

## **The Frozen Union for the Mediterranean**

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The plan for a "Mediterranean Union" was announced before Sarkozy's election in his speech in Toulon in May 2007 and since then it has been consistently developed.<sup>1</sup> In his speech in the Moroccan city of Tangier in October 2007, President Sarkozy started to spell out the nature of the Mediterranean Union, seen as a "Union of Projects" and invited Heads of Mediterranean riparian states to a summit scheduled to take place on July 13th 2008 in Paris. Sarkozy's initial plan included only littoral states and was to function like the G8 meetings of Heads of States and governments, with a Council of the Mediterranean modeled on the Council of Europe. It has rightly been argued that the agreement reached to establish the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM) was not the result of a collective evaluation and a true needs assessment. Instead, as Schumacher points, "it was the consequence of a complex web of interstate interaction processes and of the joint, informally orchestrated opposition of the non-Mediterranean European Union (EU) governments of Germany, Poland and the United Kingdom to unilateral French efforts to establish an exclusive regional cooperation framework".<sup>2</sup> By March 2008, after coordinated pressures, France had to pull back and incorporate the UfM in the wider Euro-Mediterranean mechanism, thus allowing for the participation of all EU members.

On the other side of the Mediterranean, despite their criticisms, southern Mediterranean leaders, as in the case of the Tunisian President, insisted on the importance of not detaching the new Union from the EMP, believing that this "will be called on to contribute towards a re-launching of the EMP, by working to assure a synergy with the existing Euro-Mediterranean instruments".<sup>3</sup>

Turkey has balked as it viewed the UfM as nothing more than a mechanism to keep Turkey out of the EU. This fear is not misplaced as keeping the EU closed to Turkey was part of Sarkozy's campaign platform. In fact, he has argued in the past that Turkey has always been part of Asia Minor and not Europe. Turkey's Prime Minister issued a statement before leaving for Paris in which he sharply criticized France for its opposition to Turkish EU membership, stressing that cooperation in the Mediterranean region and EU negotiations are two different projects.<sup>4</sup> Beyond the negative attitude adopted at the begging by

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<sup>1</sup> Nicolas Sarkozy, Toulon presidential campaign discourse, 7 December 2007, [http://www.u-m-p.org/site/index.php/s\\_informer/discours/nicolas\\_sarkozy\\_a\\_toulon](http://www.u-m-p.org/site/index.php/s_informer/discours/nicolas_sarkozy_a_toulon)

<sup>2</sup> Tobias Schumacher, "Explaining Foreign Policy: Germany, Poland and the United Kingdom in Times of French-Inspired Euro-Mediterranean Initiatives", *Études Hellénique/Hellenic Studies*, 17(2), Special Issue «Union for the Mediterranean: National and Regional Perspectives», Autumn 2009, forthcoming.

<sup>3</sup> Driss, *op.cit.* 2009, p. 2.

<sup>4</sup> Many believe that the only reason for Erdogan's attendance at the Summit in Paris was to use the opportunity to solicit support from the leaders of European and Middle Eastern states for his own battle against the Turkish Supreme Court, which was attempting to ban his party.

Turkey, Sarkozy's opening to Israel<sup>5</sup> created difficulties for many Arab leaders to participate in the Summit in Paris, and certainly didn't prevent them from accusing Israeli for its settlements policy. Israel adopted a positive attitude, only when it became clear that the ENP was not going to be replaced.<sup>6</sup>

The Summit is considered a real diplomatic success, as it effectively ended the political isolation of the Syrian President, Bashar al-Assad, who has long been regarded as a political pariah by the US previous administration. In a heavily publicized event, Assad sat down at the same negotiating table with Israel's prime minister. This was the first occasion when the respective heads of the two states occupied the same room, following three rounds in recent months of negotiations between them, under Turkish mediation. Another success of the Summit was Assad's and the new Lebanese president, Michel Suleiman, agreement to open embassies in each other's capitals.<sup>7</sup> However, the Paris Summit left many issues regarding the UfM structures, functions and effectiveness to be decided at the next Euro-Med meeting in Marseille next November. At this meeting it was decided that a Permanent Commission of the EU member states and the southern partners to be established in order to strengthen co-ownership. It was also decided that the Heads of Governments of the member states, as well as senior officials will have the initiative's political control and that the Arab League will participate in all Summits and at all levels of the UfM – a decision that has increased the number of actors with the power to block decisions.<sup>8</sup>

Aliboni rightly argues that the new Euro-Med architecture has configured a multi-layered "Barcelona Process" in which the UfM is working side by side with the Neighborhood Policy and the array of Commission's policies towards the Mediterranean which, in fact, are bound to replace the EMP.<sup>9</sup> Hence he is not the only one that has doubted the ability of the new framework to respond to regional challenges more effectively than the policy couple unless it becomes more flexible inside the Mediterranean basin and more open to the Middle East. Only a few months after the Marseille Conference had arranged for the array of details bound to make the UFM actually work, Israel's December 2008-January 2009 military intervention in Gaza convinced Arab partners to plainly suspend the implementation of the new policy and all related meetings. Although, France has repeatedly attempted to renew interest for the UfM, many wonder about the prospects of the Union and how it will evolve in the long term, and whether it will prove a more sustainable

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<sup>5</sup> It may be a canny approach, but it's also a risky one. "Sarkozy in Israel acted as an intermediary who could be heard by both sides, and he is more listened to in Israel than his predecessors", says Gilles Kepel. Quoted in Eric Pape, "Mediterranean Bridge Building", *Newsweek*, 19 July 2006, <http://www.newsweek.com/id/147680>

<sup>6</sup> Alfred Tovias, "Current Israeli Perspectives on EU-Mediterranean Relations", *Études Hellénique/Hellenic Studies*, 17(2), Special Issue «Union for the Mediterranean: National and Regional Perspectives», Autumn 2009, forthcoming.

<sup>7</sup> Stefan Steinberg, "France bids to extend its influence through founding of Mediterranean Union", *WSWS*, 16 July 2008, <http://www.wsws.org/articles/2008/jul2008/medu-j16.shtml>

<sup>8</sup> Tobias Schumacher, "A fading Mediterranean dream", *European Voice*, 16 July 2009, p. 7.

<sup>9</sup> Roberto Aliboni, "The Barcelona Process and its prospects after the Union for the Mediterranean", *Études Hellénique/Hellenic Studies*, 17(2), Special Issue «Union for the Mediterranean: National and Regional Perspectives», Autumn 2009, forthcoming.

framework to the widely criticized EMP-ENP couple. The view shared by the majority of Euro-Med experts and, informally, even by some French diplomats, is that the prospects of the UfM are rather bleak.<sup>10</sup>

The postponement of the Euro-Med meeting to be held in Istanbul has left space only for sectoral projects to move. Politically and institutionally the UfM remains frozen. Although primarily of economic drive, if the UfM remains limited to a narrow framework of additional developmental programs for the South, for sure, southern Mediterranean partners do not only expect additional EU aid for their economic development, but also deeper cooperation to deal with the political and socio-cultural challenges they face. The focus on the implementation of projects should not set aside critical region-wide issues, such as democracy-promotion, political reform and the strengthening of civil society, not to mention the prevention of another major outbreak of violence in the Middle East. These questions and a few others, pending, remain fundamental for the future of the UfM. Will Spain have the capacity to revitalize Euro-Mediterranean relations? Spain has always endeavoured to fully benefit from its EU presidential semesters to renew its European commitment and to promote within the EU the strengthening of the relations with the Mediterranean countries.<sup>11</sup> The Spanish Presidency in 2010 will be held during the Barcelona Process 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary and it will be critical for the stillborn Union.

Despite its technocratic character, the UfM is more vulnerable than the EMP to the paralysis caused from the stalemate in the Middle East. Contrary to the technical meetings of the Barcelona Process, which brought together ambassadors and experts, in the Summits of the Heads of States and governments of the UfM, all controversial issues will be in the agenda of discussions, regardless of the fact that some would prefer to abstain from such discussions to avoid political stalemate. French president Nicolas Sarkozy's view that the UfM should be established not in spite of the Israel-Palestine conflict, but because of it, is proving to be too simplistic. Therefore a real effort is needed this year to resolve this conflict for the UfM to move.<sup>12</sup> But even if the UfM overcomes the current stalemate in Gaza, it will inevitably be decayed in a series of development programs, which will not even be placed in a substantive political backdrop. As Pace urges, interactions in the UfM have relapsed back into the same old patterns of behaviour and therefore the UfM is meant to end unless remedial action is taken quickly. "It may not be long before the UfM joins the roll call of dead, unsung and unlamented Mediterranean policies".<sup>13</sup> Hence, if it survives, it will be far from the grand vision initial proposed by Sarkozy and definitely less ambitious than its predecessor.

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<sup>10</sup> Schumacher, "A fading Mediterranean dream", op.cit.

<sup>11</sup> Esther Barbé and Eduard Soler i Lecha, "What role for Spain in the Union for the Mediterranean? Europeanising through Continuity and Adaptation", *Études Hellénique/Hellenic Studies*, 17(2), Special Issue «Union for the Mediterranean: National and Regional Perspectives», Autumn 2009, forthcoming.

<sup>12</sup> Stéphanie Colin, "The Union for the Mediterranean: Progress, Difficulties and Way Forward", *Trade Negotiations Insights*, Vol. 8 No. 5, 2009, <http://ictsd.net/i/news/tni/47668/>

<sup>13</sup> Roderick Pace, "The Mediterranean Union risks being stillborn", *Europe's World*, Summer 2009, p. 148.