The Mediterranean Basin has been the cradle of world civilization since the first settlements in Jericho in 9000 BC. Known in English and the romance languages as the sea “between the lands”, the Mediterranean goes and has gone by many names: Our Sea, for the Romans, the White Sea (Akdeniz) for the Turks, the Great Sea (Yam Gadol) for the Jews, the Middle Sea (Mittelmeer) for the Germans and more doubtfully the Great Green for the ancient Egyptians. Our Sea played a major role in the communication of the peoples around it and prevented clashes between people with different interests from different parts of the Basin. No other such basin exists in the world. The world map shows what a unique location the Mediterranean Sea has in the world—it is big enough to house all of us but at the same time, with its unique shape, with its islands, bays and straits, it creates the means to connect the people around it. It looks as if it is a closed sea, but it offers the main transportation routes between east and west.

The Mediterranean Sea is a symbol of creativity, of the search for the meaning of life and for wisdom, and of the love of people and nature. This sea has always been an environment that has bred outstanding people who have made remarkable contributions to the development of history in philosophy, art, music, literature, science and technology. Magnificent civilizations have scattered all around the Basin, from east to west, from north to south, from Mesopotamia to Egypt, from Anatolia, Troy to Macedonia, from the Greek city states to Phoenician civilization, from Carthage to Rome, from Baghdad to Al-Andalus, from Byzantium to the Ottoman Empire and from Alexandria to Bologna, and have formed a sound base for world civilizations. One cannot imagine a history of the world without the Egyptian, Hellenistic, Roman and Ottoman civilizations.

The history of intellectual development in the Mediterranean Basin

Established in 300 BC, the Ancient Library of Alexandria in Egypt was one of the largest and most significant libraries of the ancient world. The first intellectual developments emerged in the eastern Mediterranean and focused mainly on philosophy. People around the Mediterranean Sea have had limitless opportunities to meet with different cultures and to learn about the world and this fact, starting from the Hellenistic period, gave birth to the emergence of philosophers and scientists who made great contributions to intellectual development. Among them were Thales from Miletus, Anaximandros, Anaximenes, Pythagoras, Xenophanes and Diogenes from Apollo, Hippocrates, Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle (sixth, fifth, fourth centuries BC). The Middle Ages were the Golden Age of the Islamic people in the region, and between 622 and 750 AD, starting in the Arab Peninsula, Islamic state expansion spread over the Middle East, part of Asia Minor, Persia, Northern Africa and Iberia. For centuries, Al-Andalus in Iberia and Morocco were alternative cultural centres to Baghdad. From the eighth until the fifteenth century, many philosophers had a notable impact on the development of Islamic philosophy in the region, among them Jabir ibn Hayyan, Al Farabi, Al Biruni, Ibn Sina, Al Qushayri, Al Ghazali, Al Baghaadi, Ibn Rusld, Jalal ad-Din Rumi, and Ibn Khaldun. From ancient times to the medieval and Renaissance periods, the Mediterranean Basin played a major role in philosophy, art and science. After the eighteenth century, however, when long-range seafaring became possible and new trade routes developed, the Mediterranean region began to lose its importance and other parts of Europe and North America gained influence.
Thus, there was a shift both from south to north and from east to west in the development of modern philosophy, art, science and technology.

**The history of universities in the Mediterranean Region**

The list of the oldest universities in the world varies, depending on how one defines a university. If a university is considered to be a degree-granting institution, all of the world’s oldest are located in Europe where the practice of granting certification was widespread by the 1100s. These quotes reflect a narrow, Eurocentric view of the university: “The university is a European institution”, or “No other institution has spread over the entire world in the way in which the traditional form of the European university has done”. In fact, it was the countries of the Mediterranean region that created the oldest universities in the world. More broadly the list of the oldest universities does not include the ancient civilizations of Greece, Rome, China, India or the Arab world, but the educational institutions that existed there satisfy a traditional definition of university and should, therefore, be included. If we list the universities based on the narrow definition of degree-granting institutions, we see that the oldest university in the world is the University of Bologna, established in 1088. Among the 44 oldest universities, 25 were founded in the Mediterranean Basin, and the Italian Peninsula is the leading region, with 13 universities. Eight of the top ten oldest universities in the world that have operated continuously until the present day are in the Mediterranean area, an indication of how intellectually developed the region was and still is. Although Ottoman institutions are not included in the list, Istanbul University should be mentioned, having been established in 1453 by Sultan Mehmed the Conqueror. Another important institution and the first higher education institution of the Ottoman Empire outside religious education is Istanbul Technical University, which was established in 1773.

If we take a broader definition of university as “an autonomous self-governing institution of higher education” and look at the 10 oldest leading universities in the world, then we will have a different list. By definition, the university first was developed as a religious institution (madrasah) that originated in the medieval Islamic world. The first one was the University of Al-Karaouine in 859. Al-Azhar University in Egypt in 972 and Nizamiyya in Iran in 1065 were the other Islamic universities in the Basin. The Universities of Bologna, Paris, Oxford, Montpellier, Cambridge, Salamanca and Padua are the other universities in the list, and the Mediterranean Basin has a strong presence in it. Since 1500, many universities have been founded all over the world and many different types of higher education institutions emerged. Higher education is still in transition under the pressure of globalization but it is obvious that the role of the university as an institution continues to grow and expectations of society from the university are altering rapidly in today’s changing environment. There may be different definitions of universities but what is certain is that the university is the product of the Mediterranean region. There is no reliable data regarding either how many universities are in the Mediterranean Basin or how many Mediterranean universities compete worldwide but this region’s rich, historical background has created an outstanding intellectual environment where many philosophers, artists, musicians and scientists of worldwide reputation have emerged over the centuries.

**Universities linked by the Sea**

The people, countries, cultures and institutions around the Mediterranean Sea share common characteristics and values that have allowed the creation of many successful projects and will most certainly continue to do so. The Mediterranean universities, with their core strengths based in their deep intellectual culture and socially interconnected staff and students can play a major role between east and west as well as between north and south. One of the obvious strengths is the mobility of students and academics. European Community Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students (ERASMUS) statistics show that between 1987 and 2011, over 46 per cent of student and academic mobility was in the Mediterranean countries (ANNEX01SM - Outgoing Erasmus students from 1987/1988 to 2010/2011). Mobility will help the Mediterranean universities extend their horizons and become global institutions.

University networks are another important factor and in order to understand what role these can play in this process, a brief look at the networks that exist in the region will be useful. The Community of Mediterranean Universities (CMU) is one of the oldest university networks in the Mediterranean area, having been established in 1983, when it was hosted by the University of Bari. It has over 160 member universities from 12 European and 9 Arab States. CMU also has strong connections with supranational organizations such as the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the European Union and the European Council. The first cooperative agreement, signed with UNESCO on 7 October 1992 was followed by another signed on 2 August 1997, which officially recognized CMU as a non-governmental organization. There is a very fitting message on its website: “Many voices, only one basin”. We do have many voices in one region: CMU is far from being the only network of the Mediterranean universities – in fact, there are many. Among them are the network of Mediterranean Tech-
technical Universities (RMEI), the Euro-Mediterranean University in Slovenia, a network established by a group of Mediterranean universities, the Network of the Mediterranean Universities, Mediterranean Universities Union, which is one of the European Investment Bank University Networks with its headquarters in Rome and 84 member universities, and the Euro-Mediterranean Forum, which has some 100 members.

These networks function with similar missions but until recently have tended not to communicate with each other efficiently. Some 10 years ago, CMU and RMEI decided to hold their meetings at the same universities on the same dates. Several joint meetings have been organized in Rabat, Athens and Izmir. They have also decided that they will send representatives to one another’s meetings. Another development has been the growth of cooperation between Black Sea Universities Network, CMU and RMEI. Some universities that are members of these networks have played important roles in connecting these three organizations in the last decade. More importantly, while it is good to have many voices, these networks – each having between 100 and 200 members – function independently. It is time to think about how to bring together all of these networks and create a coordinated organization that is both more efficient and more effective and will represent Mediterranean universities on any platform. If Mediterranean university networks are able to organize themselves to work together, then the impact of these networks will be much greater not only in the Mediterranean Basin, but at European and global levels as well.

While there has historically been conflict in the region among various groups, there have also always been common creative and intellectual aspirations and attitudes and, over the centuries, these groups have worked together and learned from each other in trade, as well as in the arts and sciences. The global changes that have come about in recent years, such as increased mobility and international communication, can create the opportunity and the need to build even greater cross-cultural interaction and cooperation in and among university networks to increase the sharing of experience and resources in the Mediterranean Basin.

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