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Mediterranean Scientopolitics

ON THIS YEAR'S BASTILLE DAY IN JULY, THE PRESIDENT OF FRANCE, NICOLAS SARKOZY, INAUGURATED a new initiative for uniting the Mediterranean South with Europe in general, and France in particular. The aim of the Mediterranean Union (MU), an analogue of the post-Cold War European Union (EU), is to "lay the foundations of a political, economic and cultural union founded on the principles of strict equality." Comprising 27 EU members and states from the Middle East, North Africa, and the Balkans, the MU would in principle unite close to 800 million people. In June, a meeting was held at the Institut de France with representation from many academies, scientists, and politicians to discuss possible cooperative programs. The goals expressed at the meeting are admirable; however, the MU's motives need to be clearly defined, as the issues for the MU are very different from those for the EU. Most important, thus far missing in the fabric of the former is an explicit role for education and science.

The Mediterranean people have a rich history encompassing cradles of civilization ranging from Egypt and Greece to the Roman Empire. As the word implies in Latin, the Mediterranean was considered the "Middle Earth," but at present the disparity between North and South is alarming. The difference in gross domestic product between the two is staggering, and illiteracy, deterioration in education, and the unfavorable state of governance in the South have put many there at a disadvantage. Despite these challenges, the MU could redefine the state of North-South cooperation by providing new opportunities for progress—but only if differences and concerns are openly addressed.

The integration of Eastern and Western Europe is to some extent easier than that of the North and South Mediterranean because religions and cultures are more diverse in the Mediterranean Basin. For the initiative to succeed, the leaders in MU nations must promote economic and political strategies that respect these differences. The benefits of free trade and liberty, coupled with dialogues of cultures through scholarly discourse that promote mutual acceptance, will undoubtedly lead to stronger bonding among and security for the nations in the region. But if the MU is directed by political agendas, such as distancing Turkey from the EU or isolating particular countries in the EU or Arab League, it will ultimately unravel and become a medium for slogans and the polarization of nations. The main political objective of the MU should instead be the promotion of human rights and liberty, and the solution of chronic problems such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

The driving force essential to any progress is education and the ensuing scientific and technological development. General education will not only improve the well-being of society on all levels, but will also create an atmosphere of enlightenment that resists dogmatic and radical practices. Modern education will provide new skills and economies and the means for positive participation in the world market. And building a strong science base for research and development in the Mediterranean Basin, especially in the South, will have real impact with mutual benefits, allowing scientists and the rest of civil society to work together to alleviate many problems of significance to the region such as illegal immigration, illiteracy, food shortages, energy demands, water resources, climate change, infectious diseases, and the dearth of democratic governance. Moreover, creating such a base through sustainable cooperative programs with the North will limit brain drain and channel the energy of youth into a knowledge-based world economy.

The new MU initiative could turn into a historic milestone, building on the 1995 Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (the Barcelona Process), provided that there is a genuine desire for North-South support and partnership. Building education and the science base, bridging cultures through strong collaborative programs, and boosting economic and political benefits are the triad on which the MU should stand. These objectives will not see the light of day if the purpose of the MU is mainly political—rather, the focus should be "scientopolitical," a phrase coined here to emphasize the importance of education and science to the advancement of political and human affairs.

— Ahmed Zewail

