

The Mediterranean Union risks being stillborn



The high hopes that accompanied last year's launch in Paris of the "Union for the Mediterranean" are already becoming muted, writes **Roderick Pace**. He argues that the political cultures that so beset the Barcelona Process during its 10-year life are now condemning its successor to a similar fate

The infant Union for the Mediterranean (UfM) seems to be suffering from growing pains or perhaps worse. It is already becoming infected by the same maladies that it had set out to heal. Steadily but surely, interactions in the UfM have relapsed back into the same old patterns of behaviour that the invention of the UfM was 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.

The main cause of this sad state of affairs is that the UfM has departed from the pragmatism originally proposed by France's President Nicolas Sarkozy when he launched the idea in 2007. Instead, a strain of typical Mediterranean politics has been allowed to flourish and suffocate the fragile politics of dialogue and good sense.

The UfM's other problem is the hubris of linkage politics. The term linkage politics

is used to describe the vexed approach to world politics that many countries in the Euro-Mediterranean partnership favour, and which already threatens the health of the UfM. The process is reminiscent of the way that as part of the Barcelona Process, progress towards a Mediterranean Security Charter was yoked to progress on the Middle East problem. The result was, of course, that no progress was registered on either.

Last year's early beginnings of the UfM saw as the main north-south issue whether the League of Arab States was to be involved. Israel and a number of EU countries feared that its membership would eventually lead to the ousting of Israel from the process. Last October, Jordan postponed an important Euro-Med conference on water security so as to put pressure on the other UfM member states to accept the League's participation.

In another bout of linkage politics, Egypt suspended a few months later all UfM

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activities when the Gaza conflict erupted, although it could instead have put them at the top of the agenda as a way of tackling the crisis. More positively, Egypt then led the diplomatic effort to end the hostilities but the UfM's suspension had highlighted the way that worthwhile initiatives can become hostage to other issues. It was a form of bravado politics that undermined the credibility of the UfM and further eroded mutual trust in the region.

The second major problem being faced by the UfM is its lack of financial means. In the very early stages of the initiative, Algeria's President Abdelaziz Bouteflika drew attention to this problem by asking how UfM projects were going to be financed, given that most of the appropriate EU funds are already committed until 2013. The prospects that the EU will increase these funds from its own resources, or that sufficient private capital can be found to make up the shortfall, look increasingly dim because of the global economic recession.

A third problem emerges from inside the EU itself. Until the fog of the global recession begins to lift, and so long as Europe is stuck in the limbo of its failure to ratify the Lisbon treaty, the EU will go on being inward-looking and disinclined to address other regions' problems before it has settled its own. It is a stance that others may call short-sighted, but it is nevertheless a fact of life.

Caught as it is in the midst of a worldwide crisis, the infant UfM can least afford to pursue any objectives that risk undermining its own effectiveness, and its credibility. So it is essential that it should return to the first principles set out in President Sarkozy's original proposal. Although at that stage it was still somewhat nebulous as a project, he intuitively laid down some common sense principles that are worth recalling. He proposed that the Mediterranean Union should begin by breaking with the past and with old attitudes and ways of thinking. In other words by breaking with the tendency of those involved in the

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By Khalifa Chater

What this baby needs is intensive care

Roderick Pace's diagnosis seems somewhat harsh. He sees the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM) as an institution in terminal decline with no prospect of progress or development, and little or no vision. This is too much. One of the UfM's virtues is that it has the autonomy to take key decisions about its future, something unimaginable during the wearisome decade of the Barcelona Process, the UfM's predecessor as a hoped-for champion of Mediterranean interests. Whatever faults the UfM may have acquired during its short life, at least it has the means to adapt to changing circumstances, and to review and develop its objectives.

Let us take a candid look at the UfM's problems and see what can realistically be done about them. Nicolas Sarkozy's original plan for a Mediterranean Union had the goal of breaking the geopolitical logjam that was the ruin of Barcelona. But the French President had to take account of the demands of his EU partners. As a result of horse-trading Sarkozy's plan was revised and disfigured, and I'd go as far as to say it was largely eviscerated. It has been reduced rather to a communications and public relations operation, but lacks even a mutual commitment between its northern and southern constituents.

So should we shut down the Union for the Mediterranean here and now, as Roderick Pace seems to suggest, or rather should we make do with it, notwithstanding the intrinsic defects that limit its ambitions? Or, more usefully, should we go for constructive engagement between the partners, hoping to put its founding institutional kernel to work as a force leading towards the creation of a cohesive community that will take everyone's interests into account? I do not believe its fate is to be stillborn. Using the same metaphor, the UfM may be a sick baby but it is one that will survive and thrive under intensive care.

Barcelona Process to play safe. In what can be seen as having a deeper significance than pure rhetoric, Sarkozy appealed for boldness and risk-taking, looking back to age-old capitalist maxim that the greatest dividends are often realised from the most risky investments. The French President let it be understood that he had calculated risks in mind, those that supply our societies with the sort of dynamism they need but not ruinous or thoughtless gambles.

Any objective assessment of the UfM's development since then is unlikely to find much evidence that its major problems stem from the initial difficulties on either the European or the Arab side. These were, one way or another, all satisfactorily resolved. It was the UfM's inability to break with past ways of doing things that has been devastating, and has led to the present sense of disorientation.

As the haggling over the shape of the UfM unfolded, various solutions were found quite quickly, with all the EU member states being eventually included in the formative process. Turkey was reassured that the UfM was not to be a parking place for her outside the EU, and Spain's misgivings about the abandonment of the Barcelona Process were placated, and even generously rewarded, when Barcelona was chosen as the seat of the UfM's secretariat.

Divisions on the Arab side had looked more life-threatening although in the end they too petered out. The mini-Arab summit held in Tripoli in mid-June last year bringing together Algeria, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, Tunisia and Syria was able to avoid the complete rejection of the UfM, even though Libya decided to stay out on the grounds that the

new grouping could endanger both African and Arab unity.

When UfM countries foreign ministers met in Marseille last October, a patchy solution was found to the question of including the League of Arab States. The compromise was that the League would be involved at all levels, albeit as an Observer, while Israel was given a seat on the UfM's secretariat for the next three years, with the possibility of a further extension.

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But what the 43 participating states overlooked was that age-old Mediterranean malaise – grown more conspicuous than ever with the advent of the Israel-Palestine issue – of the lack, and apparent impossibility, of a proper dialogue between the region's many organisations and multilateral initiatives. If there were one single thing the UfM needed to break with it was this.

The Barcelona Process that was replaced by the UfM illustrates the problem. Although it was often described as the only initiative in which Arabs and Israelis met under the same roof, what routinely happened under that roof was both bewildering yet rarely visible to the public. In numerous meetings that ranged from scholarly encounters to sessions of the Euro-Mediterranean Parliamentary Assembly, discussion quickly turned into confrontation and often ended in stalemate.

No matter whether the subject was economic, social or political, at committee, working group or plenary level, exchanges were all too easily transformed into a "continuation of war by other means". Words replaced bullets, denunciations and walk-outs became the strategic ploys, and intransigence became the bravery of a battlefield whose heroes were those who obstinately

refused to concede a point to their opponent, even when evidently wrong.

The sad conclusion to be drawn from all this is that no matter how the institutions of the UfM may be strengthened, and no matter how much the concept of its co-ownership catches on, little will really change in the UfM unless attitudes and working methods change first. In other words, Nicolas Sarkozy's passionate appeal for a break with the past and the old ways of doing things still holds the key to the future. The first step for the Mediterranean Union is to start a proper dialogue with the sole aim of moving away from these longstanding patterns of behaviour.

The auguries are not encouraging; Mediterranean countries are strongly resistant to making a fresh start. When the UfM was launched in Paris in July 2008, Syria's President Bashar Assad reportedly walked out of the room when Israel's Prime Minister Ehud Olmert took the floor.

So how likely is it that the political elites of these countries will muster the acumen needed to set the UfM on a fresh course? Back in 2002, a group of Arab intellectuals and scholars wrote the first in a series of Human Development Reports published by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), and in it they charted a course that marked out the many reefs the Arab world needs to navigate successfully. Yet today there seem to be few movers and shakers in the Mediterranean region, including Israel, who will be bold enough to respond to Sarkozy's appeal for change. What is missing is boldness, a break with the past, simplicity and let's not overlook it capital. □

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The UfM needs to examine and deal with the issues raised by relationships in the organisation that are out-of-kilter, namely inequality in trade and impediments to the free movement of people. Co-development programmes need to be undertaken as a priority in building the UfM, and the study of mutual interests would give its decision makers an opportunity to listen to the expectations of the public

To succeed, the UfM needs to operate in an environment of peace, with normalised relations among its partners. The Gaza war showed clearly that hiding the political dimension of a conflict – in this case between Israel and the Arab nations – renders it impossible to create the conditions needed to implement any programmes, even purely technical ones. This fact ought to have been taken into account when the Mediterranean project was at the design stage, and the Paris Summit of July 2007 that launched the UfM in fact presented a review of the geopolitics needed. As long as the peace process between all of its partners remains incomplete, any meeting of the UfM conference will be constrained. Seeking such a peaceful environment in the Mediterranean region is never going to be easy, but the UfM enthusiasts should have been aware of this obstacle, and might have perhaps postponed the project until they saw a clearer way forward.

That said, the reality is that UfM is here, and many of us hope that it is here to stay. The encouraging thing is that, as a necessary consequence of globalisation, the adjoining areas of Europe and the Mediterranean countries are going through an integration process that is likely to go well beyond a mere market entity implemented by the European Union. Sooner or later, the creation of a true community of values will be on the agenda. Would it not be sensible for the supporters of UfM to go for a strategy of "rational pragmatism" so as to support, speed up and maybe anticipate this trend? □

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