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Mediterranean Fatigue? The State of Multilateral Frameworks in the Middle East

Multilateral frameworks have been a hallmark of numerous foreign policies aimed at reducing insecurity and resolving conflicts in the Mediterranean and greater Middle East region. Yet these initiatives have lately been showing signs of wear. The EU's Union for the Mediterranean initiative does not adequately address the problems faced with its earlier regional programs, the US's multilateral approach towards Iran has fallen flat, and NATO's new Strategic Concept might very well leave Mediterranean Dialogue countries out in the cold. What hope is there for the future of multilateral frameworks in the Middle East? This Policy Paper is the outcome of the tenth workshop of the Expert Advisory Group (EAG) - European and South Mediterranean Actors - Partners in Conflict Prevention and Resolution, held in Cairo, Egypt from February 26-28, 2010.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

- | | |
|--|--|
| 1. Introduction | <i>Carlo Masala and Sarah Anne Rennick</i> |
| 2. The Union for the Mediterranean – Views from Europe and the South | <i>Ahmed Driss and Antje Nötzold</i> |
| 3. A New EU "Grand Strategy" for the Mediterranean | <i>Alessandro Quarenghi</i> |
| 4. NATO's New Strategic Concept: What Future for Partnerships? | <i>Carlo Masala</i> |
| 5. Obama's Multilateralism: A Liability as far as Confronting Iran | <i>Emily B. Landau</i> |
| 6. Conclusions | <i>Eleni Fotiou</i> |

1

Introduction

by Carlo Masala and Sarah Anne Rennick

Has anyone recently heard something about the Mediterranean? Not to be mistaken: there is a lot going on in Mediterranean countries and in their relations with each other. Greece is shaken by the financial crisis, as Portugal and Spain probably will be as well. And Turkey seems to be embarking on a new direction in its foreign policy with regards to the Middle East. Yet little progress has been achieved between Israel and the Palestinian Authority, and everything is over-

shadowed by the known unknowns of the Iranian nuclear dossier.

But what about the multilateral initiatives the EU and NATO started almost 16 years ago with the aim of bringing the southern shore countries closer to each other and closer to Europe? What about the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP) and NATO's Mediterranean Dialogue? Of course they are still in place and they still work in accordance with their foundational acts, but do they contribute to their self-set goals? And can the Obama administration's multilateral approach towards Iran really change how the nuclear dossier is managed? It seems that the time of multilateral frameworks as in-

struments to regulate conflicts in and around the Mediterranean has suffered a major blow; indeed, we observe a kind of Mediterranean fatigue when it comes to multilateral initiatives. More and more countries are turning their backs on multilateralism in the region as a guiding principal for policies, and turning instead to more traditional forms of cooperation such as unilateral actions (France), bilateral ones (Turkey - Saudi Arabia) and minilateral (EU 3) policies. At the same time, new actors - traditionally skeptical of any form of multilateral cooperation - are entering (China) or re-entering (Russia) the Middle Eastern stage.

And Europe and the US? Strangely, even the initiators of multilateral cooperation in the region seem to have lost their interest in keeping existing frameworks alive. For years now, neither the EU nor the US has tried to come up with proposals to exit the cul-de-sac that the EMP and NATO's Mediterranean Dialogue have driven into. And the prospects are not encouraging. With the financial and economic crisis, there is a risk that Europe as well as the US will become more inward-looking and will reschedule their foreign policy priorities. While it seems that the Mediterranean is in the doldrums, we still believe in the importance of multilateralism in the region. Through the various analyses and policy recommendations provided in the brief, the EAG hopes to contribute to the revitalization of these frameworks.

2

The Union for the Mediterranean – Views from Europe and the South

by Ahmed Driss and Antje Nötzold

The idea behind the Barcelona Process: Union for the Mediterranean (UfM) was to revitalize relations between Europe and its Middle Eastern partner states and to create new dynamics, especially regarding the question of co-ownership and the visibility of citizens through regional and sub-regional projects. Thus the UfM – as the latest EU attempt to create trans-regionalism – should

complement the bilateral European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) and bring the regions closer together.

Southern Perspective

Between the Barcelona Process and the UfM, it seems that there has only been a change in nomenclature. Although mechanisms were certainly reformulated, these have engendered consequences, especially at the institutional level. The co-presidency was presented, on both shores of the Mediterranean, as a means to guarantee co-ownership; however, the attested absence of co-ownership gives the new institutions, in particular the co-presidency, a negative veneer. For example, during the Gaza crisis of early 2009, the co-presidency should have demonstrated that this was the moment for all partners to meet and to work towards a common solution. Instead, the Egyptian presidency suspended the UfM. Moreover, the rotation of the co-presidency is still considered as an institutional problem. From the Southern perspective, the mechanism to ensure this rotation remains unclear: if a consensus is not reached, absolute blocking can occur. The rule of consensus can prevent a systematic rotation between all Southern members of the Union, as it would block Israel, or any other state considered not able or sufficiently useful, from assuming the co-presidency.

The mandate and the status of the secretariat are also considered a problem. The wish expressed in the beginning of the process was to have a very flexible structure; instead, we see a very burdensome one. Moreover, the higher degree of politicization of the secretariat is a real handicap, as an equilibrium should be maintained at all times.

Some of the existing problems should be resolved today given that a general secretary is appointed. But will this appointment relaunch the UfM? Only five member states (France, Egypt, Spain, Tunisia and Jordan) met at the beginning of last January in Cairo in an attempt to relaunch the project paralyzed by the Israeli war on Gaza. This

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meeting was the occasion to support the candidacy of a Jordanian ambassador to the post of general secretary. Although an experienced diplomat, the Jordanian candidate was able to take advantage of the absence of the Maghreb countries, which could have legitimately claimed the post and are now totally excluded from the governing bodies. This will certainly influence their commitment to the project.

European Perspective

For the EU, projects to promote regional cohesion, economic integration, and infrastructural connections are at the heart of the UfM. As some progress is recognizable in these domains, the prospects for the UfM are most promising, especially with regard to the priority projects. Nevertheless, the projects solely proposed from the European side will serve first and foremost European interests, and alone would not be sufficient to improve the regional economic situation.

While the UfM refers to the political goals of the Barcelona Process, it remains vague regarding the concrete aims of the political and security cooperation and addresses the regional security challenges only in rhetoric. In fact, the UfM covers security and stability-relevant issues only insufficiently. Thus the UfM – like the EMP before it – is still dependent on regional events and developments.

Beyond these characteristics, the UfM as a concept to foster trans-regional cooperation is characterized by the misconception that it deals with two unified regions. Whereas the EU acts as a more or less coherent player, the Mediterranean states are far from acting together. For instance, they do not meet to discuss mutual interest amongst themselves. Hence, there is no common agenda or joint proposals for cooperation on the part of the Southern states. This gives the EU the opportunity to use the UfM as a tool to work on projects in their interest only.

Policy Recommendations:

- In the absence of initiatives coming from the southern shore of the Mediterra-

nean, southern countries have to exceed the quarrels of an institutional nature and put more energy into achieving the objectives of the UfM.

- The European concept of sub- and trans-regional cooperation has to be called into question with regard to the Mediterranean, as it is neither a uniform and coherent region, nor characterized by the same point of departure as the European integration process.
- In tackling security challenges, the EU should focus on flexible forms of multilateral cooperation to avoid being tied up in regional conflicts and power structures. With regards to domestic reforms, the bilateral framework of the ENP, with its Action Plans and benchmarks, provides a more suitable approach.

3

A New EU "Grand Strategy" for the Mediterranean

by Alessandro Quarenghi

Initially launched as innovative and external to the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership, the Union for the Mediterranean was condemned to failure when it was brought back to the framework of the Barcelona Process. In its short life, the new institution has signaled nothing but its profound inability to provide a viable framework for cooperation between the two shores of the Mediterranean.

Its shortcomings are unlikely to be simply temporary. Not only has trans-regional EU-Mediterranean cooperation always been a mainly European process fuelled by European initiatives and reflecting European interests, but the contractual idea on which it was based – security in exchange for economic and social development – has simply not been working for some time.

Southern partners have been granted relatively open access to the European market, something that is satisfactory from their perspective because it helps them achieve relatively high development rates but does not generate unsustainable de-

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mands for socio-political change. Yet for individual European Mediterranean countries, their worsening security concerns related to immigration are not being answered, as shown by their increasing resort to old-fashioned forms of bilateral cooperation.

This is not the first time the European Union has attempted to revive, unsuccessfully, its Mediterranean strategy; it is now time to develop a new European "Grand Strategy" towards the region. Instead of continuing to create "satellite" countries, the EU should consider the same liberal strategy that supported the beginning of its own unification process: supporting any potential for regional or sub-regional Middle Eastern – and not necessarily only Mediterranean – integration. The European Union's values and interests require the creation of a liberal and cooperative regional supra-national organization, capable of working as a real partner – not only rhetorically referred to as one.

To date, all Middle Eastern attempts to improve regionalism have been unsuccessful, with the partial exception of the Gulf Cooperation Council. The European experience has inspired a number of regional attempts at structured cooperation, but it has generally been understood as a system of governance (rooted in the common market) or as an idea (integration as a way to pacify a sub-system of states). Neither, for different reasons, is theoretically able to provide a suitable model for Middle Eastern regionalism or sub-regionalism. On the contrary, the functional approach to integration, in other words that of a pragmatic and functional process which develops from building on partial but positive results, has been neglected.

In the region there are plenty of issues that could theoretically be better managed on a regional or sub-regional level: energy, water, Islamism, diaspora communities, economic and social development, the environment, etc. However, and in spite of some relatively recent and positive trends, today's political, social and economic regional structures do not generate strong enough demands for a top-down (government-led) or a bottom-up (non-government

driven) process. Any integrative process is unlikely to be able to kick off "naturally" or derive from regional efforts.

Policy Recommendations:

- Instead of trying to revive its Mediterranean approach, the EU should define a new "Grand Strategy" centered on sustaining any regional or sub-regional integrative efforts.
- In order for this new "Grand Strategy" to have a chance to be effective, it should work with the United States.
- From this perspective, Turkey's accession path to the EU should also be revised: the EU should support new Turkish regional activism and not maintain its accession in its current state of limbo.
- Any trans-national cooperative initiatives currently being considered (for instance in the energy sector) should be implemented only if they bring comparable gains to all participating actors and do not harm regional or sub-regional cooperation.

4

NATO's New Strategic Concept: What Future for Partnerships?

by Carlo Masala

NATO's work on a new Strategic Concept has attracted a lot of attention amongst policy makers and policy analysts. One issue the new Strategic Concept must deal with – preferably through the proposal of a new initiative – concerns the future of NATO's partnerships. Although NATO officials have never publicly raised any doubts about the current partnership frameworks or their activities, behind closed doors there is a lot of talk about the future purpose and direction of these partnerships.

The question of the partnerships' role is key to NATO's development. So far, partnerships have been an integral part of NATO's security policy, a tool to achieve the organization's objectives. But the best use of existing partnership programs is, arguably, still lacking. At present, there are a variety

"Although we still don't know what [NATO's] Strategic Concept will entail..., there is enough evidence to believe that it won't be encouraging for the partner countries within the Mediterranean Dialogue."

of problematic aspects relating both to the internal functioning of the different programs and to their external effects. Partnerships have, admittedly, been constantly ad-journed, but the status quo is still sub-optimal. Unclearness of the partnerships' role and yield vis-à-vis NATO's objectives, fragmentation and rigidity of existing frameworks, lack of opportunities for self-differentiation, the arguable dysfunction of the EAPC,¹ and internal managerial incoherencies all burden existing programs. Also, a variety of different countries have expressed interest in closer contact and different degrees of cooperation with NATO. These demands cannot be met by the existing partnership framework.

In the current debate, which takes place amongst experts and officials, high emphasis is placed on the question of how to bring NATO's so called Contact Countries (e.g. Australia, South Korea, and Japan) closer to the Alliance and how to give them a greater say in its decision-making process. The future direction of the Mediterranean Dialogue as well as the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative is almost not present in current debates. This seems at first sight paradoxical given the importance the Alliance - over the past 15 years - has attached to the establishment and the deepening of a structured cooperation between the Mediterranean countries.

But discourse with regard to partnership has changed over the past years in national capitals as well as in Brussels. Instead of having partnerships as a kind of outreach program, NATO member countries are in search of real partners, meaning militarily potent and politically willing to cooperate with the Alliance. This change in perception of partners has led to the current debate on how to bring these partners closer to NATO.

At the same time the financial and economic crisis which has hit most NATO member countries hard has already led to

various proposals on how to cut back the overall budget of the Alliance. And the financial shortcomings of NATO's Afghan mission aggravated the search for getting more "bang for the buck."

Although we still don't know what the Strategic Concept will entail with regards to partnerships, there is enough evidence to believe that it won't be encouraging for the partner countries within the Mediterranean Dialogue, and to a lesser extent for those within the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative.

So the question looms whether there is a way for NATO partners in the Mediterranean to attract NATO's attention. Three issues might be worth considering.

Policy Recommendations:

- Become more interesting for NATO by participating with a substantial number of troops in NATO led operations, especially in countries with a Muslim majority.
- Get rid of subsidization and participate in Mediterranean Dialogue activities at your own expense, thereby showing that you appreciate the cooperation and you are willing to invest in it.
- Offer more! Sign Individual Partnership Action Plans in which you declare to expand the range of activities in your cooperation with NATO.

5

Obama's Multilateralism: A Liability as far as Confronting Iran

by Emily B. Landau

One of the principles that Obama adopted for his foreign policy agenda upon entering the White House was multilateralism, referring to what he considered to be the proper framework for the US to pursue its foreign policy goals and deal with global challenges. His propensity to appreciate the virtues of working with international partners was strengthened by the fact that it would be one more way to set himself apart from his predecessor. Obama seemed to shun the idea of strong US leadership in favor of a view of the US as one of a group of strong

¹ Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council

"International efforts to confront and curb Iran's nuclear ambitions over the past year is the reality that weakens the case of multilateralism."

nations who will together face the ills of the world.

Multilateralism certainly sounds like a good idea. It holds the promise of giving everyone a more equal say, with the prospect of creating a "whole" that is more than the sum of its parts. When facing Iran, Obama also played up the advantages of a multilateral approach that would allow determined international actors to present a strong and united front to Iran, in a manner that would enhance their ability to alter the latter's behavior in the desired direction.

However, while multilateralism certainly has some advantages, it is not the best approach for dealing with all global concerns. Looking at what has transpired on the Iranian front since Obama took office, we find that the initial stage was actually a US initiative. Obama proclaimed his outstretched hand in the hope for an unclenched Iranian fist in return. When this proclamation failed to produce any positive results, and it was time for actual negotiations (only 9 months later), Obama latched onto the P5+1 format with his message of multilateralism. The P5 format for making decisions on sanctions in the context of the UN Security Council thus became the format for negotiating more generally with Iran. But the P5 had not been able to decide on strong sanctions during the 2006-2008 period due to their conflicting strategic and economic interests vis-à-vis both Iran and each other. So what basis was there to believe that the P5+1 group would be any better equipped to play the role of a strong and *unified* negotiator? Indeed it proved not to be. Divisions between the US and European states on one side, and Russia and China on the other continued to convey a dangerous message of lack of coordination and determination to Iran.

While multilateral formats always face the problem of different states not necessarily being on the same page, there is normally space for reaching common ground and sufficient time to do so. In the case of the P5+1 facing Iran, there not only is insufficient time, but unity of purpose is the essential precondition (rather than the ultimate

goal) of the multilateral framework. Indeed, success critically hinges on presenting a unified stance to the state in question.

International efforts to confront and curb Iran's nuclear ambitions over the past year is the reality that weakens the case of multilateralism, and raises doubts as to whether it is indeed the best framework for pursuing international goals.

Policy Recommendations:

- A particularly problematic situation is an unbalanced negotiations framework, when one "side" is multilateral (i.e. a group of states) and the other is a single state. If the multilateral group is not united in their position, their bargaining position will be severely weakened vis-à-vis the single state.
- In negotiating with Iran, the Obama administration faces this constraint in the P5+1 format. To enhance prospects of successful negotiations, the US would be well advised to shed this framework and take the lead in a bilateral negotiation with Iran.

6

Conclusions

by Eleni Fotiou

What has brought the Mediterranean region to a status of fatigue is the lack of progress on security issues: the incapacity to resolve protracted conflicts and the perpetuation of disputes with a high potential for escalation. The establishment of an area of security, as seen through the European lens of liberal idealism, means providing support for sustainable economic development and promoting democracy. Both have yet to bear the desired results.

The EU has tried to re-address its policy towards the Mediterranean region by introducing the Union for the Mediterranean, a revitalized Barcelona Process. Nonetheless, as of April 2010, this policy has not managed to bridge the contradicting interests nor the differing perceptions between the North and South. This is mainly because it aims at ad-

addressing the challenges the EU member states face and at serving their interests and priorities. However, the fact that this policy deals mainly with low politics issues in view of establishing a free market in the region makes it highly unlikely to succeed. As long as insecurity in the region remains the top issue, all others will become politicized. At the same time, the EU does not provide the region's countries with a coherent framework of relationship. Simultaneously, the distribution of resources according to NATO's Mediterranean Dialogue finds itself under heavy criticism. Thus, the question to ask is whether there is a way to foster regional integration and support regional efforts in the Mediterranean, and whether the EU and the West at large is ready to cooperate with the "Other's" terms.

The problem lies in the lack of effective regional leadership. Although Israel and Iran have the military capability to serve as leaders, it is highly unlikely that the Arab states will recognize them as such. Instead, Turkey's recent activism in the Eastern Mediterranean enjoys an extent of recognition by the Muslim world due to several important factors: the "religious" profile of the AKP government; the development of an economic cooperation with the Arab states of the Middle East and the Gulf; and its good relations with the West, namely the new US administration and the EU. In addition, due to its EU accession process, Turkey has managed to make some political and economic reforms which have allowed it to propose a model that can "reconcile" Islam with European democratic norms and integrate the Eastern Mediterranean into the developed world.

Nonetheless, before achieving this, Turkey has to face a significant number of security issues that have their roots in the Eastern Mediterranean and directly involve the country, such as radical political Islam, the Cyprus issue, stability in Iraq and the Kurdish question, energy security etc. However, as Turkey faces some domestic strains, it cannot allocate adequate capacities and infrastructure to deal with all these issues at

the same time. In addition, the EU does not offer a clear path towards full membership, the US do not seem willing to support Turkey's stance towards Iran, and the bilateral relations with Israel continue to worsen, making things even harder.

What is the role of the US and the new Obama administration in light of the observed Mediterranean fatigue? What role will Russia play in the security gap in the region? To which extent will Greece's financial crisis affect the rest of the Mediterranean? What is clear is that the Mediterranean region has its own ideological and mental dynamics. Religious, cultural, and ethnic divisions bear a historic weight. Intercultural dialogue is helpful and necessary in order to create an environment of mutual understanding, but it is not adequate to tackle the protracted conflicts in the region.



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About the Expert Advisory Group (EAG)

This project aims to explore a constructive and sustained relationship between European and South Mediterranean actors in Conflict Prevention and Resolution, in the context of past and present collaborative efforts in the Middle East and North Africa. The main objective is to create a knowledge-based network in order to advise relevant actors from both shores of the Mediterranean on current political and security developments on an ad-hoc basis.

The Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung and the members of the group agree with the general thrust of this policy paper but not necessarily with every individual statement. The responsibility for facts and opinions expressed in this policy paper rests exclusively with the contributors and their interpretations do not reflect the views or the policy of the publishers.

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