

## **SARKOZY’S PROPOSAL FOR A MEDITERRANEAN UNION**

### ***Introduction***

“*Europe’s future lies in the South*”. It was with these weighty and meaningful words that the French President decided to further clarify his vision of a Mediterranean Union during his visit in Tangiers on the 23<sup>d</sup> of October 2007.

Nicolas Sarkozy proposed on February 2007, during his presidential campaign, the creation of a Mediterranean Union in the image of the European Union model. He invited Portugal, Spain, Italy, Greece and Cyprus to join the French initiative and to show the necessary zeal in order to establish stronger cooperation ties among the littoral countries of the Mediterranean Sea.

The new *ensemble* would have, just like the EU, a decision Council, the “Mediterranean Council” and a system of collective security that would permit to guarantee peace without resorting to intimidation policies highly depended on the arms race. On the other hand, a “Mediterranean Investment Bank” would finance projects common to all the participating members of this new union.

Sarkozy proposed four main baskets for his Mediterranean Union: a common immigration policy; an ecological strategy; a common policy regarding co-development with a specific attention on water resources management; and an integrated cooperation system against corruption, organised crime and terrorism functioning under a common legal space<sup>1</sup>.

The project of a Mediterranean Union raised many questions among the European partners and the South Mediterranean countries. Lacking specific clarifications, the proposal was received with skepticism, albeit not promptly rejected. Many observers suggested that Sarkozy’s idea was nothing more than an electoral gimmick deprived of any particular substance and focusing on satisfying clear-cut internal interests. Nevertheless, as time goes by, the French President seems rather keen to realizing his aspirations of a united Mediterranean area.

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<sup>1</sup> “Coopération: l’Union méditerranéenne de Sarkozy”, in *Fenêtre sur l’Europe*, 8 February 2007.

Undoubtedly, a stable and prosper Mediterranean region is beneficial for all coastal States. Yet, it is suggested that adding an extra regional structure to a geographical area abundant in cooperation initiatives would only create a climate of further confusion and even exasperation among the Mediterranean partners.

Seeking to understand President Sarkozy's proposal, one should focus on two major questions. Firstly, is there a genuine need for a Union of the Mediterranean? Secondly, what could be the challenges that such a project could face and how could it guarantee an innovative approach as far as it concerns cooperation methods in the Mediterranean?

### ***Is There a Need for a Mediterranean Union?***

President Sarkozy's proposal incited many observers to wonder about the necessity of creating a supplementary union scheme between the Mediterranean countries. Consequently, many ideas were put forward concerning the reasons that lie behind this initiative.

#### Internal Reasons and Prestige Motives

The Mediterranean Union project was proposed during the French electoral period. The presidential aspirations of the Minister of Interior, Nicolas Sarkozy, were high-reaching enough to justify his overwhelming declarations on the common destiny of the Mediterranean people.

Driven by internal motives, Mr. Sarkozy had a strong interest in building a consensus and in gaining votes from French migrants of Mediterranean origin<sup>2</sup>. Indeed, immigration issues constitute one of the major topics of the Mediterranean Union idea. Being perceived as a conflicting political personality in France – especially *vis-à-vis* the migrant population – Nicolas Sarkozy could present himself, *via* the Mediterranean Union project, as cooperative and responsive to issues of high national importance.

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<sup>2</sup> Schmid Dorothee, "Is France back in the Mediterranean?", paper presented in the Conference on The Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP): Perspectives from the Mediterranean EU Countries, 25-27 October 2007, Rethimon, Crete.

On the other hand, the Mediterranean Union project could be interpreted as an effort to revive France's semi-dormant foreign policy towards the basin. Under President Jacques Chirac's mandate, French diplomacy has distanced itself from the Mediterranean, while there has been a clear preference on supporting EU projects and common policies.

Nevertheless, there is a risk that the success of the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP) could increase the southern countries' dependence on the EU, especially on the Commission, which runs all aid and development programs. In that case, France could lose a significant part of its traditional influence towards the Maghreb countries. Keeping this in mind, it could be argued that the Mediterranean Union idea offers an opportunity of reviving France's Mediterranean policy as well as guaranteeing a return to elementary foreign policy values, stemming from the Gaullist area, leading to a re-nationalisation of external practices. Consequently, France could maintain its influence in the region.

Following the same line of thought, it could be argued that Sarkozy's proposal aimed at restoring France as a leading European player in Mediterranean affairs. Justified disillusionment with the Barcelona process, which reached a deadlock after 9/11 and European enlargement<sup>3</sup>, could account for the French President's aspirations. On the other hand, France has lost part of the prestige it had on the European arena because of the negative results of the referendum on the European constitutional treaty. The Mediterranean Union project, if endorsed by France's partners, could certainly help France gain back the potential influence it might have lost.

#### Discontent with European Cooperation Efforts in the Mediterranean

Nicolas Sarkozy made it clear from the first moment that his disenchantment with the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP) contributed, *inter alia*, to the emergence of the Mediterranean Union idea. He mentioned three major obstacles to the success of the Barcelona process: priority all these years was given to the East and not enough to the South; attention was focusing on commercial activities while genuine cooperation has been put aside; the invisible barrier between the North and

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<sup>3</sup> Schmid Dorothée, "Euro-Mediterranean Partnership: the Failure of a Collective Security System?", in *Bitterlemons International*, Ed.42, Vol.3, 24 November 2005, <http://www.bitterlemons-international.org/previous.php?opt=1&id=109#438>, site consulted several times.

the South was not eliminated and the two shores continued being separated from each other<sup>4</sup>.

Too much was written on the failure of the Euro-Mediterranean partnership after its twelve years of existence<sup>5</sup>. Indeed, the expectations and ideals advocated in the text of the preamble of the Barcelona declaration never came into being. The general objective of this optimistic project was to turn the Mediterranean basin “*into an area of dialogue, exchange and cooperation guaranteeing peace, stability and prosperity*”, which would require “*a strengthening of democracy and respect for human rights, sustainable and balanced economic and social development, measures to combat poverty and promotion of greater understanding between cultures*”<sup>6</sup>. Yet, nothing of the sort happened. Notwithstanding the great amounts of money channeled into the economies of the South Mediterranean States, aiming mainly at development processes guaranteeing social stability and democratic values, progress seems rather disappointing.

One major fallacy of the Barcelona process is its inability to offer to the South Mediterranean States genuine and balanced cooperation. That is to say, the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership has not witnessed up to now spill-over effects. Cooperation in the economic and commercial fields has not produced the expected results on the political level, namely democratization of the authoritarian regimes and stability in the turbulent Middle East region.

Indeed, the first pillar of the EMP, which purpose was to promote and strengthen peace, stability and security on the Mediterranean region, entirely failed. The Barcelona process was initiated at a time when a general climate of optimism prevailed in the area. The Middle East Peace Process was well under way, while Europe, endowed with a Common Foreign and Security Policy, made its first concrete steps on the Middle East diplomatic arena<sup>7</sup>. Yet, after 12 years of euro-mediterranean

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<sup>4</sup> “Union Méditerranéenne”, in *Le site de soutien à Nicolas Sarkozy*, <http://sarko2007.free.fr/>, site consulted on November 2007.

<sup>5</sup> See for example, Baracani Elena, “From the EMP to the ENP: New European pressure for democratisation?”, in *Journal for Contemporary European Research*, Vol.1, Issue 2, November 2005, Halliday Fred, “The Barcelona Process: ten years on”, in *Open Democracy*, 11 November 2005.

<sup>6</sup> “Barcelona Declaration”, adopted at the Euro-Mediterranean Conference, 27-28 November 1995, in European Commission, [http://ec.europa.eu/external\\_relations/euromed/bd.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/external_relations/euromed/bd.htm), site consulted several times.

<sup>7</sup> The Council of the EU voted in 1994 its first joint action within the CFSP framework concerning peace in the Middle East. Several others followed, while the appointment of a special representative for the Peace Process in 1996, was the most important one.

cooperation, the Peace Process was aborted and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict traverses its worst period ever<sup>8</sup>.

On the other hand, the EMP has not taken any concrete measures, except on a declaratory level, concerning the diffusion of WMD, the persistence of terrorist activities, the fight against human rights violations and the unwillingness of South Mediterranean countries to comply with democratic values and rules. The EU, even though it has based the entire EMP on the principle of negative conditionality, never used sanctions against its Southern neighbors.

Concerning the economic basket, very little progress was registered. Besides the fact that almost all countries have signed Association Agreements with the EC, the South Mediterranean countries' economic dependence on the EU remains still evident. On the other hand, tariff barriers have not been completely dismantled, while agricultural products from our Southern neighbors still have problems penetrating the European market on a preferential regime, because of the CAP. At the same time, trade between South Mediterranean countries is at a low level (despite the Agadir accord), while European funds are not oriented on long-term strategies but serve rather short-sighted and self-interested objectives.

The only substantial results were registered under the third basket of the EMP, which deals with partnership in social, cultural and human affairs. Under this pillar, the Anna Lindh foundation was established in order to promote dialogue between cultures. It should be noted that a major question, which needs to be addressed by the third basket, is illegal immigration. The South Mediterranean countries face severe economic challenges in their effort to adopt liberal economic measures. The extremely slow pace of reforms and the resulting high economic and social costs contribute to significant immigration flows towards Europe, which seeks, in its turn, to avoid.

The discouraging performance of the EMP accounts for the signs of mistrust towards Europe manifested by the South Mediterranean countries. As far as it concerns the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP), it is still too soon to jump to hasty conclusions. It is, however, certain that the ENP promotes a different kind of framework based on bilateral cooperation accords and on positive conditionality. If

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<sup>8</sup> It should be noted that all EMP Conference of Foreign Ministers were undermined by the developments in the Middle East conflict.

this scheme brings about positive results, there is a certain risk that the ENP will prevail over the EMP, which could eventually perish.

At the same time, other cooperation frameworks and structures that exist in the Mediterranean region (5+5, Mediterranean Forum, etc.) have weaknesses, fact that encourages the emergence of new initiatives such as President Sarkozy's project of a Mediterranean Union.

### ***Challenges Posed by the Creation of a Mediterranean Union***

It is evident that France wants to have long discussions with all its European Mediterranean partners concerned by this project - conducting a sort of survey - before presenting a final and definitive version of the proposal. For this exact reason, Sarkozy avoided any explicit comments concerning his idea, preferring vague declarations on the structure and scope of his vision.

Nevertheless, the speech the French President gave during his visit in Tangiers, in late October, did provide observers with some further details on the future Mediterranean Union, albeit not enough.

He characterized the project of Mediterranean Union as representing a "*rupture*",<sup>9</sup> which aims at changing the way of thinking when it comes to Mediterranean cooperation attempts. It should follow the example of Europe's founding fathers and should be based on "*concrete solidarities*" regarding specific projects putting forward the vital interests of the peoples of the Mediterranean basin. The Union that would be created should constitute a *sui generis* experience that should not copy the EU system as it is today.

Concerning the fields of action, the Mediterranean Union should be project-oriented dealing especially with sustainable development, energy, transports and water. Priority should also be given to culture, education, health and human capital.

All coastal States could participate and those interested could be involved as observers, while the European Commission would be fully associated. A summit of

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<sup>9</sup> The use of the word "*rupture*" should not come as a surprise. It was Sarkozy's *leitmotiv* during his presidential campaign. This strategy aimed at introducing a whole new French model based on a radical change in political life habits by attacking insufficiencies and conformities.

the heads of State and government would be convened in June 2008, just before France's presidency, in order to formally establish the Mediterranean Union<sup>10</sup>.

### Reactions

Although most Mediterranean States viewed Sarkozy's proposal in a positive way, they hesitated to fully endorse it because of its vague and uncertain content. In general terms, all EU member States, as well as the Southern Mediterranean countries expressed their inquietude in regard to the usefulness of creating an extra cooperation scheme in the Mediterranean region. Some doubts were voiced concerning a possible marginalisation of the Barcelona process, while many were those who noticed that the creation of supplementary institutional structures could not but engender inutile duplication and confusion. Consequently, it seems that a reinforcement of the already existing European policies towards the Mediterranean could represent a more plausible way for developing the French President's idea.

A successful Mediterranean Union should meet, at least, two major conditions: the blessing of the EU Mediterranean States and the backing-up of the Southern Mediterranean countries. The support of Spain, Italy, Greece, Portugal, Malta and Cyprus – all traditionnal diplomatic actors in the Mediterranean area – should be granted. For that reason, Sarkozy declared from the beginning its intention to include his European Mediterranean partners in the debate that would lead to the Mediterranean Union.

All of them accepted the French President's invitation, as exclusion did not seem a preferable and realistic option. Spain's foreign minister, Miguel Angel Moratinos, even put forward his own proposal concerning the creation of a Euro-Mediterranean Union. It was an attempt to safeguard the Barcelona process from disintegration. His proposal would guarantee the participation of the European Union as a whole and would aim at forgin a new neighborhood relationship with the countries of the Mediterranean. It would have new institutions, in line with the great challenges facing the Mediterranean region. Decisions would be taken by a Euro-Mediterranean Council, while Foreign and sectoral Ministers would meet when

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<sup>10</sup> See "Discours de M. Le President de la République sur le thème de l'Union de la Méditerranée", Palais Royal Marshan, Tanger, 23 Octobre 2007, in [http://www.elysee.fr/documents/index.php?mode=list&cat\\_id=7&lang=fr&page=4](http://www.elysee.fr/documents/index.php?mode=list&cat_id=7&lang=fr&page=4), site consulted in October 2007.

required by circumstances. New management bodies would be created (Committee of Permanent Representatives of Governments, Standing Committee with functions of a Secretariat) in order to guarantee a genuine partnership between the two shores of the basin<sup>11</sup>.

Moratinos' proposition constitutes a rather interesting invitation as it protects European unity, by integrating the European Commission and all EU member States in his Euro-Mediterranean Union. If this idea were to flourish, the Northern European countries, such as Germany, Belgium, Great Britain, Sweden, Denmark or Finland, which are involved in the Mediterranean region, would not feel excluded.

Concerning the Southern Mediterranean States, the reactions were relatively positive. Yet, there are multiple challenges. Undoubtedly, our Southern Mediterranean partners view this initiative as a chance to establish closer cooperation ties with the EU enjoying, consequently, important funding opportunities. But, there are questions unanswered. Will the Mediterranean Union become a substitute for the existing European policies in the region? If so, is there a risk for the Southern Mediterranean States concerning the financial aid they receive from the European Commission? Will the Mediterranean Union deal with crucial political issues? Most important, will the Mediterranean Union guarantee the development of an equal partnership? There is a strong feeling, emanating from the Southern Mediterranean countries, that the EMP has been developing unevenly. That is, our Mediterranean neighbours do not consider themselves as partners of the EU, but rather as followers of a process which is decided by others, although affecting them directly.

If the Mediterranean Union is to succeed, it should be based on a feeling of co-ownership. The European partners should not continue to present to their Southern neighbours ready-made projects, without including them in the decision-making process. For this project to work it should be able to establish a win-win partnership.

### Members

When President Sarkozy first advanced the idea of a Mediterranean Union, voices were raised concerning the participating members. Would the Mediterranean Union depart from already existing structures in the Mediterranean region adding

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<sup>11</sup> See Moratinos, Miguel Angel, "From the Barcelona Process to the Euro-Mediterranean Union", in *El País*, 2 August 2007.



other interested countries? Would it concern only the Mediterranean EU countries, excluding the other EU member States?

Before the recent explanations of the French President there were also doubts on a possible participation of the European Commission. If the Mediterranean Union were to develop according to the 5+5 or the Mediterranean Forum models, it would exclude, *a priori*, the participation of the Commission. This would deprive the Mediterranean Union from precious EU funds and European expertise and know-how in the region.

Another crucial point of the Mediterranean Union project was Turkey's role in it. According to Nicolas Sarkozy, the relations between Turkey and the EU should be envisaged within the framework of the unborn Mediterranean Union. This claim – coupled with the well-known views of the French President on Turkey's EU perspectives - lead many observers to suggest that his idea intended to offer to Turkey an alternative for EU membership. Consequently, Ankara perceived the whole project as being extremely vague and dismissed it, while affirming that cooperation in the Mediterranean region and EU negotiations are two different projects. Yet, many EU countries would not prefer to see the negotiation process fail, at least not until the reform process in Turkey is well under way.

The question *who participates?* hides in it a further challenge. It is important to know who to invite, as the countries that will become members will bring along their problems. Even though, Sarkozy declared his intention to keep the Mediterranean Union project-oriented - avoiding thus discussions on political problems – it is hard to imagine a healthy Euro-Mediterranean cooperation while, for example, the Middle East conflict still goes on. Trubulences in the Middle East have influenced the Barcelona process more than once in the past. Shall the Mediterranean Union constitute an exception to this rule?

### Structure and Content

Because of the vague character of the project, many observers suggested that the Mediterranean Union could follow the model of an expanded 5+5 (6+6), including new members and possibly new fields of interest, or the G8 model or even the structure of the Council of Europe. According to the French President's recent declarations, it seems that the Mediterranean Union will be mostly inspired by the G8

model, as the already programmed summit of heads of State and government in June 2008 indicates.

Whatever the choice will be, the Mediterranean Union should constitute a strictly intergovernmental initiative, which would not create any new permanent institutions. Perhaps a small secretariat and a rotative Presidency would give to the project the flexibility it needs to properly work.

Concerning the content, President Sarkozy already proposed four fields of action. Environment, cultural dialogue, co-development and security certainly constitute important matters for both sides of the Mediterranean basin. Focusing on specific fields would definitely bring added value to what is already happening within the framework of EMP and ENP.

There is, however, a possible risk. The four topics proposed by N. Sarkozy are, presently, part of the European policies in the Mediterranean region. It would be fatal to witness an overlapping between the Barcelona process and the ENP on one hand, and the Mediterranean Union on the other. Furthermore, many suggest that adding another cooperation mechanism in the Mediterranean region would undermine the common policies of EU competence such as commercial policy, development policy, etc. Interference with the bilateral relations between the EU and its neighbors should also be avoided. Nevertheless, the idea of a “*géométrie variable*” put forward by the French President based on the political will of the interested parties, will certainly oblige the Mediterranean Union to remain project-oriented, avoiding any interference with political matters.

### Financing

One of the most important challenges the Mediterranean union faces is the financing issue. When the project was proposed by N. Sarkozy, the French President did not give any specific explanations on its financing possibilities. There were suggestions that the participating member States would contribute with an amount of money taken by their national budgets (as in the G8 model). On the other hand, it was proposed to create a new financing mechanism, perhaps a Mediterranean Investment Bank, which would manage the funding of projects. Even though the idea seems tempting, creating an extra mechanism would create new bureaucratic structures and perhaps an unwanted burden.

Undoubtedly, only the EU is in a position to engage large amounts of money financing important projects in the Mediterranean. The French President is of course aware of it, that is why he proposed to include the European Commission to the participating members of the Mediterranean Union. He even managed to satisfy any possible nagging coming from the non-Mediterranean EU countries. Compelled to contribute to the financing of the Mediterranean Union – indirectly, since the Commission participates – they were given the status of observers instead of a full membership.

### ***Conclusion***

The project of a Union for the Mediterranean, as dubious as it may be, could represent, if well coordinated, a chance for reviving the cooperation efforts in the Mediterranean region. As such, it should in no way replace the policies already introduced by the EU, i.e. the Barcelona process and the European Neighborhood Policy, but complement them and reinforce them.

There is however a risk that the proposed Mediterranean Union will favor an unofficial redistribution of roles in the basin, facilitating consequently the emergence of a powerful group of the EU Mediterranean countries. Will this harm European unity by creating internal frictions? How will it be perceived by third States, especially our Southern Mediterranean neighbors? These are issues that need to be tackled before the final version of Sarkozy's proposition is revealed.

A successful option for the Mediterranean Union is to be presented as a European initiative for the Mediterranean region as a whole. That is, all EU member States should endorse it and promote it to their neighbors as a European comprehensive policy for the basin, which would naturally comprise all current EU approaches in the Mediterranean.

On the other hand, the Mediterranean Union, presented as a European strategy for development and cooperation, would have to face its transatlantic partner. How would the US react to this policy? Many observers suggest that establishing an official cooperation with the US on Mediterranean matters would provoke negative reactions among our Southern partners, because of the mitigated results of US foreign policy in the Middle East.

Notwithstanding the discussions and the fuss that accompanies the French President's proposition, there is a possibility that the Mediterranean Union idea will turn out to be less grandiose than expected. At the end of the day, instead of a comprehensive initiative including all Mediterranean littoral countries, it could develop into a loose cooperation between interested States on specific projects, deviating thus from any regional perspective. Whatever its evolution will be, it should remain focused on its initial and basic objective, that of promoting cooperation and well-being in the Mediterranean region.

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