

Euro-Mediterranean relations in light of current international transformations: opportunities, challenges, and scenarios

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Abstract ;

The Euro-Mediterranean region constitutes a strategically significant space characterized by complex patterns of political, economic, security, and social interdependence between its northern and southern shores. In the context of contemporary global transformations, Euro-Mediterranean relations are increasingly influenced by profound changes in the international system, emerging geopolitical rivalries, regional crises, transnational challenges, and shifting patterns of regional cooperation.

The study addresses the problem of the growing gap between the potential represented by shared interests and interdependence among Mediterranean actors and the limitations of existing mechanisms of cooperation and regional integration. The significance of the study lies in highlighting the need to reconsider prevailing approaches to Euro-Mediterranean relations in response to the changing geopolitical and strategic environment.

The findings indicate that the future of Euro-Mediterranean cooperation remains contingent upon the capacity of regional actors to overcome political and structural disparities, strengthen mutual interdependence, and develop more balanced and inclusive mechanisms of cooperation.

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1. Introduction

The Mediterranean has long served as a connecting space between the European continent and the countries of North Africa and the Middle East. Its importance extends beyond geographical proximity, as the region constitutes a dynamic area of political, economic, social, and geopolitical interaction. The close physical relationship between the northern and southern shores has facilitated sustained exchanges and encouraged the emergence of diverse forms of cooperation among the countries bordering the Mediterranean. However, the evolution of Euro-Mediterranean relations has been shaped not only by shared interests and opportunities for cooperation, but also by persistent political, economic, security, and social challenges.

Over the past decades, the regional environment has undergone profound transformations that have considerably affected the dynamics of Euro-Mediterranean relations. The emergence of new geopolitical rivalries, the restructuring of the international system, the increasing importance of non-state and transnational actors, successive regional crises, migration pressures, energy transformations, and the repercussions of the Arab Spring have all contributed to reshaping the strategic context of the Mediterranean. These developments have simultaneously created new opportunities for cooperation and exposed the limitations of existing mechanisms of regional integration.

In this context, the future of Euro-Mediterranean relations cannot be assessed solely through the traditional frameworks of political and economic cooperation. It

requires a broader analytical perspective capable of taking into account the changing distribution of power, emerging common challenges, and the depth of the economic, political, and social ties connecting European countries with their southern Mediterranean counterparts. The question is therefore no longer simply whether Euro-Mediterranean cooperation should be strengthened, but rather **how such cooperation can be rethought and adapted to the changing regional and global environment ?**

Accordingly, this study examines the prospects of Euro-Mediterranean relations in light of contemporary global transformations. It first highlights the importance of shared interests and the potential for developing a stronger Euro-Mediterranean community. It then analyses the major transformations affecting the international and regional system and explores their implications for the future of Euro-Mediterranean relations. The study subsequently considers alternative future scenarios, ranging from pessimistic to optimistic trajectories, before addressing the prospects for rethinking regional integration and developing a more comprehensive form of Euro-Mediterranean cooperation.

In order to address the aforementioned research problem and assess the future trajectory of Euro-Mediterranean relations, this study adopts a multidimensional analytical approach focusing on four interrelated dimensions: shared interests and the strategic importance of Euro-Mediterranean relations; contemporary global transformations and their regional implications; alternative future scenarios;

and prospects for rethinking regional integration in the Euro-Mediterranean space.

1. The importance of Euro-Mediterranean relation

Over the past three decades, the Mediterranean basin has witnessed numerous initiatives aimed at fostering dialogue and cooperation between its two shores. These initiatives have varied in terms of the number of participating countries, ranging from the entire Mediterranean region to the dynamics of sub-regions.¹

The development of Euro-Mediterranean relations has been shaped by a succession of institutional initiatives launched by the European Union. A major milestone was the Barcelona Process, initiated in 1995, which established a framework for broader cooperation between the EU and its Mediterranean partners. This framework was later complemented by the creation of the Union for the Mediterranean in 2008. In parallel, the European Neighborhood Policy, introduced in 2003 and subsequently reviewed in 2015, sought to strengthen the EU's relations with neighboring countries. The EU's approach towards the Southern Mediterranean was further reinforced in February 2021 through the adoption of the New Agenda for the Mediterranean, which placed renewed emphasis on cooperation and partnership with countries of the region.²

1.1. Common Interest of Euro-Mediterranean Relation

From the European side, the other shores of Mare Nostrum could appear driven by open and latent conflicts, bypassed by economic growth and lacking in personal freedoms. Marked by a high unemployment, low to medium standards of human rights, a subjugation of women in certain countries, indifferent scientific achievement, the region seems distant from European norms of modern, pluralist democracy. Global issues of climate change, resource depletion, economic management, the impact of the BRICS, all seem of more consequence to Europe than does the Mediterranean. From the other side, European approaches may seem patronising, token and at worst hypocritical. Democracy and openness are proclaimed in principle, but not always honoured in practice. Openness in economic management does not fully extend to agricultural products and to labour markets; freedom of movement is largely an illusion. Actual and potential, legal and illegal immigrants are perceived to be treated scornfully, if not sometimes brutally. Europe is seen to collude in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. The new regional actors such as Iran and Turkey, the Gulf and further East to India and China may provide more fertile ground for cooperation than Europe. Of course these are stereotypes, but they are probably not confined to extreme groups; they find resonance in many conservative political movements on both shores – movements

¹ Roger Albinyana & Matías Ibáñez, The 5+5 Dialogue after 30 years: Prospects and Challenges for Western Mediterranean Cooperation, 2021, accessed on: 26/01/2026. <https://shorturl.at/cAbIS>.

² Ibid.

that are reticent about dialogue or even hostile, because cooperation constitutes a threat to traditional values. On the other hand there is much positive change and constructive engagement; existing relations between old and young, rich and poor, women and men, local and global are challenged with accelerating success by young societies with better access to education and media. This open tendency is welcoming of dialogue, aware of the interdependencies of both shores of the Mediterranean and the possibilities for fertile exchanges and collaboration. The first priority is to avoid violent and destructive conflict amongst European neighbours or at least to limit its consequences. Conflict needs to be avoided primarily for its human consequences, but also its economic costs, which are enormous, and the impact on security. Avoiding conflict means building mutual trust. Trust at a political level must be founded on mutual respect and confidence between societies. To create this bond is a long-term prospect that partly precedes and is partly formed by other more concrete aspects of cooperation³.

1.1.2. Towards a Euro-Mediterranean Community

There are concrete actions of interest to both sides and many of these have been identified within the Union for the Mediterranean. Common endeavors in education and science can strengthen the innovative basis of the SEMCs economies and can simultaneously stimulate European

research; the vast reserves of solar energy in the SEMCs can provide in the long-term secure energy supplies for both sides and can be a powerful catalyst for innovation; cleaning the Mediterranean is a much overdue task that can only satisfactorily be done together. These endeavours will all need private capital and will require innovation in private-public partnerships at national and regional levels. There is still much benefit to be achieved from closer economic integration; the complementarity of traded goods between Europe and the SEMCs is high; there is a great deal to gain from free exchange of services. Most of all there is potentially a huge migration arbitrage from the complementarity of labour markets; an aging population in Europe and a young population in the SEMCs for which the national economies will not be able to find jobs. Eventually the network of dependencies around the Mediterranean might evolve into shared common vision on which a future Euro-Mediterranean Community might be built. The Barcelona Declaration, the association agreements, the ENP, the action plans and UfM documents constitute the beginning of specific acquis of a future Euro-Mediterranean Community. There would be many political obstacles and the costs would be immense, but the benefits could be greater still. This paper is built around ‘trends, tensions and transitions’ in the Euro-Mediterranean space. In ‘trends’ we examine the way in which critical issues in the region are evolving and how they might develop over the next twenty years. ‘Tensions’ considers how these

³European Commission. EuroMed-2030: Long Term Challenges for the Mediterranean Area: Report of an Expert Group. Luxembourg:

Publications Office of the European Union, 2011, P.08.

trends will interact to generate stresses at different socio-political levels. 'Transitions' explores some options for intervention to correct malign tensions and benefit from benign ones; the particular choice of the 'transitions' is based on the four themes of cooperation described above: managing conflict; win-win projects; deeper economic integration and eventually moving towards a Euro-Mediterranean Community⁴.

2. The Most Important Transformations Taking Place in The Global System

The global arena is witnessing chaos and tensions at all political, security, economic, and cultural levels. Uncertainty prevails within global and regional organizations after a brief period of transition in the new international order, characterized by a hegemonic unipolarity that excessively uses force, and a fragile balance maintained by actors aligned with the pattern of preemptive wars in the American global strategy to confront what it termed the axes of terrorism and tyranny. From this perspective, international relations have witnessed unprecedented security, political, economic, and even cultural developments, indicating the features of the American unipolar moment, striving to achieve the dream of the American century at any cost. This has led to⁵:

1/ The emergence of conflict maps over resources and energy, as these resources have taken on military dimensions to achieve energy security, especially with the return of major powers to the struggle over

oil, gas, and water, to the point where everyone is waiting for these powers to clash.

2/The American drive in its strategies towards hotspots, particularly oil-rich areas, regions of security tensions and the spread of terrorism, sectarian conflicts, and the potential involvement of NATO in further conflicts as the pace of conflicts escalates. Energy shifts, America's insistence on expanding its influence to the borders of China and Russia, and the potential for this influence to become embroiled in clashes with these two powers, at a time when Europe is expressing its inability to bear further American involvement, and the war losses that are usually accompanied by a decline in the status and image of the leading international power managing the international system—the war on terror has opened a security vacuum and led to the spread of violence more than addressing the sources of threats. In fact, preemptive wars have directly contributed to the emergence of new generations of al-Qaeda-like groups and functionally interconnected criminal movements, and the increasing threat posed by their transnational activities.

3/The nature of these new transnational threats and the necessity of collective action at the highest levels are not limited to asymmetric threats. There is another type of terrorism that threatens the ecological balance and the biosphere of humanity as a result of climate change, the depletion of resources and non-renewable

⁴ European Commission. Op.Cit, P.09.

⁵ Mohamed Gharbi and Ibrahim Galwaz, "Euro-Mediterranean Relations in Light of the Challenges

of the New International Order," Algerian Journal of Security and Development, No. 08, January 2016, p. 73.

energy sources, and the growing dangers of environmental degradation and pollution terrorism⁶.

3. Prospects towards rethinking integration in the Euro-Mediterranean region

3.1. Towards a change in the approach to regional integration in the Euro-Mediterranean region

3.2. Euro-Mediterranean Globalism:

The outcomes of Euro-Mediterranean relations and the solutions offered to bridge the divide between the between the Mediterranean countries and address the challenges and stakes in the region constitute a solid foundation for rebuilding the highest international order. This order must be consistent with international law, justice, and the establishment of equality among peoples. Furthermore, the Mediterranean solutions to various threats form the firm ground for a just international project that safeguards humanity's well-being and security, reunites the world's peoples in the face of transnational threats, and presents a model for a humane, creative, and innovative globalization⁷.

Mediterranean globalization is a way to rationalize, humanize, and ethically address the excesses of globalization. Mediterranean integration is the starting point for achieving international integration, and Euro-Mediterranean dialogue of cultures is the optimal path for a convincing, fruitful, and positive

understanding of the contributions of peoples⁸.

The Mediterranean Charter of Freedoms and the Mediterranean Ethical Pact are essential seeds for guiding humanity back to the right path, drying up the sources of intolerance, hostility, and hatred of others, and combating stereotypical classifications of cultures⁹.

Euro-Mediterranean solidarity for achieving development for all and the right to life for all can be a creative and humane approach to fostering solidarity among the world's peoples and helping one another¹⁰.

The Euro-Mediterranean Political Club is a platform for freedoms, equal voices, and a path to equality in actions and policies. It is an effective model for building an international political order that grants rights and justice to all, obligating everyone within a framework of equal opportunities and shared responsibility. It is also a model for the coexistence of the old order's pillars and the voices of emerging actors and serious organizations, where national policies blend with the visions of civil society and the actions of social movements, without any barrier separating the world of states from the world of civil societies¹¹.

3.3. The Arab Spring and a renewed focus on the future of Euro-Mediterranean relations

The Arab Spring uprisings served as a test and a challenge to the credibility and effectiveness of the European Union's conditional policies towards the countries

⁶ Mohamed Gharbi and Ibrahim Galwaz, Op.Cit, p. 73.

⁷ Mohamed Gharbi & Ibrahim Qalwaz, Op.Cit, p. 77.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid, p.78.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

of the southern Mediterranean. They revealed numerous structural flaws in European foreign policy, leading to a review of cooperation policies and priorities.

The dynamics of the Arab Spring prompted the European Union to rethink its mechanisms for supporting the political transition in the southern Mediterranean countries under authoritarian regimes. This involved modifying its neighborhood policy to enhance the effectiveness of democratic conditionality by focusing on a dualistic and differentiated approach in its relationship with partner Arab states, linking the strengthening of relations to the extent of reforms adopted. This principle, known as "more for more," dictates that there will be more democratic and human rights reforms in exchange for increased EU support. And as the conditional states reneged on their commitment, the support provided to them decreased. The European Union believes that "strengthening its support for its neighbors is conditional on progress made in establishing and strengthening democracy, as well as respect for the rule of law. To the extent that internal reforms in a country progress effectively and rapidly, the EU's support will be important." The EU's approach to reform and change has also changed; it has begun to pay considerable attention to change from below, by supporting the strengthening of the capacities of civil society organizations and their roles in keeping pace with and strengthening reforms at the societal level¹²

Following the Arab Spring, a number of variables and factors imposed themselves on Euro-Mediterranean relations, redirecting the attention of researchers and thinkers to focus on the future of relations between the two shores. The most prominent of these variables revolve around¹³:

- The political transformations in the Arab region, the collapse of totalitarian regimes, and the inability of the new elites to achieve a peaceful civil transition.
- The resurgence of Islamist movements, particularly after their return to the political arena in most Arab countries, and the renewed European fears of these movements seizing power and pursuing policies detrimental to European interests and contrary to its cultural and social values.
- The waves of migration towards European shores, especially the Syrian refugee crisis and migrants from the Libyan coast, have added further burdens to European commitments and pose new threats to existing ones, as the Mediterranean has become a dead sea and a graveyard for migrants, in addition to challenges related to humanitarian obligations.
- The agendas of common Mediterranean policies primarily encompass the most pressing issues facing the world and constituting the core concerns of the international

¹² Mohammed Saadi, "The European Union and the Conditionality of Democracy: The Post-Arab Spring Case," Arab Policies, Issue 36, January 2019, p.P.81.

¹³ Mohamed Gharbi & Ibrahim Qalwaz, Op.Cit, p.p.78-80.

community. They address the most prominent global threats. For this reason, the Euro-Mediterranean region emerges as a global project capable of contributing to the reconstruction of the international order, provided that the actors on both shores of the Mediterranean can overcome the challenges they face, foremost among them.

- Achieving democratic peace, ending conflicts, establishing international legitimacy, and empowering peoples to exercise their rights.
- Achieving the independence of the Mediterranean and preventing the export of external disputes and conflicts to the Mediterranean region.
- The challenge of Mediterranean integration and the completion of the Mediterranean Free Trade Area, and deepening interdependence Mutual cooperation based on the principle of equal opportunities and empowerment for southern parties to keep pace with cultural development in the northern region, including the necessary support and assistance, lifting restrictions on the supply of technology, and developing a three-pronged approach to fostering openness and equitable interdependence: the movement of capital, goods and services, and people.
- This approach aims to reduce the balance of power between regional systems on average and the global system.

Despite their complementarity, the European and Atlantic initiatives launched toward the countries of the southern Mediterranean are characterized by a division of labor, and even competition. In the economic sphere, the European Union launched the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership through the Barcelona Process. In the security sphere, the Europeans initiated a security dialogue, through the Western European Union, with Mediterranean countries. Each initiative insists that it complements the others.

Conclusion

The analysis of Euro-Mediterranean relations demonstrates that the future of the region will largely depend on the capacity of its actors to adapt existing cooperation frameworks to a rapidly changing international and regional environment. The Mediterranean is no longer merely a geographical space separating Europe from its southern neighbors; it has increasingly become a strategic arena in which multiple geopolitical, economic, security, environmental, and societal interests converge.

Contemporary global transformations have created both constraints and opportunities for Euro-Mediterranean cooperation. While geopolitical rivalries, regional conflicts, political instability, migration pressures, economic disparities, and the persistence of mistrust continue to constitute significant obstacles, shared interests in areas such as energy, trade, security, climate change, digital transformation, and human development provide important foundations for renewed cooperation.

The future trajectories of Euro-Mediterranean relations consequently remain open to different possibilities. A pessimistic scenario could emerge if existing disparities, political tensions, and competing geopolitical interests continue to undermine regional cooperation. Conversely, an optimistic scenario could become possible if the actors concerned succeed in transforming common challenges into opportunities for collective action and establishing more balanced and mutually beneficial forms of partnership.

From this perspective, rethinking Euro-Mediterranean integration requires moving beyond a predominantly institutional and economic approach towards a more multidimensional and inclusive model. Such a model should recognize the interdependence between the Mediterranean interconnectedness and give greater consideration to the interests and priorities of southern Mediterranean countries. A renewed Euro-Mediterranean framework should therefore be based on reciprocity, shared responsibility, political dialogue, and the development of common responses to emerging challenges.

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