

DOCUMENTI  
IAI

THE MEDITERRANEAN FORUM

*by Roberto Aliboni*

Paper presented to the International Seminar on the Mediterranean,  
organized by the CIDOB Foundation and the NATO Press and Information Office,  
*Barcelona, September 28-29, 1995*

## THE MEDITERRANEAN FORUM

by Roberto Aliboni

### *Longstanding themes: Mediterraneanism and civil society*

The "Forum for Mediterranean Dialogue and Cooperation" was officially established under this name at the "Ministerial Meeting of the Core-Group Countries of the Mediterranean Forum" which took place in Alexandria, Egypt, on July 3-4, 1994, after a nine-month period of intense diplomatic contacts among the parties concerned.

Before reviewing the brief history of what will hereafter be referred to as the "Forum", it is important to understand the position this Forum occupies among the many Mediterranean groupings. It seems to this author that two main features distinguish the Forum from other groupings. First of all, it is limited to a group of Mediterranean countries actually bathed by the sea - a characteristic differentiating it from groupings like those planned by the CSCM (Conference on Security and Cooperation in the Mediterranean), the Euro-Arab Dialogue or the more recent Euro-Mediterranean Partnership. Membership in these groupings - to a greater or lesser extent - goes beyond the purely geographic notion of the Mediterranean sea basin. Secondly, although intergovernmental, the Forum focuses its action primarily on civil society - and tends to strengthen and rely on this society and, more broadly, on private factors.

If this is so, when looking at the vast tree of Mediterranean groupings the Forum should be considered as belonging to the same branches as the French-inspired "Forum Méditerranéen" and the Italian-inspired "Group of Contact". A glance at the experience of these two groups will show that some ideas in today's Forum proposal spring from these previous schemes and that, all in all, there is a remarkable continuity in issues and in thinking in Mediterranean politics.

*The Forum Méditerranéen* - The "Forum Méditerranéen" was set up at a conference of private organizations and individuals, organized in Marseille on February 25-27, 1988 by the "Association Echanges Méditerranée", a Marseille-based non-governmental body whose task was to foster cultural and technological exchange in the Mediterranean area [1].

The French government however - particularly circles close to President Mitterrand - was responsible for initiating the *Forum* as part of an effort to re-assert France's preferential political, cultural and economic ties with the Maghreb countries [2]. After the meeting in Marseille, the initiator of the *Forum Méditerranéen*, M. Jacques Huntzinger, professor at the University of Toulouse and a prominent member of the French Socialist Party, was asked by the French President to foster cooperation in the Western Mediterranean as a "chargé de mission" in the Ministry for Foreign Affairs.

The governmental dimension of the initiative emerged very clearly in the second meeting of the *Forum Méditerranéen*, held in Tangiers on May 23-27, 1989 [3]. From a political point of view, the Tangiers forum was not a success for the French government. Its wish to assert its

role and a sort of primacy in the Western Mediterranean was naively and poorly presented by the French members of the *Forum Méditerranéen* and this reinforced the mistrust already mingling among Maghrebi representatives. A year and a half later, in an already different political landscape - with the fall of the Berlin Wall in Europe, the establishment of the Arab Maghreb Union in the Maghreb, etc.- the Tangiers meeting resulted in the setting up of the intergovernmental "Group of Nine" [4] in Rome, on October 10, 1990, in which multilateralism prevailed over French leadership. As for the *Forum Méditerranéen*, it quietly disappeared.

Despite its apparent lack of success, in its brief life the *Forum Méditerranéen* tried seriously to establish the private dimension as the pillar of Mediterranean cooperation. In particular, with respect to today's broad philosophy of cooperation, it set the stage for the role private firms and the market should play in Mediterranean cooperation. In fact, the activities of the *Forum Méditerranéen* paved the way to the establishment of the "Club Financier Méditerranéen", a Paris-based association of banks and financial institutions which focused its activities on the Maghreb and the Mediterranean [5]. More broadly speaking, the idea that civil society should play a key role in Mediterranean cooperation was very clear among the individuals who promoted the *Forum Méditerranéen* in Marseille and was illustrated by pointing out that the *Forum* was expected to act as the "boîte à idées" for both private and public cooperation in the area. In this sense the *Forum Méditerranéen* acted as a pioneer and a scout leaving a legacy to Mediterranean projects today, including the Forum this paper is dealing with.

*The Group of Contact* - Another theme that the Forum has incorporated is Mediterraneanism, i.e. the feeling of intra-Mediterranean solidarity, as distinct from Euro-Mediterranean cooperation (though not necessarily in opposition to it, as was the case with the Mediterraneanism that used to be linked to Third-worldism and Non-alignment during the Cold War [6]). A non-third-worldist and non-anti-American Mediterraneanism developed in the 1980s in a number of Mediterranean countries, including Italy where it was particularly active and aimed at creating a regional shelter from global tensions.

The 1980s were years of great tension in the area. Mediterranean countries - and to a large extent Northern European countries too - were squeezed in a vice between Arab and Islamist terrorism stemming from the Israeli-Egyptian peace, the splits created in the Arab world as a result of the peace, Iranian subversion in the region, and the consequences of the Israeli invasion of Lebanon on one hand, and US and Israeli policies against "international" terrorism such as, for example, the bombing of the Tunis PLO headquarters, the "Achille Lauro", the Sigonella base crises in 1985, the bombing of Tripoli and Benghazi in 1986, on the other.

This new scenario compelled Mediterranean governments to undertake regional initiatives. In the mid-1980s the Italian government, then headed by Mr. Bettino Craxi, reacted by considerably reinforcing political and economic bilateral ties with North African countries in particular. At the end of 1986, Italy tried to go further by launching the idea of regional "support groups" of countries which would help stabilize crises in the Mediterranean area through regional means. To some extent, there was an attempt to draw on the experience of the Central American Contadora Group. Mr. Craxi was reported to have defined these "groups" as follows: "It is a question of establishing a firmer point of contact between the Mediterranean - European and Arab - countries which are not, and do not wish to be, involved in conflicts and are willing to seek realistic negotiated and peaceful solutions" [7].

The Group of Contact never actually materialized, but this author feels that its fundamental idea - the existence of Mediterranean solidarity alongside other manifestations of solidarity and conflict across the Mediterranean basin - is another legacy that today re-emerges with the Forum for Mediterranean Dialogue and Cooperation.

### *The Forum in its international context*

The Forum is an initiative of the Egyptian government. The idea was first launched in February-March 1993, and a draft plan for establishing a "forum of cooperation among Mediterranean countries" was submitted to a number of partners in November 1993. The proposal was intended to allay Egypt's frustrations and concerns over the regional and international changes brought about by the end of the Cold War, the 1990-91 Gulf War and the beginning of the peace process in the Near East. The new scenario - negatively perceived by the Egyptians - convinced the government in Cairo to find the way to promote Mediterranean solidarity as one more option in a difficult situation and as a means for strengthening ties with the European Union.

This development is central in the work of Egyptian analysts today. Abdel Monem Said Aly, the present Director of the Al-Ahram Center for Political and Strategic Studies, points out that: "By using its geo-political position, Egypt has been an influential international and regional actor because of four factors: (a) the Cold War; (b) the Arab-Israeli conflict and peace process; (c) the Gulf security; and (d) the crisis in the Horn of Africa. ... The above mentioned factors have faced considerable change in the past four years [causing] a possible decline in the Egyptian regional and international status" [8]. In fact, the Arab-Israeli peace process, the implications of the 1990-91 Gulf war and the policies the US has pursued from the all-dominant position in the region it has acquired after the end of the Cold War, have altered the strategic conformation of the region and are perceived by Egypt as a threat to its traditional leadership. Furthermore, Egypt is also concerned that in a less immediate future, the huge amount of foreign aid it receives today from both the US and the Arab Gulf countries - largely because of its important strategic role in the region - may be put in jeopardy. The Mediterranean option emerged at the end of 1993 as an element of a new Egyptian strategy to check this decline in influence and was manifest first in the establishment of the Forum as a tie with the Southern members of the EU, and then in Egypt's request to join the Arab Maghreb Union and become a member of the (sleeping) Group of 5 + 5, i.e. in what must have appeared to Cairo as a sphere of privileged cooperation with Europe.

Another Egyptian analyst, Prof. Mohammed El-Sayed Selim from Cairo University, has given a full account of the reasons and goals underlying the Egyptian move towards the Mediterranean, in particular towards the Forum:

It was only after the fundamental transformations in the international system in the beginning of the nineties that Egypt began to explore a Mediterranean project, with a view to establishing an institutional framework for relations with the European Union. Prominent among Egypt's objectives behind this new policy direction was to try and mitigate the negative economic effects of the EU's emphasising of its interests in Eastern

Europe and North Africa and to expand the 5 + 5 formula for European-Maghreb cooperation to include Egypt. A new strategic perspective also lay behind this shift in direction, as Egypt began to diversify its global options in a uni-polar world in which the US is the sole super power. Europe's participation in the Madrid Peace Conference further consolidated this new orientation. [9]

In January 1994 the Egyptian initiative was favourably received by the Italian Government, then headed by Prime Minister Carlo Azeglio Ciampi, who was firmly convinced that it was in Italy's interest to develop a Mediterranean dimension in both national and European circles (more firmly convinced than the Foreign Minister, who nonetheless complied faithfully with Mr. Ciampi's Mediterranean priority). The Italian government committed itself to developing the Forum and to this end asked the International Affairs Institute in Rome to prepare a report on what could be done to implement cooperation in concrete terms within the Forum [10]. This report -under the name of "Med-20002- was then adopted as "the basis for discussion in dealing with different issues in [the] working groups" established by the above mentioned ministerial meeting of the Forum in Alexandria.

At the end of February 1994, the French Foreign Minister visited Cairo and confirmed interest to proceed with the Forum. In the following months however, it was clear that while the Italian government was looking for a substantive commitment and regarded the Forum initiative as an important dimension in its foreign policy, the French government was more cautious and wanted the initiative to remain as informal as possible.

On the other hand, the Forum was not very well received by the Maghreb countries, particularly by Morocco. They were more interested in building strong bilateral relations with the EU and the CSCE (the Mediterranean dimension of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe) than in the limited Forum format and were aware and somewhat suspicious of Egypt's attempt to share in their more or less special relations with the EU.

The Alexandria ministerial meeting eventually took place at the beginning of July 1994 in a climate reflecting these dissensions. Furthermore, the international context of the Forum was changing; for one thing the June 1994 European Council meeting in Corfu had begun to shape a new EU Mediterranean policy which had a definite impact on Egyptian policy. Finally, Italy had a new government and although its priorities were still unclear it was evident that the Mediterranean did not rank as high on the list of priorities as it had with Mr. Ciampi's government. In Alexandria there was agreement to proceed because it was still important to maintain an Arab-European forum for exchanging political views and to provide the Arab partners with the international confidence they were looking for. But agreement was very informal and uncommitted [11].

### *The Forum's activity*

In the Alexandria meeting the Ministers of Algeria, Egypt, France, Greece, Italy, Morocco, Portugal, Spain, Tunisia and Turkey set up three working groups on political, cultural and economic issues. These groups first met in October 1994 in Madrid, Rome and Cairo respectively. The work of the three groups was then examined by the December 1994 Senior

Officials' gathering in the Portuguese Algarve region. The Senior Officials prepared the subsequent ministerial meeting which took place in Sainte-Maxime (Southern France) on April 8-9, 1995, and included Malta as a new member.

The Social-Economic Group did not produce any substantive results. The Political Group is studying the possibility of developing a form of Mediterranean Political Cooperation, that is, a mechanism for political consultation (following suggestions in the "Med-2000" Report presented by the Italian International Affairs Institute) linked to the EU political cooperation. It also examined numerous applications for membership which had been presented at the time of the meeting in Sainte-Maxime by countries as diverse as Albania, Cyprus, Croatia, Jordan, Israel, Libya, Russia, Syria and Slovenia. The Cultural Group drew up a list of 16 cultural cooperation projects known as "Archimede" which will be implemented by the governments which put them forward and not by the Forum itself.

At Sainte-Maxime the ministers put off making decisions as to new members and considered that discussions held within the Political Group were in themselves a form of consultation. They apparently did not come up with a distinctive mechanism for political consultation. They took note of the "Archimede" list and approved the idea that the Forum would simply act as an umbrella for these cultural cooperation projects. In his final address the French Chairman said, with respect to the identity of the Forum, that the member states "ont réaffirmé la vocation spécifique du Forum d'être un «cadre informel de dialogue entre les pays riverains de la Méditerranée sur des sujets d'intérêt commun»".

It was also decided to have an "informal Presidency", which for the time being would be Italy. In the first semester of 1996 then Italy will combine the Presidency of the European Union (and the follow up of the Barcelona Conference) and the informal Presidency of the Forum. The Forum also expressed its full support to the Barcelona Conference and to the EU proposal to establish a Euro-Mediterranean partnership as well.

Nevertheless, the vagueness of the identity and of the activity of the Forum is striking. Everything is informal, conclusions are oral and there are no press-communicés - in fact, there is almost no public documentation on the Forum at all. In Sainte-Maxime however, interesting exchanges of opinion did take place concerning the most important Mediterranean political crises of the moment, like the Algerian situation, the transition to democracy and terrorism. Such exchanges can be considered the germ of political cooperation. Although there are other fora where exchanges of this kind take place (the OSCE, the dialogue initiated by the WEU and, sooner or later, the dialogue initiated by NATO) this author believes that for the time being no other forum has fostered more political exchange between Arabs and Europeans than the Forum. Another positive aspect of the Forum is its capacity to develop a cultural agenda, although the format is an extreme example of *géometrie variable* and *coopération à la carte*. What will the Forum's future be?

### ***Will the Forum survive?***

As already mentioned, the main reason the Forum is so shy in affirming its identity is that the political context which gave rise to the Forum in the first place had already begun to alter as

early as the first ministerial meeting in Alexandria. The movement towards a Euro-Mediterranean Partnership initiated in Corfu tends to incorporate the Forum's *raison d'être* and to provide a more comprehensive response to Egypt's concerns than the one the Forum would be able to give. The Forum is informal, almost secretive, simply because it is now waiting to see what developments take place in the Euro-Mediterranean sphere after the Barcelona conference. They may pre-empt the Forum's identity and activities.

Nonetheless, there are at least two good reasons why the Forum's survival is desirable - both mentioned in "Med-2000" Report which includes two important ideas for trying to give the Forum a precise task and, at the same time, consistency with the wider EU's framework of cooperation. The Report says:

\* Mediterranean cooperation requires a specific institutional framework within which the Community countries of Southern Europe can take on a special responsibility towards both their partners on the Southern Rim and northern European countries. Whatever its degree of institutionalization, this framework must be linked to the European Union's Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP);

\* the institutions for political cooperation must pursue two main objectives:

a) to increase the coherence between the consensus-building mechanisms in individual countries and international cooperation so that better management of interdependence and global economic, social and cultural processes may be achieved, thus attenuating and solving possible crises and reducing risks;

b) to establish the type of dialogue required to bring the Mediterranean area into the processes of globalization, thereby reducing tensions between globalization and specificities; the human dimension is bound to be predominant in Mediterranean cooperation.

A Southern European role of mediation between the countries on the south shore of the Mediterranean and the EU already figured in the Group of Contact scheme and the Western *Forum Méditerranéen* in Tangiers. The final document of the Tangiers meeting refers to Southern European countries as "mentors" of the Arab countries which were part of what was later to become the "5 + 5" Group. The "Med-2000" Report tries to substantiate this (very Mediterranean) metaphor by pegging local political cooperation to the wider political cooperation with the EU (i.e. the CFSP) and by arguing that proximity between the countries concerned and shared cultural heritage may help to solve oppositions between global trends and identities. It is clear that one specific task of the Forum, as limited as it is to the Mediterranean countries, should be the revival and the strengthening of a Mediterranean cultural identity. It may not be by chance that the Forum's cultural dimension has proved successful. Even if this were the Forum's only contribution, it could still be an important factor in smoothing Euro-Mediterranean relations, thus easing their institutionalization.

If the Mediterranean Forum proves unable to work out an institutional and political identity consistent with the wider European framework, it will be very difficult for it to survive. But the possibility of the Forum's emerging as a helpful mediator between Mediterranean and European cultures is not at all to be discarded. Useful though the mediation task may be it is not provided by any institution. This in fact may be the very gap the Forum can fill, giving it a good *raison d'être*, particularly from the point of view of the Southern European countries and

their intra-EU policy.

## Notes

[1] The author took part personally in this conference. The proceedings of the conference have been printed in Marseille by the Association: *Premier Forum Méditerranéen*, Actes du colloque "Réalités et perspectives des relations entre les pays européens de la Méditerranée occidentale et les pays du Maghreb associés à la C.E.E.", Editions Echanges Méditerranée (without date).

[2] The background of the French initiative is analysed by Eric Gobe, "Autour du Forum Méditerranéen: vagues, hésitations et enjeux", in IREMAM, *Annuaire de l'Afrique du Nord 1990*, Vol. 29, Paris, Editions du CNRS, 1992, pp. 97-106. As to the reasons that induced France to take the initiative, one that should be added is Italian activism in the Maghreb, which was particularly lively in the 1980s and was supported by considerable economic and financial cooperation efforts, the result of political will on the part of the Socialist leadership to conduct an assertive policy in the Mediterranean area.

[3] The proceedings were printed and distributed privately in mimeographed form only: *IIème Forum Méditerranéen*, "Réalités et perspectives des relations entre les pays européens de la Méditerranée occidentale et les pays de l'Union du Maghreb Arabe", Tanger 23-27 Mai 1989. The author participated in this second meeting too.

[4] Subsequently, "Group of Five plus Five" (thanks to the addition of Malta); today frozen because of UN sanctions on Libya and the domestic strife in Algeria. On Western Mediterranean politics see Michel Rousset (éd.), *La Méditerranée occidentale espace de coopération*, Cahiers du CEDSI, No. 12, Grenoble, 1992.

[5] The establishment of the Club was preceded by a meeting in Paris on March 13-14, 1989 (see the proceedings in: Forum Méditerranéen, *Financement du développement dans le bassin méditerranéen*, Journées réunies à l'initiative de la Mission Méditerranée du Ministère français des Affaires Etrangères, 13-14 Mars 1989, Edition Echanges Méditerranée, Marseille, 1989). The Club publishes a quarterly newsletter: *CFM Méditerranée Développement*.

[6] See Samir Amin, *Delinking. Towards a Polycentric World*, Zed Books Ltd., London and New Jersey, 1990.

[7] See "Mubarak ha chiesto a Craxi aiuto economico e politico", *La Repubblica*, 16 December 1986; Francesco Gozzano, "Garantire la stabilità dell'area mediterranea", *Avanti!*, 26 November 1986, and IAI, *L'Italia nella politica internazionale anno quindicesimo: 1986-1987*, Franco Angeli, Milano, 1989, p. 444.

[8] Abdel Monem Said Aly, *From Geo-Politics to Geo-Economics. Egyptian National Security Perceptions* (unpublished: draft presented by the author within the framework of the UNIDIR Expert Group on Confidence-Building Measures in the Middle East); see also Wadouda Badran, *Egypt's Security Policy*, paper presented to the ISS-WEU International Seminar on



"Security and Defence Policies of the Maghreb Countries and Egypt", Paris, 9-10 March 1995 (unpublished), and Gema Martín Muñoz, *L'Égypte et la stabilité en Méditerranée. Les conséquences pour l'Afrique du Nord et l'Europe*, paper presented to the ISS-WEU International Seminar on "L'Égypte et la stabilité au nord de l'Afrique et en Méditerranée: les conséquences pour l'Europe", Paris, November 3, 1994 (unpublished).

[9] Mohammed El-Sayed Selim, *Mediterraneanism: A New Dimension in Egypt's Foreign Policy*, Al-Ahram Center for Political and Strategic Studies, Strategic Papers No. 27, March 1995.

[10] The English version of the report was published by the Institute in its quarterly journal: "Cooperation and Stability in the Mediterranean: An Agenda for Partnership", *The International Spectator*, vol. XXIX, no. 3, July-September 1994, pp. 5-20.

[11] See "Réunion informelle des Ministres des Affaires Etrangères des pays du Forum Méditerranéen. Point de presse du Ministre des Affaires Etrangères, M. Alain Juppé", *CFM Méditerranée Développement*, No. 7, November 1994, pp. 11-12.