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## THE UNION FOR THE MEDITERRANEAN FAILS TO PROVIDE A NEW TOOL BOX FOR THE REGION

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On May 20<sup>th</sup>, Spain's foreign ministry said in a statement that "the Spanish presidency of the European Union (EU) and the two co-chairs of the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM), Egypt and France, had agreed to postpone the summit scheduled for June 5-7<sup>th</sup> in Barcelona. The statement also said "this postponement will also give a greater amount of time for the process of Israeli-Palestinian talks to begin to yield results." Following the Israeli attack on a humanitarian flotilla of ships trying to break the blockade of the Gaza strip such words sound like wishful thinking.

On July 13<sup>th</sup> 2008, President Nicolas Sarkozy kidnapped the European Mediterranean Policy (EMP). The maiden was henceforth to be known as the UfM. Germany viewed the retooling of the EMP engine as distinctly second rate. Nobody in the City of London paid much attention. Spain was upstaged but paying the price for its refusal to draw the hard lessons of the failure of the Barcelona+10 conference in November 2005.

When he launched the EMP in 1995, the Spanish Prime Minister, Felipe Gonzalez enjoyed the full support of Chancellor Helmut Kohl. It was seen by its promoters as a complement to the EU's opening to Eastern Europe after the collapse of the Communist empire and further encouraged because a serious Israeli Palestinian dialogue appeared to be bearing fruit.

The EU launched its Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) in 2003, by which time it was becoming obvious that its normative policy was failing to live up to its stated principles. Democracy promotion was more a means of catching up with the US for fear of being seen as siding with governments against societies than the expression of any genuine support for those in North Africa and the Middle East who craved the rule of law rather than arbitrary government. The bias in all the instruments of EU Mediterranean policy was further distorted by the US led war against terror. What had started as an attempt to dialogue became by semantic betrayal, fear of the Muslim *Other* while the progress of Turkey, a key ally in the Cold War, towards greater democracy was belittled.

It is impossible to know whether the EMP has been economically successful or not because no independent method of evaluation of its aid policy has ever been

attempted. That was equally true of the ENP which burnished the diplomatic image of those countries who signed up but is of little economic use otherwise. Its founders wished to see the UfM focus on uncontroversial projects such as solar energy but results have been disappointing. Well designed large joint-ventures in food processing, energy and fertilisers do not find mobilising capital difficult and move ahead regardless of *fiat* from the EU.

The UfM has failed on different accounts. After the raid against the humanitarian flotilla, the International Crisis Group wrote that the Israeli attack was an indictment of a policy for which Israel does not bear sole responsibility. "Many in the international community have been complicit in a policy aimed at isolating Gaza in the hope of weakening Hamas. This policy is morally appalling and politically self-defeating." Many European governments have forfeited the respect of all Southern Mediterranean people and not a few of its own citizens.

Meanwhile, Turkey's emergence as a regional power is discomfiting to many in Berlin and Paris. Based on the simple proposition that nations that seek to project influence should start by fixing their own disputes, Turkey has settled long running disputes with its Arab neighbours and seeks to exercise a moderating influence in the Caucasus, even though arguments about Armenia or the Kurdistan remain unsolved. But Turkey is not shy to play its own cards in many Middle East conflicts. In domestic politics, the inclusion of political Islam into an open political game, the curtailing of the power of the army and rising economic prosperity offer an example to its neighbours which Europe cannot match. Permanent European members of the UN Security Council may look on with condescension as Turkey and Brazil seek to resolve the dispute about Iran's nuclear programme but the quicker they get used to others having a say in making the rules the better. The UfM is paying a heavy price for giving the impression from the outset that it was devised to avoid Turkey ever joining the EU. All this at a time when the Turkey's tool box offers many interesting ideas which could help improve the quality of political and economic governance in Arab countries.

Nor has the UfM tried to engage with North Africa, a region of obvious interest to the EU if only because of the many human, energy and other links which bind people from northern and southern shores. A faster growing North Africa is important for the EU but little serious analysis has been done on the benefits open frontiers and faster economic rates of growth in North Africa would bring to North Africa, the EU and the broader world. Life continues in the cocoon of official *EuroMedland* irrespective of the fast changing ways of the world outside.

The UfM is also weighed down by the populist discourse of its founder who indulges in futile debates on national identity rather than confront the real interests that could build a better future for the people of the region. Treating Turkish leaders with condescension and their Arab peers with undue flattery is the hallmark of a European leadership which faces serious hazards about the viability of its own political project. New policy instruments, bold ideas and greater respect for the views of people in the south and not just of their self appointed leaders, a real political will to defend the basic rights of ordinary Palestinians are sorely needed. The Mediterranean deserves a new tool box and leaders on both shores who dare look to the future.