

## **The Past and Future of the Mediterranean Region**

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### **Introduction**

The Mediterranean Region is the cradle of many civilizations and therefore philosophies and religions. Even in a process of seemingly all-pervasive globalization, such as the one the world is experiencing at present, and in a situation in which Europe is becoming a complete and complex entity, the regions on the north and south of the Mediterranean Basin seem to be recapturing what had appeared to be lost in terms of identity.

In recent years the Mediterranean area has been the theatre of numerous endeavours of particular interest, including many related to environmental issues which transcend any national boundaries. Most of the Mediterranean countries have contributed to the so-called "Plan Bleu" in the effort to save the common sea, the "mare nostrum", and many initiatives have been promoted by the Institute for Mediterranean Studies in Malta, with the support of the will and imagination of Elisabeth Mann Borgese, the renowned political scientist and oceanographer. Other interesting activities, this time in the cultural sphere, have been promoted by the Institut Català d'Estudis Mediterranis.

Over and beyond the specific initiatives, what is important is the renewed search for common roots and possible common strategies. It is on these renewed foundations that a form of survival becomes the goal, in facing the larger economic, geographic and political coalitions, such as the European Community, the North America Free Trade Association (NAFTA), including also Mexico, and so on.

### **Demographic Situation of the Mediterranean Region**

In terms of population there is a marked difference between the situation in the north and the south of the Mediterranean Basin countries. The issue in the north is aging of population and constantly diminishing fertility rates; in the south, a very slow increase in life expectancy, and hence a much slower aging of the population, and high fertility rates, especially in those countries of Islamic religion.

As a consequence there is also a marked difference between the north and the south in terms of educational, health, and labour needs, the ratio between the number of jobs needed in the next ten years being one (in the North) to 64 (in the South). This explains the migratory flows from the south to the north of the Mediterranean Basin, a phenomenon which is understandable and probably unavoidable. Even the introduction of legislation in countries such as Italy, France and Spain is unlikely to curb the massive migration, in part because of the extended coastlines of the countries in the north, which are extremely difficult to control, as is the case of Italy.

### **Dynamics of Cultural Encounters**

Contacts between the various cultures of the Mediterranean Basin countries have taken place over the centuries in different historical moments. Hence, although there may be discrepancies in terms of time, the remnants or the anticipations of cultures often bring about changes that seem unexpected. In this paper, we shall en-

deavour to look at the past, in terms of contacts between Mediterranean cultures, and the future, in terms of what we might expect to occur.

In the past, cultures came together and exchanged life styles, sometimes maintaining the core of their cultures. The Arab culture, mostly Moslem, gave up some of its specific life styles, for example those related to education, but not others, as those related to family structures. The Arab culture has also left its mark in terms of art and understanding of natural phenomena, according to some even science, as in the case of Sicily and Sevilla.

In other cases, cultures have experienced different phases in the process of contact. An initial phase of acceptance, followed by re-elaboration and rebellion, eventually finding a way of coexisting. These phases may take centuries or decades. In the present world of extremely rapid change in all areas - technology, economics, politics - there is a serious discrepancy between the rapid pace of change and the much slower pace of cultural changes, which often leads to tensions and even conflicts. Humanity has still not found a way of matching the different rhythms of change. This still seems to be beyond even its great scientific capacities.

In coming into contact, cultures experience a dual process of give and take. Problems start to arise, when one particular culture is dominant, for example for scientific or technological reasons. This happened in the Arab world, with the development of western science and its predominance. Many Islamic scholars are now urging their countries to revisit their great scientific and technological capacities of the past. Capacities which have done such a noble service to the world communities, by salvaging much of the early scientific knowledge subsequently transferred to the West.

### **Communication around the Mediterranean**

The Mediterranean countries are a precious reservoir of knowledge and learning, having been the recipients also of the great knowledge of the past, from China and from the Hindu civilizations.

The Northern part of Europe has greatly benefitted from this reservoir but the South has not been able to do the same for itself. The different regions will have to find ways of communicating, possibly along new lines of interest, for example, artistic interest, as between Barcelona and northern Italy and southern France, or along lines of similar capacities, for example the capacity to manage small enterprises as in central Italy, Spain and France, or through new ways of transferring people and goods, using the sea itself.

The coming years may well be a time for reinforcing the capacities of the people of the Mediterranean to find for themselves new ways of cooperating, on the basis of common heritages, even in a situation of differing possibilities. It may well be that the forces deriving mainly from technology are not destined to have the better over non-material forces, and that the common spiritual heritage will prevail.

Empirical studies and theories on culture and the interaction between dominant cultures and other more peripheral cultures have shown that, in meeting, cultures give up what might be referred to as "peripheral" aspects but not the specific core aspects, which are their strength and what allows them to survive.

This is very much the case around the Mediterranean. There is a feeling of belonging, that is at the basis of the survival, for example, of different African countries - Arab, Moslem or black Africa - fighting to preserve their culture, and in the effort sometimes forgetting other cultures and also their right to survive. Unless an understanding that each culture has a limit in its identity in the other cultures, tensions will increase more and more.