

RECONFIGURING EURO-MED REGIONAL COOPERATION

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Any attempt to reconfigure the Euro-Med framework for regional cooperation needs to build on the emerging geopolitical context of the broader Middle East following the Arab revolutions. To counteract the potential of new regional divisions, support the process of economic transition, and regain its ability to operate, Euro-Med countries should consider both downscaling and broadening the by now defunct Union for the Mediterranean (UfM).

The Changing Geopolitical Context

Assessing the long-term consequences of major historical events is notoriously difficult. When asked by Henry Kissinger what he thought had been the impact of the French Revolution, Zhou Enlai famously quipped: "It's too early to say." There are good reasons to apply similar caution when trying to grasp the repercussions of the Arab revolutions. While there are some signs now that the revolutionary wave is beginning to ebb as it meets the callous determination of Middle Eastern dictators and the harsh realities of Arab societies, its long-term consequences remain as clouded as its immediate future. In this situation, teleological predictions tend to battle Neo-Orientalism to provide opposing, and mostly one-dimensional, mirror images of the Middle East's future political order.

Despite this continuing uncertainty, the one thing that appears assured, however, is that the revolutions have shattered the Middle East's old balance of power. This balance pitted a motley coalition of western-leaning status quo states that included Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Israel, against an axis of revisionist powers consisting of Iran, Syria, Hamas and Hezbollah. For the better part of a decade, this fickle balance served the interests of both sides. Those Arab states that sided with the United States and Europe could count on monetary and political support in return for their help with fighting terrorism and immigration and for providing essential life support to an increasingly discredited Middle East Peace Process. Those opposing them sought to exploit their revolutionary credentials in order to distract public attention from their own disorderly status quo. With the Arab publics awoken, neither remains a viable strategy.

Although Syria and Iran initially seemed to profit from the current upheavals, public protests and internal divisions have now severely weakened the "axis of resistance" and forced Hamas into a

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power-sharing deal with Fatah. America's (albeit reluctant) abandonment of Hosni Mubarak, on the other hand, has effectively split the "axis of moderation" and weakened US influence over its erstwhile allies in the region. The result has been a temporary power vacuum, with only the faintest indications as to the future regional order. While one defining feature of the Arab spring seems to have been its unifying character – with many analysts pointing towards the secular and non-partisan nature of the protests – there are good reasons to believe that at least in the near future the regional order of the Middle East might become more fractitious and divided.

The most visible consequences of America's volte face has been Saudi Arabia's aggressive attempt to strengthen its regional posture – by dispatching troops to Bahrain, propping-up fellow Gulf monarchies and inviting Jordan and Morocco into a Gulf Cooperation Countries (GCC) that looks increasingly like a counterrevolutionary club. There are also reports that Saudi Arabia is increasingly looking for new strategic allies amongst its trading partners in Asia. Egypt, on the other hand, seems intent on reclaiming regional leadership, by negotiating the Fatah-Hamas agreement, opening contacts with Hezbollah, and promising a much tougher line on Israel. It has also indicated that it will review its relationship with Iran. Should both countries continue to drift into opposite directions a re-emergence of regional division, possibly returning to the period of the Arab Cold War, seems plausible. Moreover, as the region drifts towards the September deadline for the creation of the Palestinian state, another eruption of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict remains a distinct possibility.

Implications for Euro-Med Cooperation

Faced with such a fluid and uncertain situation, Euro-Med countries need to carefully weigh their options in the emerging regional context. Within the foreseeable future, the default option for the EU will be to concentrate on its bilateral relations in the region. This is both a consequence of the emerging needs of those Arab countries that have started a difficult transition process as well as the result of the worsening regional climate. The European Commission has already acknowledged this development with its proposal for a "Partnership for Democracy and Shared Prosperity" which advocates greater differentiation and a redistribution of resources in accordance with democracy criteria. While the proposal falls short on new ideas and incentives, its general aim of refocusing EU assistance and resources on democratic reforms should be welcomed.

More difficult will be overhauling the by now largely dysfunctional framework for Euro-Med regional cooperation. The UfM in its current form remains in disarray and without any real progress on the Middle East Peace Process is likely to wither away. But rather than burying the multilateral framework for cooperation altogether, the project ought to be brought in line with current regional realities.

To start with, the UfM needs to divest itself of its larger political ambitions. Within the current situation, there is simply no prospect for the organisation taking on a political or security function. Instead, it should shift its attention to the kind of economic and technical cooperation that it was originally conceived for. For the time being, the revolutions have severely blighted the economic prospects of the region. There is now an urgent need to coordinate and bring to scale economic assistance to prevent a backsliding of the revolutions and preserve regional stability. Here the UfM might serve a useful purpose by, for example, convening a donor's conference, coordinating international assistance, identifying best practices and providing technical expertise and advice.

In order to better play this role and act against a deepening of regional divisions, the UfM should consider the bold move of opening its membership base to the countries of the Arabian Peninsula. Inevitably, the GCC will have a vital role to play in supporting the recovery of North African economies – the more so as the EU is currently unable and unwilling to steer this recovery on its own. To prevent EU and GCC rescue packages working at loggerheads, a broadened UfM might serve as a useful forum to coordinate their assistance. It could also mitigate the potential fallout on the regional trade architecture (including the Agadir Process) from Jordan and Morocco joining the GCC. While this would imply shelving more ambitious plans for the creation of a distinct Euro-Mediterranean region, a broadened UfM would be more in line with both the Pan-Arab nature of the revolutions, as well as the emerging economic realities of the region.

Such a wider union would inevitably require a different and much looser institutional framework. The biannual meetings of heads of state and government, which keep on being postponed, should be scrapped in favour of more ad hoc summits. The Barcelona Secretariat should remain a technical unit of limited size without the glitz it has attracted in the past. And the Co-Presidency system needs to be revised in order to better reflect the interests of the community, rather than that of single member states. While European countries should be represented by the European External Action Service (EEAS), Mediterranean states could consider the possibility of rotating team-Presidencies to better reflect their divergent points of view. Finally, civil society should be granted a more consistent role in the process by building on the Euro-Mediterranean Social Dialogue Forum first organised in March 2010.

While there is no guarantee that such a downscaled and broadened organisation could avoid the deadlock of the current UfM, it offers some distinct advantages. To turn a page in their economic development, North African countries will need the coordinated support of both the EU and the Gulf States. A reconfigured UfM could also provide a better forum to coordinate the regions overlapping trade agreements and energy dialogues, often discussed within separate forums, while

deemphasising more contentious political issues, some of which are better addressed within the bilateral European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP). Finally, it could help to bridge the emerging fault lines that threaten to destabilise the region. And while this might not measure up to the glamour of the original undertaking, it might come to reflect the pragmatism of the erstwhile Organisation for European Economic Cooperation.

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