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COMMENT

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What future for the Union for the Mediterranean?

The cancellation of the biannual Union for the Mediterranean (UfM) summit leaves EU policies in its southern neighbourhood in disarray. To prevent the further disintegration of its regional policy, the EU needs to act now rather than wait for the outcome of indirect Israeli–Palestinian peace talks, which stand little chance of being a success.

Two lost years

Spain's recent "postponement" of the biannual summit of the UfM Heads of State and Government until November rounds off a depressing two-year period for Euro-Mediterranean relations. Long gone is the enthusiasm that surrounded the launch of Nicolas Sarkozy's "project of civilizations" at the Paris Summit in summer 2008. Following years of gridlock, Sarkozy's UfM was meant to reconfigure the EU's policies towards the countries of the southern and eastern Mediterranean to provide them with greater balance and a clearer focus. In reality, the opposite has been the case.

Almost from the get-go the UfM has been plagued by a series of internal conflicts and external crises. Initial rifts over the organization's structure and the participation of the Arab League were followed by months of suspension resulting from Israel's Gaza incursion and a lengthy feud over the distribution of portfolios for the UfM's Barcelona Secretariat. As a result, the Union's six "priority projects" have made little progress and its Secretariat—despite a grand opening ceremony in March—has yet to assume its work. With the multilateral track blocked, Mediterranean countries have focused on their bilateral relations

with the EU, fuelling a trend towards further regional fragmentation.

Given the postponement of the summit until late November, there seems to be no easy way out of the current impasse. The summit's suspension means that important decisions concerning the budget and statutes of the Barcelona Secretariat will be further delayed. The summit was also supposed to appoint a replacement for the current Franco-Egyptian Co-Presidency, which is charged with the UfM's overall direction. With their non-renewable two-year term coming to an end in July and no apparent decision on who should replace the current duo, another crisis seems to be lurking just around the corner.

What went wrong?

The common explanation for the current deadlock in Euro-Mediterranean affairs is that the unravelling of the peace process led to the blockage of the UfM, in which Arabs and Israelis are equal partners. The conclusion that analysts have repeatedly drawn is that "there can be no Euro-Mediterranean community without peace". The reasoning is compelling. The cancellation of the planned summit followed the refusal of several Arab leaders to participate in any meetings with Israel's

divisive foreign minister, Avigdor Lieberman. And in their joint press statement, France, Egypt and Spain explained their decision by arguing that they wanted to buy time for US-mediated indirect peace talks.

Other evidence is readily discernible. In April, negotiations on a joint water-management strategy for the region collapsed because of a dispute over the naming of the Palestinian Territories. And talks over the next Co-Presidency have been stymied due to the fact that there are few Arab candidates that would be acceptable to Israel. However, blaming Arab-Israeli differences alone obscures the full extent of the problems the UfM is facing.

The truth is that the new Union has become a microcosm of the conflicts and crises of the wider Middle East. Turkish claims to the flood waters of the Euphrates and Tigris have been as significant in scuppering the UfM's water strategy as the Cyprus issue has been in holding up negotiations over the Secretariat. Of course that does not absolve Israelis and Palestinians of their important responsibilities, nor lessen the destabilizing impact of the Arab-Israeli conflict. But it suggests that the current crisis is more structural in nature.

The reality is that the UfM itself bears a good share of the blame for

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the current situation. By upgrading the profile of the partnership and endowing it with an elaborate new machinery, some of the development issues the UfM was meant to address have become more susceptible to regional calamities. Similarly, the UfM's widely lauded principles of co-ownership and co-management have proved to be empty. The complexity of the new Union has meant that decisions are increasingly being made by a small group of countries in a non-transparent manner and without much consultation. The result has been an increasing disenchantment with the process amongst some participants.

The way ahead

All of this suggests that sitting out the current Israeli-Palestinian crisis is simply not an option for the EU. Even if there were a revival of the peace process by November—a somewhat unlikely prospect given the current regional climate—the UfM would remain hobbled by its structural deficits. To prevent a further unravelling of its regional policy, the EU will need to employ a mixture of quick fixes and long-term restructuring.

The most urgent task at hand is for the Barcelona Secretariat to take up its work and push ahead with

the UfM's core projects, such as the Mediterranean Solar Plan and the Motorways of the Sea. Only then will the UfM be able to demonstrate its usefulness to the outside world. This means that long-overdue decisions on the statutes and long-term funding of the Secretariat need to be adopted quickly. Equally important is resolving the question of the Co-Presidency. One option is for Egypt to continue in a caretaker role in the hope that a replacement can be found by November. For the EU's part, it is important that the External Action Service takes over from France as soon as it becomes operational, to avoid a deepening rift between northern and southern EU member states.

In the long run, the functioning of the UfM will depend on its ability to isolate progress in its development projects from the vagaries of the Middle East. To do so, an increase in “variable geometry” and an empowering of the “non-political” Secretariat might be sensible. Ultimately, however, the best way for the EU to guarantee the UfM's success is to play its part in resolving regional crises. Here much remains to be done, given the EU's absence from some of the conflicts affecting the region over the past few years.