

The Union for the Mediterranean: a New Chance for Middle East Peace or the Emperor's New Clothes? ¹

President Sarkozy's brainchild, the Union for the Mediterranean, was finally born on 13 July 2008, after a whole series of mutations. It has been seriously slimmed down in terms of ambitions and kneaded into a shape which fits neatly into the framework of the EU's ailing Barcelona Process. The opening summit, one day before the French national day, was spectacular with its solemn declarations of leaders of otherwise estranged nations, highlights of silent diplomacy and theatrical diplomatic incidents. The actual decisions were remarkably modest. What can the Union for the Mediterranean really achieve in the long run? Will it open a new road to peace in the Middle East and between other hostile nations in the Mediterranean area? Or will it just lethargically plod along like its predecessor, the Barcelona Process, once the French presidency is over and Nicolas Sarkozy has to concentrate on domestic problems?

Introduction

The Mediterranean has always been integral to Europe. The Mediterranean also poses the question which we never seem to be able to answer: where does Europe stop, why is one side of the Mediterranean part of the European Union and the other side isn't. That it was France that came up with the idea of enhancing the Mediterranean relationship is not surprising. After all, France is an Atlantic power, a European power and a Mediterranean power.

Background

Sarkozy introduced the Mediterranean Union in his inauguration speech in May 2007 as a new form of solidarity and partnership. The issue was raised in a number of high level negotiations. In December 2007, France, Spain and Italy expressed support. Following these initial consultations, Germany and France prepared a paper setting out a common vision for the future of the Union for the Mediterranean for the European Council of March 2008. The European Council of 13/14 March 2008 approved the principle of a Union for the Mediterranean and invited the Commission to present proposals defining the modalities of the "Barcelona Process: Union for the Mediterranean". On 20 May a Communication of the European Commission² invited the European Council at its meeting in June 2008 to discuss and endorse the proposals contained in this

¹ Guest speakers were **Anne Prédour**, French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Department of European Cooperation, in charge of Euromed partnership; **Rosa Balfour**, European Policy Centre, Senior Policy Analyst and **Cem Özdemir**, Member of European Parliament (Greens). The meeting was chaired by **Hana Bet-El**, academic, author and policy adviser, Brussels. The debate took place under Chatham House Rule. The opinions expressed do not necessarily represent the opinions of the Heinrich Böll

² http://ec.europa.eu/external_relations/euromed/docs/com08_319_en.pdf

Communication and to put them to the inaugural meeting of the “Barcelona Process: Union for the Mediterranean” planned for 13 July 2008 in Paris.

The BPUM does not want to erase the Barcelona Process, it intends to make it stronger. First of all, it is a shared partnership with a north-south co-presidency, France and Egypt. Secondly, the governance structure is more coherent, there will be a joint secretariat, hopefully in the south, and a joint permanent committee based in Brussels.

In this better integrated union, the emphasis will be on regional projects which can be south-south or north-south. These projects will give the BPUM more visibility. The Paris declaration of 13 July 2008³ mentions the following main priorities: de-pollution of the Mediterranean, maritime and territorial highways, renewable energies, higher education, civil protection and a Mediterranean business initiative.. France wants to develop projects on other topics too, like access to civil nuclear power and scientific cooperation. The next steps till end French presidency will be a number of meetings of the Joint Committee, of senior official meetings and six ministerial EUROMED conferences of which the main one will take place in Marseille on 4 and 5 November (foreign ministers).

Sarkozy welcomed all the Arab countries on board which means that the BPUM cannot avoid the Middle East peace issue. In the Paris declaration the Israeli-Palestine peace process was explicitly supported. Also, the Prime ministers of Israel and of Syria were present which can be seen as a first step towards a solution in the peace process. The summit enjoyed a high level of participation. Only Libya declined. Four new countries joined the process: Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Monaco and Montenegro. Turkey played an important role. At the beginning, the BPUM was seen as a second choice to the EU, but the EU accession negotiations continue and the declaration on the BPUM clearly shows that it will be totally independent from the accession negotiations.

At the Marseille ministerial conference⁴, there is a number of problems at the technical and institutional level to solve. Egypt will be co-president of the BPUM, but on EU side the situation is unclear. The co-presidency has to be coherent with the external representation of the EU which means that the Czechs will get the co-presidency at the beginning of 2009, but as France wants to keep playing a role, this needs to be defined how. Finally, a decision has to be made on the location and the mandate of the secretariat which is important for selecting and implementing the projects.

Main problems and criticisms

The subject of the BPMU is not as controversial as it used to be a year ago, though some are concerned that it is France’s main intention to sell French nuclear power plants. Another concern still is that it may have been intended as an alternative for countries like

3

http://www.ue2008.fr/webdav/site/PFUE/shared/import/07/0713_declaration_de_paris/Joint_declaration_of_the_Paris_summit_for_the_Mediterranean-EN.pdf

⁴ http://www.ue2008.fr/PFUE/lang/en/accueil/PFUE-11_2008/PFUE-03.11.2008/Euromed_affaires_etrangeres

Turkey or Croatia for EU membership which would not be acceptable, because it is a different process. Another problem was that it would be restricted to the coastal states is not existing any more thanks to Angela Merckel's intervention. Also, the duplication of institutions one was afraid of is not going to take place. There are remaining questions, but the idea of the BPMU certainly helped to focus on the area which as such is a good thing.

At the moment the BPUM looks very much like an instrument to prevent immigration from the southern countries. The solution to the migration problem cannot be that we only talk about border management on our (northern) sides of the Mediterranean, it has to include sustainable solutions. The opening of the EU's labour market is a key point as well as the development of renewable energies: the countries in the south of the Mediterranean are wind and solar rich.

Important is also the issue of corruption. Some of the European countries playing the game of corruption as well: in Tunisia, Egypt, Syria. Transparency International⁵ also looks into what countries are the most corrupt in giving money, in bribing. Most European countries are high on the list. We should take note of that. In this sense the BPUM is no progress. Syria for example stated clearly that it wants it the „Chinese way. It is almost as if the European Union is condoning the Chinese way. We have given up on ENP and human rights dialogues.

There is also a foreign policy dimension to all this: the BPUM could help to improve relations between members like Morocco and Algeria. The southern Mediterranean states have strong national priorities. There are security problems, states that do not cooperate with each other and political problem of states that are not sufficiently inclusive as the Arab human development reports⁶ clearly show. In the context of the BPUM the north will inherit some conflicts of the south and will have to deal with them.

The location of the secretariat will have political implications. For some countries the question still is: how will we be involved, once the BPUM is on its way as a Franco-Egyptian project. Also, how will non-Mediterranean EU member states be involved? How are the Barcelona Process and the European Neighbourhood Policy instruments integrated? What do we do with the knowledge that there is a lack of cooperation between member states in the south which was a major problem in the BP, especially when it comes to energy distribution, environmental protection and the pollution of the Mediterranean? Also, how do we deal with different expectations? Egypt still has to implement the institutional framework of ENP, Algeria is not interested in neighbourhood policy, Syria's ratification of the association agreements is still pending. Finally, what about the promotion of democracy and human rights, what about the parliamentary involvement and that of civil society? According to the Paris Declaration, the Euromed Parliamentary Assembly will be the legitimate parliamentary expression of the BPUM, but this needs to be adopted

⁵ <http://www.transparency.org/>

⁶ <http://arabstates.undp.org/subpage.php?spid=14>

This leads to the question: for the benefit of whom is the BPUM? For the EU it was a divisive exercise even though in the end there was an agreement that this exercise should be a common European one.

For the south Mediterranean the BPUM has ensured that it gets more attention. This could lead to more investment: the projects are aiming at regional infrastructure. But what about access to European markets, access of citizens to the EU and treatment of south Mediterranean citizens in the EU. If the agenda is set by the EU, the level of co-ownership will be low. On the other hand, the south Mediterranean states have problems of putting a common agenda forward which all adds up to a power asymmetry.

In spite of all criticism and scepticism, there are innovative aspects about the BPUM: it strengthens the high level contacts. Then again, it has to be pointed out that it is inter-governmental in contrast with the EUROMED Partnership which knows a lot of bilateral contacts on various levels. Also, there is a limited ability of BPUM to exercise peer pressure.

Finally, we should not pack all the problems of the region into the BPUM. The situation in Syria is also a consequence of the war in Iraq and if we want to prevent similar things happening in Iran, we will have to deal with the Syrian leadership and to move forward with the Israeli- Palestinian peace process.

The secretariat

The secretariat of the BPUM is not really serving as a clearing house for the whole range of activities. It is rather concentrating on the projects, the organisation of donor conferences, managing contracts and raising money. The mandate is restricted. The Euromed Partnership could use a secretariat. It looks like a useful joint venture, but with specific competencies. The conference of Marseille will define the mandate. Some states want to focus on the projects, others want a larger mandate. Some European states are not willing to give such a power to the secretariat. It will have to be decided whether it is going to political or technical.

Human rights

A declaration of the Euromed Human Rights network and the Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies asked not to give the co-presidency to Egypt. We are talking about co-ownership, but at the same time we are talking about regimes that practice torture, torture against members of the same NGOs that we are supporting through the Euromed Partnership. In the south Mediterranean the EU has not done enough for human rights. With the ENP it was making some inroads and the human rights dialogues could have been important. Morocco and Tunisia probably signed the human rights protocol believing it would not be an important aspect of EU relations and Egypt managed to postpone twice the meeting of the subcommittee on human rights. We don't know when the next one will take place. These are huge problems. And the BPUM legitimises the non-addressing of human rights issues. One of the reasons of setting the BPUM up was to improve relations with Algeria and with Libya - for pure geostrategic reasons, not to change the way human rights are addressed in these countries.

The human rights issue is a double-edged sword. In 2003, regime change was one of the justifying reasons for the invasion in Iraq. Standards within the EU are also falling considering the treatment of migrants from the south Mediterranean. The thing is that the dialogue on human rights always ended in blaming each other; we need to go beyond that.

Under the European Neighbourhood Policy, serious talks took place which could not take place under the Barcelona Process. There has also been a little bit of peer pressure – maybe we have not been patient enough. In the ENP so many incentives had been created that, with a well-meaning government, some of these things could have been taken forward. Within the BPUM it looks as if we say: let's do some projects and we will all be happy.

Arab League

There used to be an Arab Union, older than the EU. Perhaps it been better if the EU had co-operated with existing structures and help the south Mediterranean countries with its experience in stead of imposing a new concept. The south Mediterranean countries do not need European money. They have money of their own, only some of them have everything whilst others are starving. If Europeans want peace and democracy to flourish, they should better to do it with the Arab League. The region has to develop with what it has, with the help of European expertise, not necessarily with European money. And, finally, nothing will happen without the solution of the Palestinian problem.

The dialogue with the Arab League started in 1974. It didn't work because there is a huge discrepancy between the members of the League. The Maghreb countries for example have contact with the north but not with each other (e.g. Morocco and Algeria).

Conclusion

The EU has to put its money where its mouth is. The main focus should lie on sorting out what the secretariat is and what it is going to do, how it to interact with NATO, UN, civil society etc. We should not just stop the previous process, neither should we create nothing in parallel. The BPUM has to be a co-ordinating institution that does not sideline all that has been achieved already. ENP has already encompassed all the priorities of the Commission. The ENP should not end because of the BPUM process.