

SOME REFLECTIONS ON THE UNION'S MEDITERRANEAN POLICIES

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As this piece was being written the guns fell silent in Gaza after 22 days of war. More than 1000 people have lost their lives so far, the bulk of them Palestinians – one third of them children. Five thousand have been injured, scores of homes destroyed. As soon as hostilities broke out, Egypt, co-president of the newly formed Union for the Mediterranean, indefinitely suspended all the Union's meetings. Some dismay, in a sea of indifference, began to surface that yet again, another EU policy intended to stabilise the turbulent Mediterranean region was prematurely moribund, unable to make any impact on a major regional conflict. Egyptian-French diplomacy had immediately gone into full gear as soon as the conflict erupted. In the first week of the New Year, the "Egyptian Plan" called for an immediate cease-fire and talks in Cairo between the belligerents.

In the EU we need to reflect on this latest conflict to try to discover the weaknesses of our approach. Without much pretence to novelty, may I be allowed to make a few suggestions.

I do not think we need to dig too deeply beneath the surface to uncover the weakness of our approach and much of what I say here is "déjà vu". Starting with the research community we need to re-examine carefully the thrust and content of our discourse. Are our long documents and analysis really impacting on the minds of decision-makers? Then, take the metaphors we use (and this just one example for lack of space): for example, "frozen conflict" has been used so widely and recklessly that it has lost its meaning. The images it projects are so removed from what is going on. The Mediterranean conflicts are not frozen at all, but the process of resolving them is.

The second proposal I would like to make, is that we ought to look more closely at European foreign policy initiatives to see whether in their detailed application they are really meeting their lofty objectives. For example, the

Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP) – now “Union for the Mediterranean” – has often been celebrated as the only initiative which brings together all the belligerent parties in the Middle East Conflict under the same roof. The initiative is praised for increasing dialogue in the Mediterranean region. These claims are exaggerated: Hamas is excluded and Syria stays away from most meetings and worse, a real dialogue has never galvanised the process.

A closer look at the way in which the EMP / Union for the Mediterranean operate, mercilessly shatters these “myths”. At various meetings ranging from experts’ gatherings in EU financed networks to the Euro-Mediterranean Parliamentary Assembly (EMPA), dialogue is rare while confrontation is rife on the Middle East Question. This behaviour reminds me of the sorry tale of a couple going through an acrimonious divorce but who are nevertheless constrained to live together under the same roof until the community of acquists is divided. In conflict situations, ministers, experts and parliamentarians are expected, at least rationally, to put their heads together and propose solutions. But the EMP and EMPA structures usually seize up.

Mediterranean politics are overburdened by linkage politics and “hostage taking”. Last October, Jordan postponed an important Euro-Med Conference on water in support of the Arab League’s quest for membership of the Union for the Mediterranean. In January 2008, Egypt stopped participating in the bodies of the Euro-Mediterranean Parliamentary Assembly after receiving sever criticism from the European Parliament for its bad human rights record and its treatment of the Cops. The sorry tale of the failed Mediterranean Security Charter says it all.

The third proposal: nothing is ever said of other important, (albeit lesser) conflicts in our region despite their potentially harmful effect on regional stability. I am referring here to the situation in the Western Sahara and the Cyprus Question. Structures created to foster dialogue and help in the resolution of regional conflicts ought not to overlook any conflicts. It may be argued that initiatives such as the EMP/Union for the Mediterranean, already

close to capsizing under the weight of the Middle East Problem, will certainly sink if more conflicts are loaded on them. But if participating states are serious about fostering dialogue instead of scoring diplomatic points, then this excuse is nonsensical.

The fourth point is an old one: can the EU ever hope to achieve its stabilization aims if it continues to refuse to talk to key players such as Hamas and Hizbollah? Hamas targets Israeli civilians, was the first to break the cease-fire, uses its own population as a shield, is closely allied to Syria, trains its fighters in Iran, smuggles arms and munitions into Gaza, does not recognise Israel... but has received the overwhelming support of Palestinians in a free election and is a key player in any solution to the Arab-Israeli question. The EU can never condone its violence, and it must do its utmost to ensure that it does not rearm, but can it afford to snub it?

My last point is this: all policies, national or supranational have their high and low points. Some also become irrelevant. But I see a tendency in the EU to send policies to the recycling bin before they have become completely obsolescent. The EMP has been facing difficulties, many of them crucial but which could also be resolved given time. We can never overlook its achievements modest as these are. Policies often need fine tuning, not discarding. Unilateral policy initiatives by EU Member States, even those launched with lofty objectives in sight, often cause greater confusion. Internal EU dialogue needs to be strengthened before new policy initiatives are launched.

The "Union for the Mediterranean" is a case in point. It started off as a vague proposal of a "Mediterranean Union" excluding non-Mediterranean EU member states and threatening to split the EU. Spain was irritated by it because it would eclipse the Barcelona Process. Hence it was called "Barcelona Process – Union for the Mediterranean". At the November 2008 Ministerial meeting, all reference to Barcelona was dropped. The French initiative has helped refocus attention on the Mediterranean at a time when many were losing interest in it.

But it has also underlined that the “Mediterranean approach” to problem solving is sloppy.