

French Initiative in the Mediterranean Region: Back to Square One?

Jean-Robert Henry

Research Director at the National Scientific Research Centre (CNRS)

Institute for Research and Study of the Arab and Muslim World (IREMAM), Aix en Provence

Before it was emptied of a large part of its substance by inter-European negotiations during the first quarter of 2008, the French Mediterranean Union project disrupted routine European-Mediterranean relations throughout 2007. Launched by Nicolas Sarkozy in Toulon on 7th February, in the middle of the election campaign, the project was ceremoniously confirmed by the new President on the evening of his election, 6th May, as the grand plan of French diplomacy. Thereafter, with each passing presidential intervention, the concept underwent a series of revisions and amendments that considerably distanced it from the initial outline and progressively refocused it within the Barcelona Process. In the light of these great diplomatic manoeuvres, which in all likelihood will continue throughout the French Presidency of the European Union, how can we interpret France's new Mediterranean policy and what lessons can we identify in order to better grasp what is at stake in Europe's relationship with its southern neighbours?

From the Electoral Argument...

Even though Nicolas Sarkozy's presidential campaign bred the idea of a systematic break with the past, the speech given in Toulon on February 7, 2007, addressing an audience of repatriates, was simply the next step in a series of reactions and initiatives aiming to respond to the progressive bogging down of

the Barcelona Process, sealed by the failure of the 10th anniversary summit in November 2005. At that time, Europe's Mediterranean actors, and in particular France, were beginning to lose hope that that Process could be overhauled, and other options were beginning to be considered to overcome the dysfunctions present in the European-Mediterranean Partnership. As early as 2001, the Western Mediterranean European countries had re-initiated the 5+5 dialogue by cultivating the region's inherent complementary economic and cultural aspects, a region that has been saved from the conflict of the Middle East (Chevalier and Pastré, 2003). While ensuring that this dialogue did not compete directly with the Barcelona Process, but rather converged with the Euro-Mediterranean system's "strengthened co-operation", they were encouraged at achieving a Heads of State and Government summit in Tunis in December, 2003, and at managing to push forward co-operation in areas such as defence, where Barcelona had not managed a breakthrough.

In more or less confidential circles of decision makers, questions were also being raised about the future of European-North-African relations, without excluding any scenarios, including enlargement towards the south.¹

In France, other responses to Barcelona's weaknesses came thick and fast over the last year of Jacques Chirac's presidency: in the space of a year, we saw a "relaunch" of the Euro-Arab dialogue, with no follow-up (April 2006), the "Mediterranean Cultural Discussion Group" initiative (September 2006), and the strengthening of the French-North-African partnership by the Minister of Foreign Affairs (March 2007). Abundant and disorganised, this strategy nevertheless underlined French diplomacy's obsession with the Mediterranean, a concern that would prove

¹ Cf. eg. The conclusions of a meeting organised in Paris on October 25, 2004, held in private, by the European Union Institute for Security Studies.

to be more connected with the right than the left during the presidential campaign: the socialist candidate maintained a prudent silence on the issue in contrast with the far more audacious vision of relations between Europe and its southern neighbours that D. Strauss-Kahn had outlined.

From Nicolas Sarkozy's speech in Toulon onwards, the "Mediterranean Union" project dominated. The arguments developed by Henri Guiano, an adviser to the President and one of the plan's former commissioners, seduce in their long introduction by explicit and not so explicit borrowings from Braudel, Valéry, Camus, Morin... Believing that "Europe's future will be played out in the Mediterranean", he develops the vision of a "Mediterranean Union" to be built using "the European Union as a model". It quickly becomes clear, however, that one of the major reasons driving the creation of this new group was the need to give Turkey, which Mr. Sarkozy did not want in Europe, an important place in the regional balance. Equally, the generosity of the initial aim was tempered as soon as the project's specific objectives were tackled: besides collective security, the Mediterranean Union was to have four priorities: the first was the control and management of migratory flows, and the remainder concerned the environment (already covered by the 1976 Convention), joint development, and finally the fight against corruption, organised crime and terrorism. As we can see, security issues dominated. In its aims, its methods and its ambiguities, the

Besides collective security, the Mediterranean Union was to have four priorities: control and management of migratory flows, the environment, joint development, and finally the fight against corruption, organised crime and terrorism

Mediterranean Union idea reflected that of the "Mediterranean Community" that Jean-Louis Guigou had been trying to promote on the left for some two years: the introduction of benevolent and peaceable

sub-regionalism on Europe's southern borders, reflecting the European project without featuring its extensive competences or competing against it. The need to build "an area of shared peace, security and prosperity between the peoples of the Mediterranean" was also highlighted by Michel Barnier, the Foreign Affairs Minister, following a long line of French politicians, in May 2005.² Furthermore, the Mediterranean Union concept was obviously inspired by two previous experiences of organisations for relations between the Mediterranean's northern and southern shores: the 5+5 dialogue and the 11-member Mediterranean Forum, also known as the "Franco-Egyptian Forum".³ The Mediterranean Union constitutes a third and final stage in this co-operation between the two shores that could have been endorsed without colliding with France's European partners had the initiative been driven less ostentatiously.

... to the Great Diplomatic Scene

From the very evening of his electoral victory, the new President chose to reiterate the importance that the Mediterranean issue held in his eyes, by making a solemn call to southern-Mediterranean partners. His Mediterranean Union project was also seen as a "new face to France's Arab policy" and an innovative vision for the organisation of the Mediterranean area, in the context that the latent crisis of the European system was likely to encourage individual initiatives.

As early as July, Mr. Sarkozy visited North Africa to promote his project. However, the journey turned out to be rather a disappointment: Morocco, the country that has been most engaged in Mediterranean issues, politely refused the prospect of a whirlwind visit, President Bouteflika hardly reacted to his French counterpart's proposals and only the Tunisian President declared himself in favour. With respect to Libya's support, just after the affair of the nurses had been closed, it was ambiguous to say the least. On the European side, Italy and Spain showed polite and uneasy interest in the project, but the irritation of other European partners, such as Germany, did not take long to make itself felt. The increasing force of that reluctance explains the successive amendments

² Interview in the Algerian newspaper *El Watan* on May 8, 2005.

³ Hayète Cherigui has published seminal studies on the subject, in particular: *La politique méditerranéenne de la France, entre diplomatie collective et leadership*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 1997, and "La politique méditerranéenne de la France: un instrument de leadership dans l'espace régional", in *Politiques méditerranéennes entre logiques étatiques et espace civil* (dir. J.R. Henry et G. Groc), Karthala, 2000. *Annuaire de l'Afrique du Nord*.

that would be made to the Mediterranean Union project in the President's speech to French ambassadors on 27th August, then in his Tangier speech in November, and in Rome at the end of December, when he met with his Italian and Spanish counterparts, before the final Franco-German compromise that would later be backed by the European Council in March 2008.

The August 27 speech displayed a modest turning point in Nicolas Sarkozy's initial position on Turkey's accession to the European Union: he no longer rejected it out of hand, but made it conditional upon the Union considering the limits of Europe itself. Furthermore, the Mediterranean Union's four pillars were revised: the control and management of migratory flows, the first objective of the Toulon speech, disappeared in favour of "a dialogue between cultures". Moreover, the cultural approach held a central role in the President's thinking: on multiple occasions he reiterated the great future "challenge" represented by the "confrontation between Islam and the West". In order to neutralise this challenge, Sarkozy proposed to establish the Mediterranean Union, but also to help "Muslim countries" to gain nuclear electricity. That, however, did not include Iran, which Mr. Sarkozy considers the main culprit for the troubles in the Middle East. In all, it was clear that France's friendship towards Arab and Muslim countries was of lesser importance in the President's vision than renewed support for Israel's security.

In the following months, the French President named people and teams charged with following the Mediterranean Union project and with explaining it to France's European partners. The ambassador Alain Le Roy was appointed to pilot the project. Working meetings and symposiums were held in France and other countries concerned. Spontaneous consultations and suggestion boxes were debated with regard to the project, proposing different solutions to overcome the criticisms that it provoked and the difficulties it encountered.⁴ For the reluctance expressed by France's partners has not decreased. Germany in particular did not appreciate the lack of diplomatic co-ordination, contrary to the solidly established custom of the Franco-German partnership, nor what it considered its eviction from the Mediterranean scene. At the beginning of December, Ms. Merkel publicly expressed her re-

grets at the emergence of a project competing against the European one. While Mr. Moratinos, the Spanish Foreign Affairs Minister, pleaded for "Barcelona plus". Nicolas Sarkozy took partial account of these objections in a new speech on the Mediterranean Union given in Tangier on 23rd October, during a visit to Morocco. He insisted upon the project's pragmatic aspects that were to create a "Union of Projects", flexibly combined and finalised on the basis of joint development. Cultural and educational priorities were affirmed once again. Aware that his project had to avoid competing with other methods of regional cooperation, the President confirmed that the European Commission had to be fully associated with the MU, but was content to offer only observer status to countries not bordering the Mediterranean, such as Germany. Finally, he invited the Heads of State and Government of the countries bordering the Mediterranean to participate in a Mediterranean Union Constitutive Conference to be held in Paris in July 2008, at the beginning of the French Presidency of the European Union.

Ms. Merkel publicly expressed her regrets at the emergence of a project competing against the European one

On 20th December, a few days after the astonishing State visit of President Gaddafi to Paris, a summit brought the French, Italian and Spanish leaders together in Rome with the aim of better reconciling the French project with European constraints. He adopted a "Call from Rome for the Mediterranean", stating that the "Union for the Mediterranean will have the vocation of reuniting Europe and Africa around the countries bordering the Mediterranean". The formula was written by Mr. Zapatero, who preferred it to the Euro-Mediterranean Union defended by his Foreign Affairs Minister. The French maintained the hope of conferring a unique political nature upon this Union in terms of European mechanisms, even though the new structure's tasks would be specifically to develop complementary projects in fields covered by the Barcelona Process. After a final compromise with

⁴ Cf. in particular the *Rapport du Groupe d'experts réuni par l'Institut de la Méditerranée sur le projet d'Union Méditerranéenne*, headed by J.L. Reiffers, undertaken between July and September 2007 and made public in October. While certain proposals made in this report were integrated into the Mediterranean Union project (on the community of knowledge for example), other very pertinent reflections (on increased cooperation and Germany's association) were hardly given any attention.

Germany, it is that rather vague name, Union for the Mediterranean, which would finally reach the consensus on the European Council of 13th and 14th March, 2008, but emptied even further of its substance and reduced to the level of a sub-title of a painfully clumsy "Barcelona Process". From that time on, we can consider the Mediterranean Union to have evolved; the new configuration was re-integrated into the Euro-Mediterranean logic, including "projects" that will largely be financed by Brussels. The only political element that has survived from the Mediterranean Union project is the co-presidency of the new Union, allocated to two countries bordering the Mediterranean, one on the northern shore and one on the southern. Of course, under the French presidency of the European Union, this painstaking revival of Barcelona will probably lead to new developments and misunderstandings.

Continuing Contradictions

Through these successive re-workings, the French Mediterranean Union project has thus evolved considerably, including its very name, without managing to neither shake off a feeling of permanent improvisation nor erase contradictions present in the project which have left France's partners and observers alike perplexed.

Through successive re-workings, the French Mediterranean Union project has thus evolved considerably

Three principles are worth highlighting.

- How to delimit the European space and the Mediterranean space given that they intersect? In the eyes of Nicolas Sarkozy, France's membership to both of these spaces is evident, but he finds it difficult to admit Turkey's historical and spatial anchoring in Europe, as witnessed in his words to European parliamentarians in Strasbourg: in his mind, the divide in civilisations is based on other considerations.
- How to manage the operational articulation between the European Union and the new Union? With regard to the partners of the Mediterranean Union, which has become a Union for the Mediterranean, the President's responses have changed over

the course of his speeches: he accepted quite early in the process that the European Commission should be completely integrated into the project, but only envisaged the participation of non-Mediterranean European members after the Rome meeting. In fact, it was the European Council meeting of 14th March, 2008 that clearly imposed the presence of all European Union members in the plan. With regard to the sharing out of competences, of course, it is impossible for European Union members bordering the Mediterranean to delegate to the new Union competences that they have already conferred upon the European Union. The competences attributed to it can only be complementary or subsidiary, a fact which supporters of the Mediterranean Union admitted by moving on to the concept of a "Union of Projects". Curiously, they were slow to take advantage of the possibilities offered by European law in the spirit of "enhanced cooperation".

- The last contradiction was the gap, present in all of Nicolas Sarkozy's speeches, between idealism and realism, between the audacious rhetoric of vision and the modest specific proposals. We cannot avoid a suspicion that Mediterranean rhetoric is being instrumentalised when we see to what extent it contradicts the security objectives pursued: we are still far from the interlinking between the founding utopia and the politics of the possible that characterises the European model. That model is strongly invoked in the creation of the Mediterranean Union, but leaves aside its substances and its aim, i.e. the human dimension. There was never any question of following the European Union's example and turning the Mediterranean Union into a common human space: we remain within the framework of the Barcelona Process, which formalised the strict separation of economic space and human space, thus leading in large part to its failure.

A Turning Point in France's Mediterranean Policy

In the end, these Mediterranean manoeuvres can be assessed as disappointing for France, perhaps even wasteful. Little is left of the Mediterranean Union project, except what Spain and Germany were willing to help recover. Given how much engagement the operation required, perhaps it could have been foreseen that the project would fail, and that Spain would perhaps pick up a part of the stakes as in 1995. Even

Too many incoherences, improvisations and announcements undermined the value of the French initiative, harming the country's image with the outside world and leading to reservations within the country's diplomatic ranks

the founding of the political outline on specific "projects" (hydraulic, transport, nuclear, educational reform...) favourable to French interests, seems destined to end up under European control.

The way the operation was managed entirely justifies the criticism levied against it. Too many incoherences, improvisations and announcements undermined the value of the French initiative, harming the country's image with the outside world and leading to reservations within the country's diplomatic ranks. We get the feeling that the French actors, beginning with the President himself, fell prisoner to a hastily thought-out formula that failed to take account of contradictions, and an exhibitionist style of communication.

The journalist Daniel Vernet spoke in *Le Monde* about the Mediterranean Union "pipe dream". The term was without doubt exaggerated in that the project attempted to respond, however clumsily, to real problems, and we know that it has been repeatedly corrected. But the result of a year invested by French diplomacy in its "major project" is pitiful.

However, the most serious criticism that can be made against the project is that it served, whether intentionally or not, as a smokescreen and cover for the underlying changes made in France's Mediterranean policy. The amendments made to the Mediterranean Union cannot conceal a blatant Atlanticist drift against which Hubert Védrine had warned in his report to the French President (Védrine, 2007, p.63).

Several positions bear witness to this Atlanticist turn, which has sacrificed a Mediterranean heritage of several decades in favour of the illustrious aim of attaining the status of the United States' privileged ally. Thus, the vigorous but exclusive denunciation of the nuclear risk posed by Iran is not in keeping with France's traditional position of general "denuclearisation" in the Middle East: no reference was made to the possession of these arms by any other countries in the region, including Israel. It is true to say that the socialist presidential candidate went even further, by re-

fusing to permit Iran to possess even civil nuclear capabilities. Equally, the only limit imposed upon the reaffirmation of support for Israel's security was the exploring of that nation's colonisation of Palestinian territories. The Atlanticism of the new leaders of France was, until the beginning of 2008, focused on the implantation of a French military base in the Gulf, without consultation with European partners on operational risks.

Of equal importance was a shift in ideology: the recurrent reference to the "confrontation between Islam and the West", the "major challenge" of current international relations, in the purest Huntingtonian style, is new in the views of French Presidents, who, since De Gaulle, had taken care to play a leading part in Mediterranean conflicts without falling into a culturalist rut incompatible with a calm and pacifying reading of trans-Mediterranean realities. They were aware that France had to maintain an alternative voice on these conflicts, and that that original European voice was expected by southern partners and societies. On that level, the contrast between new French Mediterranean policy and the one that was defended in 2003 is a gaping one. It is true that other Europeans' responses to the region's challenges have hardly been better. They have been too economically realistic and too culturalist, while lacking human realism. Behind the formal quarrels and incompatible moods of Mr. Sarkozy and Ms. Merkel, we can find convergence: the same alignment with the USA, support for Israel despite certain reservations, a reluctance to open Europe to Turkey and the Muslim world, even a difficulty in facing up to the human proximity with the south.

Europe Searching for the Mediterranean

Nicolas Sarkozy is right to affirm that "Europe's future will be played out in the Mediterranean", but the Mediterranean Union project and its later incarnations do not provide the right responses. New relations between Europe and the Mediterranean have yet to be established.

The only positive contribution made by the return to the Barcelona Process through the Union for the Mediterranean is the marginalisation of the Neighbourhood Policy and its unilateral character and a re-focusing on the Mediterranean space; however, we can doubt the ability of the new concept – which has won general acceptance because of its very incon-

sistency – to revive the moribund Barcelona Process. We find ourselves back where we started, i.e. with a mediocre and threadbare European Mediterranean policy incapable of meeting the challenges it faces. And yet, they are crucial.

The most important challenge concerns the management of conflicts in the Middle East. On that point, Europe's policy has moved from the weakness of good intentions to a complete alignment with American policy. Support for Israel is expressed in almost identical terms by Ms. Rice, Ms. Merkel and Mr.

The only positive contribution made by the return to the Barcelona Process through the Union for the Mediterranean is the marginalisation of the Neighbourhood Policy and its unilateral character and a re-focusing on the Mediterranean space

Sarkozy: condemnation of the colonisation of Palestinian territories is almost virtual, and associated with no practical sanctions. That same alignment can be seen with regard to Iran: the Europeans' search for an alternative diplomacy to the talk of war is no longer the order of the day. Of even graver significance is the Europeans' adherence to the framework of these arguments, that is to say, a vision that reduces the world and the region opposing the West and its allies to mere "terrorists". Such a vision justifies the development of NATO's ascendancy and activities in Europe, the Mediterranean and as far as Afghanistan, at the expense of a European defence.

It is clear that we are not preparing the future of the Mediterranean region by allowing such conflicts to persist and the ideologies that underpin them to mature. By almost blindly supporting Israel and its colonisation policy, Europe has made itself an accomplice to the injustice being perpetrated against the Palestinians, an injustice to which Arab opinion is far more sensitive than to the sort perpetrated by a dictator like Saddam Hussein. Equally, by adhering to the new faces of an East-West conflict, Europeans become hostages to a warmongering discourse that is far from what the European project sought to promote. It is no coincidence that the affair of the cartoons came

up just when the reluctance – or even "repugnance", as around fifty French parliamentarians dared to say – was being increasingly openly expressed towards a large "Muslim" country like Turkey entering the European Union. Europe is now tending to turn Islam and the Muslim World into its external and internal other, the main opposite reflection of its identity. This is an awesome change with regard to the initial spirit of the European project, which sought to rebuild upon universalist and humanist values a Europe that had been brought low by confrontation between different strains of nationalism and disregard for human rights.

At a time when southern Mediterranean societies have never been so close to us, there has been an unwillingness to see just how the construction of a Mediterranean border for Europe would damage the dense fabric of the links that unite them to societies in the North, particularly in the western Mediterranean. We are allowing that border to be legitimised through identity-centred arguments of the cultural or religious variety. If Europeans do not wish to see the Mediterranean become a hostile horizon, they need to save themselves from the perverse effects of such an identity-centred regression and truly take on board their human and cultural proximity with the south. For them, that proximity constitutes both a challenge and an asset, distinguishing them from the other actors present on the Mediterranean stage. It is in the management of the human Mediterranean space that Europeans must prove their conceptual and political boldness and institutional imagination to overcome what has become the poisoned dossier of relations between Europe and its south, that is to say, the movement of people. It is not clear whether the intention of the French Presidency of the European Union to adopt a European migration pact will clearly take account of this area. By not asking questions about the motives and the legitimacy of human mobility in a globalised planet, and by not ousting the propensity to pen the fear of others within imaginary borders, the European project has put at risk the virtuous cycle function that it has exercised both internally and externally till now.

This issue concerns all Europeans. We may regret that the mediocre political consensus adopted on the Union for the Mediterranean, which furthermore lacked popular foundations, has driven back Mr. Moratinos' Euro-Mediterranean Union proposal. It took up a suggestion made by D. Strauss-Kahn in 2004 (in his *Cinquante propositions pour l'Europe*), which itself followed a reflection made within the Club de Mar-

seille and in the publication *Projet* as early as 2002. Alvaro Vasconcelos pleaded the case for the so-called "Euro-Mediterranean Union" in this very publication last year. Even if it has been provisionally ruled out, in the end this perspective will break through in the debate, and the Reiffers report mentions that it was supported by several members of the working group. But it is clear that it scares politicians and is hardly compatible with scenarios aiming to keep Turkey and other Muslim countries out of the European space.

The perception that European and Mediterranean societies belong to a joint space of peace and solidarity provides a more favourable framework of reference for the resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the overcoming of bilateral misunderstandings

Thus, the Euro-Mediterranean Union idea has the advantage of bringing two possible scenarios together under one slogan: one maximalist (enlarging the EU southwards) and the other minimalist (creating a confederal structure around the European Union). It is also interested in overhauling the Euro-

Mediterranean group itself and basing it upon a joint utopia involving greater mobility for civil society than that envisaged in the reductionist Barcelona partnership or the apartheid implicit in the Neighbourhood Policy. Thus it should be able to achieve strengthened inter-Mediterranean relations without contradicting the European project. Furthermore, the perception that European and Mediterranean societies belong to a joint space of peace and solidarity provides a more favourable framework of reference for the resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the overcoming of bilateral misunderstandings inherited from colonial history. It would lead to a truly desirable enlargement of the Council of Europe towards the Mediterranean in matters of human rights.

References

- Minutes from the "L'espace humain méditerranéen" round table (18-22 April 2002), *AFAS Sciences*, N°2002-3/4.
- CHEVALIER, Jean-Maire et PASTRE, Olivier (dir). '5 + 5'. L'ambition d'une association renforcée". *Les Cahiers du Cercle des économistes*, N° 4, December 2003.
- HENRY, Jean-Robert. "L'Union euro-méditerranéenne: une utopie nécessaire", *Projet*, June 2002.
- VEDRINE, Hubert. *Rapport pour le président de la République sur la France et la mondialisation*, 4 September 2007.