

7. The Euro-Mediterranean Partnership – Success or Failure?

Richard Youngs and Traugott Schoefthaler

Richard Youngs is Senior researcher and Coordinator of the Democratization programme at the Madrid-based think tank FRIDE (Fundación para las Relaciones Internacionales y el Diálogo Exterior). He argues that on almost all counts Europe's decade-old Mediterranean strategy for creating new links and partnerships with the Arab world has been a failure, but that it also has seen Europe's political influence wane further. He sets out a "to do list" for EU policymakers. Traugott Schoefthaler, Executive Director of the Anna Lindh Euro-Mediterranean Foundation for the Dialogue between Cultures, agrees that the concept of a "partnership" was hardly filled with life, whereas the Barcelona Process has served to some extent the political and economic interests of EU Member States. He advocates more weight for the too long neglected "third pillar" of the Barcelona Process, cooperation and exchange in education, culture, science, and the media. The following discussion was published in the Autumn 2006 No. 4, 2006 issue of 'Europe's World', the only Europe-wide Policy Journal, Brussels, pp. 26 – 33.

How Europe's Mediterranean policy went so badly wrong

Richard Youngs

It is now more than a decade since the European Union and its southern Mediterranean neighbours set themselves the ambitious objectives of the Barcelona Process, so it is now fair to say that the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP), as it is formally called, has been a failure. This year's conflict in Lebanon demonstrates the extent to which the EU has failed in its aim of creating a "co-operative security community" across the Southern Mediterranean. Certainly, any resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict looks more distant today than at the inception of the Barcelona Process.



Photo: Fríde Madrid

Economic modernisation and growth has most definitely not taken off in the Arab countries, European investment in the region remains at a depressingly low level and migration is a more divisive issue than ever. The cultural divide between Europe and the Middle East has widened, not narrowed. European intolerance has deepened and Arab anger against the West appears to have intensified. The political mood of the countries linked to the Barcelona Process was neatly encapsulated last November when its tenth anniversary summit turned out to be one of its most acrimonious to date. The summit attracted only one Arab head of state, and the ill-starred event was dominated by an unsuccessful attempt to agree on a definition of terrorism.

Hamas' January 2006 election victory in Palestine confirmed that the Barcelona Process and efforts to forge closer links with Europe has not been matched by the rise of more moderate liberal forces in the Middle East. At the same time, credible European leadership in the region has become increasingly hard to detect; Jacques Chirac is much weakened domestically, Tony Blair appears widely discredited, Spain's Zapatero government lacks strategic vision and in Germany Chancellor Angela Merkel is still only just finding her foreign policy feet at the head of her unwieldy coalition.

A number of the more important current policy challenges have been conspicuously addressed outside the framework of the Barcelona Process. The latter didn't play any significant role in tempering tensions between Lebanon and Syria in the aftermath of Rafik Hariri's assassination. Rather, an unusual exercise in bi-lateral French-American diplomacy has been the key development. Indeed, EMP instruments were not employed to any meaningful degree either to assist Lebanon, disarm Hezbollah or to pressure Israel on the human rights deficiencies of its security doctrine – all joint causes of the current conflagration.

In the Palestinian Territories, the focus has been on the Quartet and on the European Commission's sizeable bi-lateral aid programme. In the run up to Hamas' election victory in January, the instruments of the Barcelona Process failed to become a reference point for influencing either Israeli actions or the internal development of Palestinian politics. By much the same token, the negotiations that led to Colonel Gaddafi's decision to abandon Libya's WMD programmes were mediated through London and Washington, and Libya chooses to remain outside the scope of the EU's Mediterranean strategy. In other words, the pan-Mediterranean instruments for fostering regional cooperation that the Barcelona Process has been pushing have not prevented the EU from being squeezed out of the strategic picture in the Middle East.

Meanwhile, US interest in the Mediterranean has intensified. Morocco is set to receive large amounts of US financial assistance from the Bush administration's so-called Millennium Challenge Account. And an increasingly close security partnership has been taking shape between Washington and the Algerian government headed by Abdelaziz Bouteflika. American involvement could over the longer term, and with significant changes in US strategies, eventually provide a fillip to European aims. But it also means that Europe faces new competition in the region, particularly with regard to the traditionally dominant French profile in North Africa. America's policymakers now argue that among the reasons for their growing interest in the Mediterranean is the failure of the Barcelona Process.

One area where debate has progressed notably since the creation of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP) is regarding the issue of democratic change in the Arab world. Here too, though, it is doubtful that European policies have had a significant impact. The democratisation issue is more openly debated in the Middle East than before, but far-reaching political change has not occurred and in some Arab countries authoritarian regimes seem as firmly ensconced as ever. Even in countries like Morocco where human rights reforms have been implemented, civil society actors argue this has overwhelm-

ingly been to do with internal changes, so EU strategy has not been a positive factor. In Egypt, American rhetoric on the promotion of democracy has, for good or ill, been the main focal point of debate, not European policy. Despite its mid-1990s Barcelona commitment to supporting democracy in the southern Mediterranean, the EU has still not convinced Arab public opinion that it is genuine about this.

Recommendations for reforming Europe's Mediterranean policy commonly propose incremental increases to the EMP acquis. But the primary need is not for more activity or for a broader range of policy initiatives. A vast array of "Euro-Med" branded dialogue and cooperation now takes place across the Mediterranean, but it is doubtful that much more impact could be gained through more summits, a "Mr. Med" special representative, a common definition of this, or a new charter on that, or through more institutional structures like the often-proposed Euro-Med Development Bank. It is unlikely even that throwing more money at the EU's Mediterranean strategy would be effective when the large amounts of resources already provided are not working as intended.

The problem is rather the way in which current initiatives are implemented. Europe needs, for example, to change the way it supports civil society in Arab countries. It is often asserted that one of the EMP's strengths is its inclusion of civil society organisations as a complement to formal governmental relations. But the way in which civil society has been included so far has in fact favoured the status quo. High hopes have also been invested in the new Anna Lindh Foundation for Dialogue between Cultures, but this is oriented towards civil society participants who are chosen directly by governments. The much-vaunted effort to strengthen cultural cooperation has been significant in scale, but in truth it has been dominated by exchanges between cultural elites. This may help explain why no inroads have been made on altering Europeans' largely negative perceptions of Islam.

At last year's tenth anniversary summit of the Barcelona Process, EU governments accepted language in the final declaration that appeared to circumscribe the EU's freedom to engage with NGOs that are not favoured by Arab regimes. And this is an area where "doing more of the same" is definitely not enough; present policy is in danger of moving fundamentally in the wrong direction. The EU does not need to go out of its way to favour Islamist civil society organisations; but it should not discriminate against them when offering inclusion in European initiatives. Such changes to the nature of civil society support could usefully be implemented through the independent European foundation for democracy under discussion in Brussels. This could permit a more

flexible and arms-length funding mechanism, depending on how ongoing debates over such a foundation are resolved.

A thorough re-think of Europe's approach to economic reform is also needed. Economic liberalisation has to be introduced in a more balanced fashion with greater European understanding of the complex impact that past, present and future market reforms have in the Middle East. Large amounts of EU money have been pumped into the Mediterranean region in the cause of economic reform, but little effort has been made to assess the political and social impact of these measures. An assessment of this sort should be given high priority as an integral part of the work plan agreed last year at Barcelona, and it should be completed during the coming year when preparations for a Euro-Mediterranean free trade area are due to intensify.

The European commitment made at Barcelona in November 2005 to move at long last towards opening EU markets to southern Mediterranean produce could prove significant. It is a promise that is still laced with caveats and references to possible "exceptions", and the EU's tendency not to respect its market-opening commitments of this sort suggests that European governments will need to be held firmly to account on this. It is an issue on which Arab NGOs should take the lead, collaborating across borders and using the newly-created Euro-Mediterranean non-governmental platform to scrutinise the actions of individual European governments.

The EU's European Neighbourhood Policy now gathers within a single new framework the states on the Union's southern and eastern peripheries, and could provide the means of injecting new dynamism into the Mediterranean picture, although so far its development has chiefly bred confusion. But by focusing on bi-lateral action plans with individual southern Mediterranean states, the Neighbourhood Policy offers a chance to unblock efforts or closer cooperation with some states that have until now been held back by regional tensions in the Middle East. It is unclear, however, whether such an approach can be carried forward without undermining the region-building spirit of the Barcelona Process. And so far this new policy has in practice not been organised on a neighbourhood-wide basis. If the EU is to develop a new neighbourhood basis to its relations, it should at least ensure that there actually is a tangible "east-south" dimension to its various practical policy initiatives. A new civil society forum could be created for reformers from both the eastern and southern parts of the EU's neighbourhood to share perspectives on ENP Action Plans, and to develop "advocacy strategies" for these plans' mid-term reviews.

Most crucially of all, the relationship between short-term security imperatives and long-term reform efforts needs to be assessed in far greater depth. It is often rather simplistically assumed that security and human rights policies are mutually exclusive, and indeed for the moment European governments' prioritisation of counter-terrorist cooperation with Arab regimes does indeed seem to have given autocrats greater leverage to defend their power. But European policies cannot be the pre-eminent factor in propelling economic and political change in the southern Mediterranean. In the best of cases, Europe could play a marginal role and correct those of its policies that make reform harder to achieve in the Middle East. Paradoxically, both greater clarity and more humility are needed from Europe. The democracy agenda cannot be couched in terms of "exporting" democratic values to the region. Yet that makes it no less imperative that Europe should re-think its policies so as to play at least a modest role in facilitating political change.

The current conflict in the Middle East presents the EU with a variety of challenges. It should reassess the decision to limit contact with the Hamas government. A temporary implementation mechanism, which circumvents the Hamas-controlled administration, has allowed much European aid to continue to flow to the Occupied Territories. But the EU's cold-shouldering of Hamas has been interpreted in the region as another case, like that of Algeria a decade ago, of Europe being unwilling to accept democratic elections when they don't yield the results desired by the West. The reluctance of European donors (with the exception of France) to channel large amounts of money to help Lebanon build stronger state institutions has already proved a costly misjudgement. We know that effective pressure on Israel can only come from a change in the US position, but the EU must demonstrate that its engagement with Syria through the EMP can be harnessed to help provide a broader, long term solution.

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It is not too late to rekindle Barcelona's flame

Commentary by Traugott Schoefthaler

If Richard Youngs did not borrow the rhetoric of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP), his already sceptical analysis of its shortcomings might be even sharper and more astringent. Ten years after Barcelona, the EMP has not yet taken root and it has instead turned into an instrument of “external action”, cared for by the European Commission and chaired by the rotating EU Presidency. Almost all its budgets are decided upon within the EU's structures, and follow its administrative and financial rules. Everything is a “project”, leaving little space for synergies and strategies, and not much room for joint decision-making. The language of development assistance divides partners into “donors” and “beneficiaries”.

So the actions undertaken as part of the EMP should not be assessed in terms of the Barcelona Declaration, but against the EU's own objectives. The achievements include the establishment of a political instrument that enables frequent meetings of senior officials from all 35 countries, including Israel, Palestine and Syria, as well as periodic ministerial meetings. Bilateral association agreements have been signed between the EU and all its Mediterranean partners, which have since increased their trade with the EU by an average of over 50%. The EU has become the leading provider of foreign investment, and the prospects for a Euro-Mediterranean free trade zone by 2010 are good.

Should we blame this policy for not having achieved peace in the Middle East? The Israeli-Arab conflict is not the only one where EU is just one actor of a quartet, and it is not even fully empowered by its citizens to undertake conflict settlement in Cyprus or the Balkans.

The spirit of the Barcelona Declaration derives from two words, culture and civil society. These are to be found in its third chapter, and few would deny that they are the poor cousins of political and economic cooperation. Youngs is right when he says that the cultural divide between Europe and the Middle East has widened. Perhaps it took the

cartoon crisis of early 2006 for Europeans to begin to understand how the prevailing concept of inter-cultural dialogue went wrong, and why it could not cope with critical situations like that. Thousands of dialogue events, attended by “representatives” of different religions and major cultural entities, ended with shallow conclusions about common values, but failed to arrive at common perceptions of differences. Only recently has a departure from the logic of Samuel Huntington’s “Clash of Civilisations” scenario found its way onto the agenda of almost every stakeholder in the inter-cultural dialogue.

We at the Anna Lindh Euro-Mediterranean Foundation for the Dialogue between Cultures have a mandate to provide new ideas, opportunities and skills needed for a more meaningful dialogue, especially with young people. It is the first common institution of the Barcelona Process with its headquarters in Egypt that is also co-financed by all 35 partner countries – a first step towards co-ownership of the EMP. Its intergovernmental Board of Governors, for the first three years identical with the Euro-Med Committee, is the first political EMP instrument where majority decisions (although at the extremely high threshold of a 6/7th majority) can be made – a first step towards better governance.

The Euro-Med Foundation started operations in August 2005 as a network of 35 national networks, bringing together more than 1,000 institutions in the worlds of education, culture, science, media and women and youth organisations. Our first joint product is a study with practical recommendations on education, culture and the media as key factors for changing mentalities between men and women. With the Council of Europe and the Arab League Educational, Cultural and Scientific Organization (ALECSO), a Euro-Mediterranean teacher training programme on cultural and religious diversity has been put in place; 1,000 young artists are expected in Alexandria for a Biennale on “creative diversity”; 1,000 young people between 18 and 25 participate in the “Dialogue 21” project.

The Foundation has been created top-down, yes; but it has also developed mechanisms to reach out to civil society at large, together with the three other Euro-Mediterranean networks EuroMeSCo (political science institutes), FEMISE (economic institutes) and the Non-Governmental Platform.

It is not too late to rekindle the flame of Barcelona. Ten years after Helsinki, most western Europeans considered the Helsinki process a failure – too early. We need to revitalise our ambitions, with more patience and perseverance.

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