



# 4ÈME SESSIONS MÉDITERRANÉENNES DES HAUTES ÉTUDES STRATÉGIQUES JEUNES DES DEUX RIVES

## 4TH MEDITERRANEAN STRATEGIC STUDIES TWO SHORES YOUTH SCHEME



# COMMITTEE WORK COMMITTEE 2



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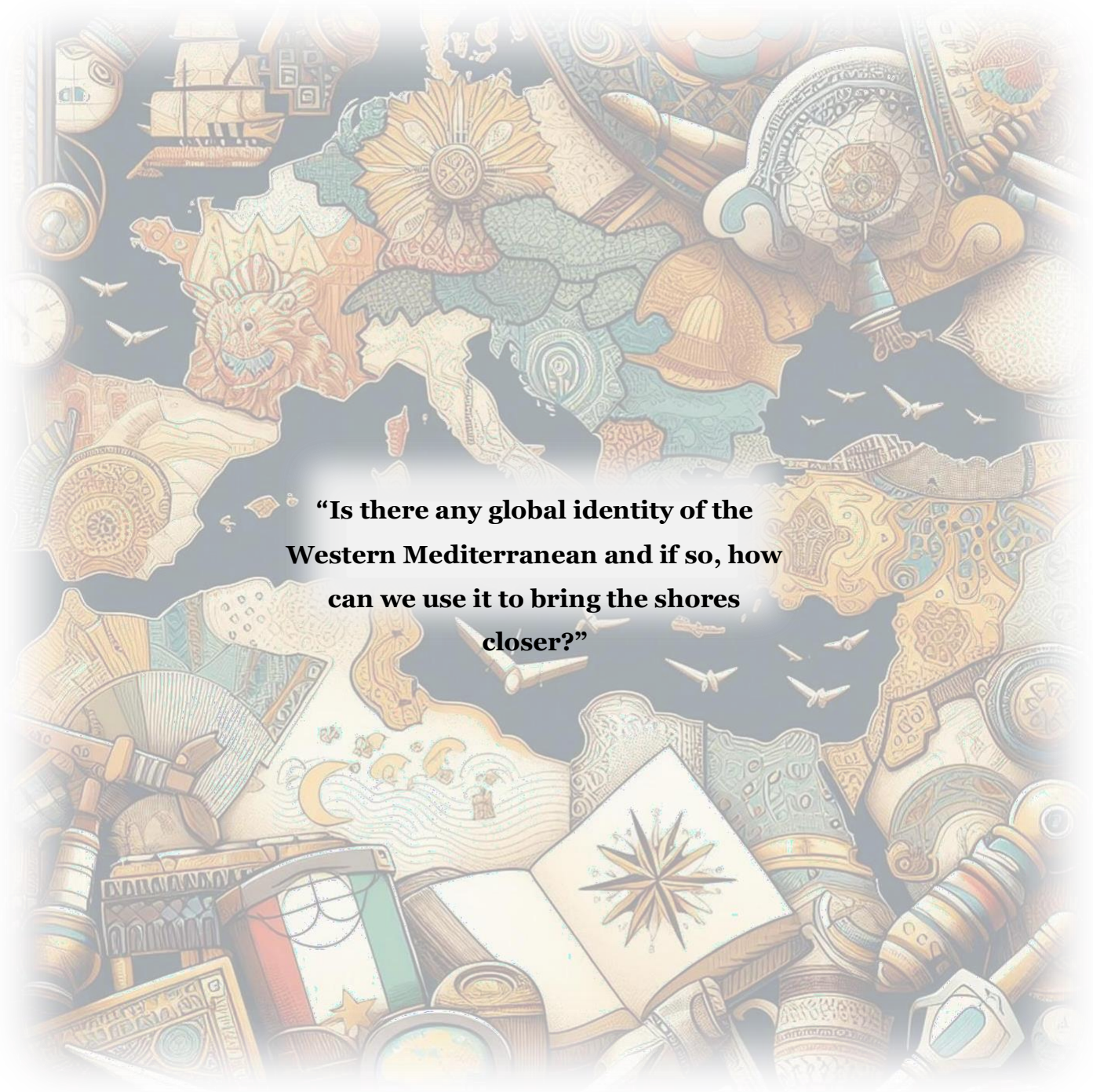
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*This work only represents the opinions of the authors.*





**“Is there any global identity of the  
Western Mediterranean and if so, how  
can we use it to bring the shores  
closer?”**



## Table of Contents

<i>Introduction</i> .....	3
<i>Historical and Cultural Overview</i> .....	4
<i>Identifying the Global Identity</i> .....	5
<i>Bridging the Two Shores</i> .....	6
<i>Challenges and Considerations</i> .....	7
<i>Conclusion</i> .....	8
<i>References</i> .....	9



## Introduction

The Mediterranean basin, spanning Europe, Asia, and Africa has been on a wild ride for decades. The two shores reveal economic disparities, and in the political sphere, it includes diverse governance systems, from democracies to monarchy regimes. Ongoing conflicts and political instability in parts of the region (e.g Libya, Syria) affect the social and economic dynamics. Despite its rich cultural heritage, the Mediterranean faces migration pressures, youth unemployment, and inequality. Environmentally, the Mediterranean is particularly vulnerable to climate change, which impacts agriculture, water resources, and coastal communities. This presents a challenge to the region's sustainability and global identity.

In this way, the question of global identity for Mediterranean countries has become a recurrent and increasing issue. So, is there any global identity of the western Mediterranean and if so, how can we use it to bring the two shores closer? The context of Mediterranean countries is multifaceted, reflecting the region's rich history, cultural diversity, geopolitical significance, and contemporary challenges. That is why questioning the existence of a "Mediterranean identity" is crucial for understanding the cooperation and development of this area.

Beforehand, one can define identity as the understanding of who a person or a group is, encompassing the characteristics, beliefs, and values that define them. For the famous French writer, Albert Camus, trying to define a Mediterranean identity is the “rediscovering the only true” culture that “lives in the tree, in the hill, and in people” (Camus, 1957, n.p.). In addition, the contacts between the different shores of the Mediterranean ultimately encouraged, are seen by the other French writer Paul Valéry as “ [the] relations of all kinds: war, trade; voluntary or involuntary exchanges of goods, knowledge, methods; mixtures of blood, words, legends or traditions” (Valery, 1931, p.1136). The idea of a balance on a human scale, which is nourished by exchanges between human beings and their environment promotes the idea: all otherness and contradictions are as alive and necessary as each other.

Thus, the Mediterranean is shaped by a complex interplay of historical legacies, cultural practices, religious and ethnic diversity, economic interactions, and environmental factors. These elements link the region's diverse populations, fostering a sense of shared identity. Understanding these connections is essential for appreciating the unique character of the Mediterranean and addressing the region's contemporary challenges.



## Historical and Cultural Overview

The western Mediterranean Sea has been for millennia a vibrant crossroads and a rich mosaic of civilizations. This relatively enclosed sea served as both a barrier and a bridge. It separated landmasses but their proximity also provides a natural highway for trade and communication.

## Maritime Hub and Shared Geography

This unique geography facilitated the development of a robust maritime network. The Phoenicians established extensive trade routes that laid the groundwork for a vibrant maritime culture (Aubet, 2001). Coastal communities dependent on the sea developed common practices and identities. The Greeks and Romans, followed by later powers such as the Byzantines, Venetians, and Ottomans, all invested in developing sophisticated ships and navigation techniques. The common weather patterns - hot, dry summers and mild winters - supported similar agriculture, focused on crops such as olives and grapes, on both the northern and southern shores. This has helped further develop trade in the region and common culinary traditions.

## Cycles of Power and Unification

Western Mediterranean history features rising and falling empires that unified the region, allowed for cultural exchanges through conquest and dominance.

Empire/Civilization	Period	Key Contributions
Carthaginian Empire	~814-146 BCE	Maritime trade networks, Punic Wars with Rome (Osborne, 2009)
Roman Empire	27 BCE-476 CE	Engineering (aqueducts, baths), legal systems, governance (Matyszak, 2000)
Islamic Caliphates (Spain)	711-1492 CE	Art and architecture (Alhambra), scientific and cultural exchange
Spanish and Portuguese Empires	15th-17th centuries	Exploration, further cultural and economic integration

*Source: Elaborated by the authors.*

Empires like Rome's spread culture. Roman engineering, law, and art influenced the region, while architectural styles, religious practices, and artistic expressions from various empires highlight deep cultural integration.

## Trade in the Mediterranean

Even in the absence of a dominant political entity, commercial networks flourished, ensuring continuous cultural and economic exchange:

*Phoenicians:* Early maritime traders connecting the Mediterranean with distant regions.



*Greek City-States*: Promoted trade and cultural exchange via colonization and commerce.

*Italian City-States (Venice and Genoa)*: Major medieval trade hubs connecting Europe with the East.

Trade routes carried goods and culture, influencing artistic styles, cuisine, and architecture, although the shared staples like olive oil highlight this enduring interchange.

### **A Foundation for a Shared Identity**

The Western Mediterranean's geography promoted maritime trade and cultural exchange, leading to a common way of life. Political unification and trade networks further integrated cultures. This shared history lays the groundwork for a future regional identity, enabling countries to leverage their heritage for mutual benefit.

### **Identifying the Global Identity**

The notion of a global identity in the western Mediterranean is complex, since the region is made up of countries with diverse histories, cultures and languages. However, there is a sense of historical and geographical connection that unites these countries in addition to a sense of shared belonging between the countries of the western Mediterranean. All these countries have had a natural relation for many years due to the constant movements and communication paths that have encouraged economic, trade and human relations between them, also they all have common some gestures, attitudes, wishes or tastes.

We can divide the commonalities between the countries in the region in five main points. The first one would be historical influence, defined by the richness of the region's history influenced by the ancient civilizations such as the Greeks, Romans, and Phoenicians or even the Ottomans presence and the European impact that have contributed to forge a unique identity in the region.

The second is religious heritage, which is a pivotal point, since Christianity and Islam have played a significant role in shaping the religious landscape of the western Mediterranean. On the one hand, Christianity marks are evident in the art, architecture and traditions of countries such as Spain, Portugal, France and Italy, meanwhile Islam is present in the North African countries like Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia and Libya. On the other hand, the coexistence



of these religious traditions has also contributed to the unique identity but also can be considered as a barrier in the relationships or a point of convergence.

In relation to trade and commerce, the geographical location of the western Mediterranean has facilitated trade connections between Europe, Africa and the Middle East, and has brought, consequently, the exchange of goods, ideas and cultural influences. Many languages spoken in the western Mediterranean, such as Spanish, French, Italian or Portuguese, among others, share Latin roots, leading to similarities in vocabulary, grammar, and sentence structure. Across North Africa and parts of southern Spain, Arabic has left a significant impact on local languages. Within some countries, regional dialects and variations exist. While these variations contribute to linguistic diversity, they also reflect shared historical developments and cultural exchanges within each country. Finally, the culinary traditions in the Mediterranean share several similitudes such as the use of olive oil, fresh and local produce like seafood and vegetables, besides the importance of the social reunions around food.

It is essential to emphasize that the Mediterranean is not defined by a unique and static identity. On the contrary, it should be considered the existence of multiple belongings and the fact that a person from a region can have bonds with a variety of social groups without losing their identity.

## **Bridging the Two Shores**

The main obstacles to establishing a stable Western Mediterranean identity are the inequality between the Northern and Southern shores, the interests of global powers in the region, and the challenges posed by illegal trafficking. To overcome these challenges, it is important to build a "relationship" bridge based on diplomacy, economic and security collaboration, and educational and social programs.

Diplomacy plays a key role in building trust and friendship between Mediterranean states. Naval diplomacy, as well as exchange and training programs for military personnel, help strengthen relationships between countries. Economic and security collaboration has also grown, with increased commercial interactions and tighter bonds between European and North African countries, including addressing security issues such as illegal trafficking of humans, arms, and drugs, which require cooperation between different states and armed forces (European Union, 2023).





Educational and social programs also contribute to the development of a common identity in the Western Mediterranean. Opportunities such as the Erasmus program provide university students with the chance to explore new cultures and countries, while institutes organize conferences and seminars to create a network for sharing projects and ideas about international relations and geopolitics (European Commission).

Overall, these efforts contribute to the consolidation of a stable Western Mediterranean identity, despite the challenges posed by inequality, global interests, and illegal trafficking. Through diplomacy, economic and security collaboration, and educational and social programs, a strong foundation is being built for a common identity in the Western Mediterranean region.

## **Challenges and Considerations**

The Western Mediterranean region faces numerous challenges rooted in its complex histories and varied political landscapes. Historical conflicts, such as colonialism and territorial disputes, have fostered deep-seated mistrust among nations (Abulafia, 2011; Wright, 2012). Political systems also differ significantly, with Southern Europe's democracies contrasting sharply with North Africa's diverse governance structures, complicating regional cooperation (Abulafia, 2011; Wright, 2012). Economic disparities further hinder collaboration, as wealthier European nations possess stronger economies and resources, leading to trade imbalances and economic dependency for North African countries (European Commission, 2021; International Monetary Fund, 2022). Social and cultural barriers add another layer of complexity; despite shared historical influences, distinct languages, religious practices, and cultural norms often result in misunderstandings (Escribano, Marín-Quemada, & San Martín González, 2009; Ayubi, 1995). Migration from North Africa to Europe exacerbates economic strain and social tensions, further straining relations (de Haas, 2008; Castles, de Haas, & Miller, 2013). Security concerns are pervasive, with terrorism and political instability in North Africa threatening regional stability, necessitating robust border security and cooperative efforts (Buzan & Wæver, 2003; Lutterbeck, 2006).

To bridge these divides, fostering a shared identity is essential. Promoting cultural exchange through educational programs and cultural festivals can enhance mutual understanding and appreciation (Aliboni, 2005; Sayigh & Shlaim, 1997). Economic collaboration should be prioritized, with fair trade agreements and European investments in North African development projects to balance disparities and stimulate growth (Aliboni, 2005;



Sayigh & Shlaim, 1997). Political and security cooperation must be strengthened through regular dialogue, diplomatic efforts, and joint security initiatives, including counter-terrorism and border management (Khader, 2013; Hill & Smith, 2011). Addressing social issues is also crucial, with inclusive policies and community engagement aimed at reducing tensions and fostering a sense of belonging (Entzinger & Biezeveld, 2003; Gropas & Triandafyllidou, 2014). By recognizing the region's shared history and cultural ties while addressing these challenges, the Western Mediterranean can move towards greater unity and prosperity, benefiting all nations involved.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the Western Mediterranean, with its diverse historical, cultural, and economic backdrop, does possess elements that suggest a form of global identity. This identity is not monolithic but rather a mosaic of interconnected histories, cultural exchanges, and shared economic practices that span both the northern and southern shores. Historical influences from ancient civilizations, religious heritage, trade, and culinary traditions all contribute to a sense of shared belonging among the Mediterranean countries. Despite the disparities and challenges, these commonalities provide a foundation for fostering a regional identity that can bridge the economic, political, and social divides.

To leverage this global identity and bring the shores closer, a multifaceted approach is essential. Diplomacy should prioritize building trust through cultural exchanges and collaborative security initiatives. Economic cooperation can be enhanced through fair trade agreements and investment in development projects that address disparities. Educational and social programs, such as student exchange initiatives and cultural festivals, can promote mutual understanding and appreciation. By acknowledging the region's shared heritage and addressing contemporary challenges through cooperation, the Western Mediterranean can move towards a more integrated and prosperous future, fostering a stronger sense of unity among its diverse populations.



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