Catania Process and the First Euro-Mediterranean Ministerial Conference on Higher Education and Scientific Research (Cairo, June 2007).

Sarkozy's plan reflected a very flawed understanding of how present-day EU works. True, a powerful state such as France will always manage to get its way in Brussels. In that sense, "the UfM hardly differs from the long-forgotten Global Mediterranean Policy launched in 1972 by then President Georges Pompidou"<sup>6</sup>.

Bicchi puts out an interesting view "the UfM was launched because a very small group cajoled an uninterested majority into yet another initiative for the Mediterranean." This statement actually explains the situation how the UFM came into life "UfM developed as the outcome of the efforts of a small number of countries. France, supported at its discretion to by Spain and Italy, accepted a crucial change in the original plan in order to achieve the acquiescence of a large set of countries, represented by Germany, which favored more continuity with the EMP than in the original plan"

The UFM was believed to replace the Barcelona process from 1995. There were even more discussions and debates on whether the UFM is similar to the Barcelona process, meaning same content - more prestigious package.

### **The Barcelona Process**

The Barcelona Process was initiated in 1995 and had the main goal to enhance and improve the areas of peace and stability. It was in 2005 when a feeling of disappointment overwhelmed its supporters. It was a hard process which slowed down the progress of the states, because it was affected by the conflicts that rose in the Middle East. Soler Eduard i Lecha & Irene García argue that the " effects of the Arab-Israeli conflict on the Barcelona Process can best be illustrated by the impossibility of reaching a consensus on a Euro-Mediterranean Charter for Peace and Stability in the year 2000. The partners of the Barcelona Process thus opted for a more pragmatic approach. Not only was any attempt to operate in the framework of regional conflicts ruled out, but expectations were also lowered. Hence, bilateral

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<sup>6</sup> Bechev, D & Kalypso Nicoladis, *The Union of the Mediterranean: A genuine breakthrough or more of the same?* (Rotledge, 2008), pp.9

cooperation channels were given priority, for instance within the framework of the European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP).”<sup>7</sup>

Perhaps the project’s greatest achievement was its setting-up and the formulation of its agenda. To bring all the various parties together – above all Israel and the Palestinian authority – and to agree on a declaration and the principles on which to base the new regional relationship was without doubt in itself a major diplomatic achievement. By agreeing on the Barcelona Declaration, all the actors involved and above all the very pro-active then Spanish foreign minister Javier Solana set ambitious targets of democratization, security and economic growth for the Mediterranean countries.<sup>8</sup>

The Barcelona process had its faults; it emphasized the trade liberalization more than the primary goals, which were developments in the social, economic and political spheres. In addition the approach from the members to the Barcelona process was quite lukewarm, confused and focused more on receiving than working hard. The states from the UFM enjoyed the attention that they received after the initial conception as well the institutional and financial support which made them slowly grant receivers instead of grant seekers. The Barcelona process failed to build and foster political change in the dominant authoritarian regimes of the many Mediterranean countries. “It was able neither to encourage a model for Arab reform and political modernization nor to build EU partnership based on political reform.”<sup>9</sup> To sum up, the greatest factor for failure was the lack of shared identity within the member states and the will to share common goals. “The conflicting interests and goals of the non-EU countries were and remain much greater, ranging from those who strive for EU accession to those that have completely rejected not just free elections but also free trade.”<sup>10</sup> It is beyond clear that the Arab states could only cooperate where they share common interests, but there is a lack of the component whichever it may be that will push the states into one unity.

### **Institutional framework of the Union of the Mediterranean**

Any political union other than financial and political support also requires institutional support. For that matter several institutions were established to provide support for a better functioning of the UFM and improved coordination among the states. Firstly, a summit of Heads of State and Government is

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<sup>7</sup> Soler Eduard i Lecha & Irene García, *The Union of the Mediterranean and What has it changed and what can be changed in the domain of security?* (Center for European Policy studies, 2009)

<sup>8</sup> Fontelles Borrell Josep, *Yes the Barcelona Process was “mission impossible”, but the EU can learn from that* (Europe’s world, autumn 2010)

<sup>9</sup> Ibid

<sup>10</sup> Ibid

intended to be held every two years to foster political dialogue at the highest level. According to the Paris Declaration<sup>11</sup>, article 15 states:

*“Heads of State and Government agree to hold biennial summits. The summits should result in a political declaration and a short list of concrete regional projects to be set in motion. The Conclusions should endorse a broad two-year work programme for the Barcelona Process: Union for the Mediterranean. Annual Foreign Affairs Ministerial meetings will review progress in the implementation of the summit conclusions and prepare the next summit meetings and, if necessary, approve new projects.”*

The biennial summit built the basis for the functioning of the UFM and therefore appeared to be a place where most of the security problems would be resolved. These summits provided a relationship like the European Council and the Council of EU have, where the political guidance is in the hands of the heads of states and governments. “The first meeting in Paris in July 2008 was seen as a diplomatic success: the French president met with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad for the first time since the assassination of Lebanese politician Rafik al-Hariri in 2005, and the Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and al-Assad participated in the same summit even if they did not exactly shake hands.”<sup>12</sup>

A co-presidency system was formed which was a novelty for the UFM, under article 21<sup>13</sup>. It envisioned for a co-presidency between one EU country and other from the Mediterranean partner countries to be created:

*“Heads of State and Government establish a co-presidency in order to improve the balance and the joint ownership of their cooperation. One of the co-presidents will be from the EU and the other from the Mediterranean partner countries. The co-presidency shall apply to Summits, all Ministerial meetings, Senior Officials meetings, the Joint Permanent Committee and, when possible, experts/ad hoc meetings within the initiative.”*

The first representative from the Southern countries (popularly referred to as “The South”) was Egypt, which was eager to prove itself to Europe that it had the ability to run the Union of the Mediterranean for a two-year term. On the other side, the North countries or “the North” regulated matters differently.

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<sup>11</sup> Joint Declaration of the Paris Summit for the Mediterranean, (Paris, 2008)

<sup>12</sup> Rosa Balfour, The transformation of the Mediterranean Union (Mediterranean politics, 2009), pp.3

<sup>13</sup> Joint Declaration of the Paris Summit for the Mediterranean, (Paris, 2008)

The co-presidency system on the EU side was to conform to the existing Treaty provisions. Currently presiding with the co-presidency is France.

Another form of institutional support is the Secretariat which had the task to identify and monitor the implementation of concrete projects for the Euro-Mediterranean region, and to search for partners to finance these projects.<sup>14</sup> For providing support directly from Brussels a Joint Permanent Committee was created which “assist and prepares the meetings of the Senior Officials and ensures the appropriate follow-up; it may also act as a mechanism to react rapidly if an exceptional situation arises in the region that requires the consultation of Euro- Mediterranean partners.”

The funding sources for the functioning of the UFM comes from several places such as: the EU, national governments, the private sector and financial institutions like the European Investment Bank etc. The EU will contribute €90m, €2m of which is for investment in business and €2m is going for water management and a project to combat pollution of the Mediterranean Sea. The budget also sets aside €5m for a solar plan as well as €7.5m for the development of maritime and road networks.<sup>15</sup>

### **Relations with UFM states**

Since the conception the Union of the Mediterranean had to maintain strong relations with countries with difficult profiles. Morocco and Egypt were satisfied with the functioning and saw the UFM as a place where they can prosper and work towards their interests. The Arab-Israeli conflict continues to be a significant problem and a high risk factor which may contribute to the collapse of the Union.

According to Bicchi<sup>16</sup>, the UFM “is highly politicized at the regional level, because of the Arab–Israeli conflict, while at the same time it is depoliticized in its content, because of the low interest in any project of political transformation. Paradoxically, but not so much so given the nature of internal Arab politics, the high politicization of Arab–Israeli relations is instrumental to the depoliticization of an agenda for domestic change: the higher the Arab–Israeli conflict remains in the attention of European and Arab audiences, the less scrutiny Arab rulers have to endure.”

Nevertheless the UFM has managed to bring representatives from both sides on the same table. Countries like Algeria, an energy supplier which does not see the advantages of the ENP, and Libya, which so far has not been interested in upgrading its observer status in the EMP, could use the UMed to

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<sup>14</sup> Final Statement of the Marseille Meeting of the Euro-Mediterranean Ministers of Foreign Affairs

<sup>15</sup> Aliboni Alberto, New as it is, the Mediterranean Union needs an overhaul (Europe’s world, summer 2010)

<sup>16</sup> Bicchi Federica, The Union of the Mediterranean or the changing context of the Euro-Mediterranean relations (Mediterranean politics, 2011), pp.13

boost their trade and energy relations with both France and Europe without having to subscribe to the binding conditions the EU attaches to existing policies. Getting these countries involved, however, comes with a price: it would mean compromising on the requirement for all EMP member countries to subscribe to the principles set out in the United Nations Charter (which some countries, such as Libya, do not wish to do). This would undermine the EU's clout and credibility in the political dialogue with its Southern neighbors.<sup>17</sup> Bechev and Nicolaidis argue<sup>18</sup> that "indeed, southern compliance should not be taken for granted. There are many hidden dangers in the future development of the UfM. Tensions between the Arabs and Israel might hijack the process. If Tunisia is named the host of the institution's secretariat it would be very difficult to ensure Israeli participation since Tunisia does not recognize the Jewish state." The UFM is emerging in a changed Mediterranean environment, and at a time when global tendencies are making the Euro-Mediterranean format obsolete. Because of globalization the Mediterranean is not an autonomous, self-enclosed region. Rather the Mediterranean is fulfilling the role it once had as a crossroads between North and South. It would be naïve for the EU to aim at inner Mediterranean solidarity, but by cultivating co-ordination and co-operation among different regions it may find a way to engage more meaningfully with the Mediterranean along with other regions of the world. It is high time for the EU to connect its Mediterranean policy with policies that also embrace more distant regions of the world.<sup>19</sup>

Several gaps that can later cause additional problems resurface, the UFM is mainly dominated by inter-governmentalism where national parliaments control the integration process, however there is no mention of the institutions that were formed by the parliament or the non-state actors and sub-state actors. The aspect of co-ownership is also limited; NGOs will mainly present their projects to the Secretariat. The roles of the Euro-Mediterranean Parliamentary Assembly and of the networks of local governments were considered in Marseille, but without any clarification regarding their role in the UfM.<sup>20</sup>

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17 Balfour, Rosa & Schmidt Donna. Union of the Mediterranean, disunity for the EU (European Policy Centre, 2008), pp.

18 Bechev, D & Kalypso Nicolaidis, The Union of the Mediterranean: A genuine breakthrough or more of the same? (Routledge, 2008), pp.5

19 Aliboni Alberto, New as it is, the Mediterranean Union needs an overhaul (Europe's world, summer 2010)

<sup>20</sup> Rosa Balfour, The transformation of the Mediterranean Union (Mediterranean politics, 2009), pp.3



## Conclusion

With the passive functioning of the UFM the conclusion is that more than likely this project has failed. The question that can be asked now is whether the EU should intervene directly in order to put the UFM back on track or completely cancel the entire project. A more important question that arises from all of the aforementioned issues is should the EU ban its member states the freedom and luxury in forming unions like this one? After all the establishment and functioning of the said union came partly from the EU budget. And should the functioning continue without producing any results given the fact that the EU is in hard financial times and may ask for even more money from its member states? The truth is that the EU is not ready for an expansion of this kind, nor are the states from the Middle East and Africa. There is a large disparity in the way of functioning of the states, with the rise of instability and conflicts, the Union of the Mediterranean cannot prosper.

Certainly a union like the UFM is necessary, but only when the region stabilizes, and the EU dedicates itself fully to its establishment and functioning. Quoting Bechev and Nicolaidis “if the UFM is to succeed in the long run, it has to be co-owned not just by technocrats and officials but by key stakeholders on both sides of the Mediterranean including businesses, civil organizations, trade unions, and political parties.”<sup>21</sup> Will the UFM encounter the same fate as the Barcelona process? It seems that the only solution is full regional cooperation where the member states of the UFM will abundantly join their interests and forces to establish a fruitful cooperation and furthermore include representatives from the civil organizations, businesses, trade unions and political parties. If the UFM does not work hard for the establishing of this unity and cooperation, then it will soon sink in its demise.

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<sup>21</sup> Bechev, D & Kalypsa Nicolaidis, *The Union of the Mediterranean: A genuine breakthrough or more of the same?* (Routledge, 2008), pp.18

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