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# EU multilateral relations with southern partners: reflections on future prospects

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The Arab awakening and other developments in 2011 have fundamentally changed the situation in the south-eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East. While the EU and its Member States have responded to these changes by reinvigorating and re-launching their essentially bilateral European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), they have done nothing from a multilateral point of view. According to EU officials, what should now be done is to reconsider the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM) with the aim of setting it back on track. However, despite that the UfM proved to be a non-starter before the Arab Spring and has since lost any residual credibility, no clear proposal has emerged yet for how exactly it can be revamped. Which multilateral approach the EU should develop under the new circumstances - not ruling out a revamped UfM - and if after the Arab Spring a multilateral approach still makes sense at all, are both questions waiting for answers. This opinion piece seeks to reflect on this topic with a view to setting out the parameters that will sooner or later facilitate those answers.

### Multilateral relations in the Mediterranean after the Arab Spring

In the future, inter-regional multilateral relations between the EU and the countries of the Mediterranean may not exist, and if they do, they will be radically different from the past. Throughout the 1990s and the 2000s, the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP), with its collective political relationship between the EU and the then 'moderate' Arab regimes in the Mediterranean, proved weak and ambiguous yet sustainable. Yet the same approach today could prove unsustainable, if not unfeasible, with the regimes that are emerging from the Arab Spring transition. Furthermore, the regimes now emerging in the region may ultimately prefer strong bilateral relations with individual European states to a multilateral framework of relations with the EU.

The EU, in contrast, is likely to keep an interest in multilateral relations with its southern partners. The establishing of a multilateral relationship with the countries of the region will serve to strengthen the EU's identity and allow the EU to play a substantial role in the region. If relations built on a multilateral framework were to prove impossible, the EU may explore other options; for instance, the setting up of a constellation of strategic partnerships by implementing a series of 'advanced status' agreements with southern partners willing to do so and/or by initiating some form of reinforced cooperation with

Turkey. However, these options, as interesting as they are, would remain but a set of bilateral agreements between the EU and individual Mediterranean partners and signal the end of a multilateral perspective in Euro-Mediterranean relations.

At the moment, the situation remains extremely fluid in both the Middle East and North Africa. It is therefore impossible to predict whether inter-regional multilateral relations across the Mediterranean will be resumed and, if so, which ones. However, assuming that developing multilateral relations will remain feasible and of interest to both the EU and, more importantly, to its southern partners, the text below offers some remarks on what multilateral EU-Mediterranean-Middle East political relations and their instruments could look like.

### **A new multilateral format for relations with southern partners**

Emerging in the détente era, Euro-Mediterranean relations were developed in the shadow of European security requirements. The decision to associate countries of North Africa and the Levant with European security organisation was made to deal with allegedly shared security challenges. It was however, solely implemented with a view to solving European security problems. Moreover, the involvement of the Arab countries in Euro-Atlantic security chiefly benefitted the Arab regimes themselves, rather than Arab states and peoples. This is why these regimes, for the sake of their own stability and durability, never failed to respond positively to European initiatives, the UfM being no exception.

Against this backdrop, it seems evident that whatever the new initiative may be, it needs to emphasise its discontinuity with previous policies and aim to create a pact which has real significance for both parties. It needs to be a pact between respective governments rather than an extension of European/Western alliances: NATO, EU, OSCE (although these alliances, and the Arab League, could well be included in the pact). While the pact might take EU, Western and international experiences and patterns into account, any political and security cooperation spanning the Mediterranean Sea must rest on its own rationale and be distinctive and autonomous from European and Western models.

A second question regarding the initiative is what the objectives of a possible political pact should be? Given the present unpredictable situation, it is nigh on impossible to single out which concept of security the parties would share, or determine which new political alignments will emerge from the Arab transition. All previous, broad formats of Euro-Mediterranean cooperation aimed to be instrumental in solving conflicts. These ambitions, greater than actual capabilities, played no small part in the overall failure of the cooperation initiatives. It would therefore appear more realistic for multilateral political cooperation efforts across the Mediterranean to leave aside, for the time being at least, conflict resolution and instead emphasise conflict prevention and the building of broad confidence among all parties. In this sense, the correct initiative would discard the kind of operative, complex organisation of the past and act as a diplomatic conference instead and be as open as possible, broadly in keeping with the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe (CSCE) template. In sum, in the emerging regional context, multilateral relations across the Mediterranean Sea should not aim to solve conflicts or be structured as operative bodies as past Euro-Mediterranean policy frameworks have strived to do. The political objective should be the creation of a simple structure which implements good neighbourhood principles and provides parties with the opportunity to keep in touch, thus contributing to the avoidance of any potential violent regional conflicts which are already lurking on the horizon.

A third question concerns the structure and goals of any potential new framework of multilateral relations. The EMP was holistic in format, treading in the CSCE's steps and

linking political and economic decisions to one another. Should potential and new Euro-Med multilateral relations retain that multidimensional character? Following the EMP, multidimensionality has been embedded in the multilateral UfM (and before it in the ENP): the Secretariat is in fact supposed to respond to the political initiatives of the UfM political institutions (the Summit, the Foreign Ministers and the Co-Presidency) and in turn provide technical-economic projects to them. As has already been pointed out, however, the UfM never fully took off and for this reason the willingness to link political and economic dimensions, although there in principle, cannot be matched by deeds. The general idea transpiring from official statements and literature is that the way to revive the UfM would be to emphasise the role of the Secretariat while keeping the ineffective political institutions of the UfM more or less in the backstage, if not allowing the Secretariat to work alone, as if it were a new international developmental agency. (i) The question remains whether eventual EU political relations with southern partners must be linked to economic and developmental relations or if they should remain separate? The experiences of the last ten years and of post-Arab Spring politics seem to suggest a separation is best, so that difficult or poor political relations do not prevent economic development and cooperation from flourishing or at least functioning normally. In this sense, the UfM could be turned into a developmental agency with a specific agenda by severing or at least considerably downsizing its links with political institutions that are in fact too ambitious to be successful in the emerging political context (which looks even more difficult than past one). Ultimately, the holistic approach should be dropped, and if a multilateral framework of Euro-Med political relations has to be established, it should preferably break with past frameworks and be separated into economic, political and other dimensions.

A fourth point regards the southern partners themselves. Whom should EU initiatives address? As a rule, the official answer to this question remains that initiatives should address south-eastern Mediterranean countries only, separate from Arab Gulf countries 'east of Jordan' and excluding Iran. However, developments in 2011 have demonstrated the growing importance of relations between the Arab Mediterranean and Gulf countries. While this is not a new development, in recent years the integration between western and eastern areas in the Middle East has certainly increased in pace and depth. At the same time, the Palestinian issue has expanded from being an Arab-Israeli issue and become an Iranian issue as well. Political re-alignments stemming from the Arab Spring are bound to cause all the different actors between the Atlantic and the Gulf to move politically ever closer. Thus, any new initiatives should take these developments into consideration and aim to move beyond the traditional Mediterranean format by addressing those countries in North Africa, the Middle East, as well as those 'east of Jordan' that show interest in EU initiatives. This is even more so if the future initiative happened to be the kind of diplomatic conference I have mentioned above. In this case, addressing Mediterranean-only partners would not make sense. Furthermore, it would make sense to provide the initiative with a solid transatlantic dimension, enlarging the partnership on the Western side as well.

## **Conclusions**

While the future evolution of European and Western relations with the Middle East remains highly uncertain, Europeans would be well advised to identify, beside bilateral and international relations, the contours of new inter-regional political multilateral relations which can be summarised as follows:

- (a) there should be discontinuity with respect to previous initiatives, so the new initiative would be less of an extension of existing Western alliances and more of an agreement between governments;
- (b) relations could be organised at first as an open diplomatic conference rather than an

- operative framework similar to past EMP;
- (c) relations should address specific dimensions rather than be holistic in nature;
  - (d) relations should target limited political and security objectives, such as conflict prevention rather than resolution;
  - (e) relations should be open to all states in the region, whether friends or not, and regardless of geographic location;
  - (f) initiatives should find a way to include a transatlantic dimension.

With the failure of the UfM, the financial and economic crisis in Europe and, finally, the Arab Spring, these issues have largely been neglected. In the EU, the conventional response has increasingly been to broadly point out that the UfM should possibly be modified and revamped, whilst simultaneously saying little or nothing about which concrete steps to take. Spain has responded chiefly by hosting the UfM Secretariat in the Barcelona Palau de Pedralbes and supporting the idea of sidelining the impotent UfM political bodies and reinforcing the Secretariat instead. A recent article by the new Italian Foreign Minister, Giulio Terzi di Sant'Agata, hints at something close to the idea of a diplomatic conference sketched out above, although he embeds this idea in the context of goals and instruments that are irredeemably gone. (ii) Be this as it may, if an initiative is to be taken, the decision to do so has to come from the Member State capitals. The present EU institutions, in particular the EEAS, cannot decide alone. A new political initiative for the Mediterranean and the Middle East can only take shape with the necessary collaboration between the EU and its Members States, requiring individual capitals to take the initiative. Such initiative and the subsequent extensive political debate throughout Europe would be most welcome.

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***The opinions expressed in this article are those of the author alone and do not necessarily reflect those of the Institute.***

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[i] Ioannides, an adviser to the EU Commission in BEPA (Bureau of European Political Advisers), illustrates what the UfM is expected to be as follows: 'Although it was created in (and was a product of) the pre-spring era, the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM) also has a role to play in the post-revolution Mediterranean societies. It complements bilateral relations between the EU and Southern partners and should encourage effective and result-oriented regional cooperation. The UfM Secretariat in Barcelona could thus operate as a catalyst to bring states, the EIB, IFIs and the private sector together around concrete projects of strategic importance and support job generation, innovation and growth throughout the region'. Isabelle Ioannides, 'EU Responses to Transitions in the Southern Mediterranean', in I. Ioannides and A. Missiroli (eds.), Arab Springs and Transitions in the Southern Mediterranean: The EU and Civil Societies One Year On, Berlaymont papers, BEPA, Issue 1, January 2012. See also Rym Ayadi and Salim Gadi, The Future of Euro-Mediterranean Regional Cooperation: The Role of the Union for the Mediterranean, EuroMeSCo Paper 7, November 2011.

[ii] Giulio Terzi di Sant'Agata, 'A Common Euro-Mediterranean Home', Longitude (magazine of the Italian Foreign Office), No. 12, 2011, pp. 6-7.

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