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Europe/Arab States: Whither Sarkozy's Mediterranean Union?

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It is no secret that the European Union's policies toward the Mediterranean basin are in deep trouble. The Barcelona Process (officially the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership) conceived in 1995 as a means of minimizing migration and external threat by creating a zone of "shared peace, prosperity and stability," has run aground on the region's intractable political and economic problems. The European Neighborhood Policy, introduced in 2003 to engage Southern Mediterranean states bilaterally with the promise of closer economic links to the EU, has accomplished little. Few believe that the two combined policies will effectively address the ever-increasing flood of migration, as North African countries change from sources of migrants into transit points for sub-Saharan Africans desperate to get into Europe. As a result, Europe is becoming the security fortress that its policies were originally designed to avoid.

The other consequence has been an increasingly frenetic search for alternative policies, such as French President Nicolas Sarkozy's proposal for a Mediterranean Union. Initially conceived by presidential advisor Henri Guaino as a means of restoring France's leading position in Europe and the Mediterranean, the idea emerged during an election rally at Tours in February 2007. The initial proposal seemed to restate an older French idea to treat the Southern Mediterranean separately from the Eastern so as to obviate problems related to Israel and Palestine; it also reasserted France's engagement with its former colonies. Since then the proposal has mutated several times.

French officials claim that three broad ideas have informed the proposal. First, Europe's future is embedded in the South because that is the source of real security threats—strategic conflict, economic failure and the "clash of civilizations." Second, the Mediterranean is the historic focus of European culture, and thus its revival is linked to a European revival. Third, the Barcelona Process has failed because of a lack of European and private sector engagement, together with Southern resentment of European hegemony. The French claim that, despite early suspicions (particularly in London), the project was not an attempt to block Turkey's accession to the EU. Rather, France was encouraging other states to offer projects with only one concrete element: shared policies on the management of migration.

Despite the clarity of the proposal's real purpose—to engage Southern states in a securitized view of migration—the vagueness of the French concept has meant that it is now constantly evolving as other states respond. Morocco and Tunisia have been enthusiastic participants and even Algeria is cautiously warming toward it. It is European states that have been opposed. Initially Spain and Italy were hostile until a meeting between President Sarkozy, Italian premier Romano Prodi, and Spanish leader Jean-Luis Zapatero in Rome in December 2007 resolved their differences, largely because the French leader clarified that the new Union would not be a replacement for the Barcelona Process or European Neighborhood Policy.

Instead Sarkozy proposed that the Mediterranean Union would have a minimal bureaucracy, operating under a dual presidency from the South and the North to ensure equality, and would administer projects proposed by its members. A group of ten states would act as Sherpas to develop project proposals, including a separate financing agency that would seek public and private funding. These arrangements would then be discussed and adopted when Mediterranean littoral countries meet in Paris on July 13, 2008.

But opposition to the proposal, spearheaded by the European Commission, Germany, Balkan and Baltic states that resent apparent French meddling with settled EU policies, has led to a further watering-down of its content. On March 3 the French president and the German chancellor met to restore the damaged Franco-German relationship which is at the heart of the EU. Germany was resistant to suggestions that the new initiative would mirror the Baltic Council, which involves EU and non-EU Baltic states. As a result, the proposed Mediterranean Union has undergone yet further mutation. Now it will involve all EU member-states, who will meet with the Southern Mediterranean states on July 13, presumably to discuss detailed plans for this new version.

This, of course, is to completely abandon the original principles upon which the Mediterranean Union was premised—namely that it should be the possession of the Mediterranean littoral states alone, led by France. It will retain its dual presidency and will meet formally once every two years. Presumably, it will also retain its project-management agenda. In other words, the Union that began as an exclusively Mediterranean club is now, in terms of membership, coterminous with the Barcelona Process. It is to offer genuine equality to all member-states, and thus the principles of conditionality inherent in Barcelona will be excluded.

No one knows whether Germany—for it seems to be Germany now that has determined the content of the modified proposal—intends for the proposed Mediterranean Union to be absorbed into the Barcelona Process or for it to be used to revitalize the Process somehow. It could even simply become a talking shop similar to the “five-plus-five” group, now expanded to the “six-plus-six” by the inclusion of Greece and Egypt.

Little remains, in short, of the original French proposal. European discipline has been restored; quite where that leaves the Franco-German relationship is another matter.

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