

France bids to extend its influence through founding of Mediterranean Union

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French President Nicolas Sarkozy presided over a conference of 44 leaders from Mediterranean and European states on Sunday, which founded the “Union for the Mediterranean.” Most of the heads of state in attendance were invited to take part the following day in the traditional military parade and celebrations marking the July 14 Bastille Day holiday.

The new union is planned as an economic and political bridgehead between Western Europe and the major North African, Arab and Balkan states, which lie on the Mediterranean Sea. The union was originally planned by Sarkozy as an organization of Mediterranean states exclusively under French leadership, but vigorous opposition, particularly from the German government, led Sarkozy to accept a compromise allowing the 27 states of the European Union to also take part.

The only major Mediterranean nation that did not participate was Libya, whose leader, Muammar Gaddafi, turned down an invitation to attend. The kings of Morocco and Jordan did not attend, pleading other engagements, but sent high-ranking officials in their stead.

After the conference, a number of delegates applauded the initiative to found the union. Although she had expressed her opposition in April to Sarkozy’s original plan for the union, German Chancellor Angela Merkel declared that the three-hour meeting represented “a very, very good start for a new phase in the cooperation” between Europe and the South.

The decisions made at the conference affecting countries with a total population of 800 million were decidedly threadbare. No major political goals were agreed upon. Instead, modest proposals were made dealing with the environment, climate, transportation and education. The leaders agreed to hold a summit every two years, with the aim of drawing up a political declaration and a short list of concrete regional projects. In addition, foreign ministers will meet each year to review progress, prepare summits and approve projects.

The issues of immigration and policing were high on the list of the union’s agenda. Barely a day goes by without a horrific report of desperate groups of African migrants stranded or drowning in the attempt to reach Europe, and one of Sarkozy’s main priorities is to ensure tighter immigration and police controls to prevent migrants leaving their country of origin in the first place.

Despite the lack of major policy proposals, Sarkozy’s initiative has serious international implications.

In the first place, the Paris conference effectively ended the

political isolation of the Syrian President, Bashar al-Assad, who has long been regarded as a political pariah by the United States. In a heavily publicised event, Assad sat down at the same negotiating table as the Israeli prime minister, Ehud Olmert.

Although Assad icily avoided making any personal contact during the meeting in the Élysée Palace, this is considered to be the first occasion when the respective heads of the two states occupied the same room. The event followed three rounds in recent months of negotiations between the two sides, under Turkish mediation.

On Saturday, Sarkozy was able to claim another success when Assad and the new Lebanese president, Michel Suleiman, agreed to open embassies in each other’s capitals. Always ready to exploit a photo-opportunity, Sarkozy also posed at the entrance to the conference alongside Olmert and the Palestinian president, Mahmoud Abbas.

Since coming to power over a year ago, the Sarkozy presidency has been marked by a great deal of activism on the international arena. Just a week ago, Sarkozy took over the rotating chair of the European Union and announced an ambitious program for the next six months aimed at rescuing the floundering EU constitution, together with new proposals for repressive immigration and security policies.

Sunday’s conference in Paris had been preceded by repeated rounds of visits and negotiations by France’s foreign minister, Bernard Kouchner, and Sarkozy himself with many of the countries which took part—in particular Israel, Syria and Lebanon.

Sarkozy’s motives are far from altruistic. Despite the fact that he was forced to back down on his original vision of a French political monopoly over a Mediterranean Union, Sarkozy is intent on ensuring that the organisation founded at the weekend is strongly under French leadership. For the conservative French press, the founding of the union represented France’s return to prominence in the Middle East. *Le Figaro* wrote triumphantly:

“The launch of the Mediterranean Union in Paris this weekend highlights with much pomp France’s return to the Middle East. Getting the Israeli Ehud Olmert, the Syrian Bashar al-Assad and the Lebanese Michel Suleiman all to sit down at the same table is in itself a stage victory for a project that was confronted with many difficulties even before it was born ... Nicolas Sarkozy is a sort of godfather for the new relations between Damascus and Beirut.”

The newspaper went on to point out the risks involved in playing the role of “godfather,” but concluded that “the responsibilities

that the president is shouldering correspond to the ambitions our country has always had regarding Lebanon and the entire region.”

In its own commentary on the founding of the new union, the German *Süddeutsche Zeitung* stressed that Sarkozy was seeking to exploit the waning influence of the US in the Middle East to reestablish a leading role for France:

“He regards the Mediterranean Union together with France’s chairmanship of the EU as a double opportunity to thrust into the vacuum which has emerged in the Middle East during the change of president in Washington. Sarkozy hopes to re-establish a role for Paris in the region which exceeds that played by other EU states.”

Writing in the latest edition of *Le Monde Diplomatique*, the foreign policy expert Alain Gresh identified a number of issues which mark a major break on the part of the Sarkozy administration with the main foreign policy lines laid down by successive Gaullist governments since the 1950s.

Gresh pointed out: “Since his election as president in May last year, Nicolas Sarkozy has kept tight control of foreign policy while swinging it round towards alignments and alliances quite opposite to those of Jacques Chirac. It is now pro-Israel, pro-US and pro-NATO, where before it had been defiantly dismissive of all three.”

The shift in French foreign policy priorities under Sarkozy is underlined by the fact that, in defiance of traditional protocol, former president Jacques Chirac did not take part in the Bastille Day celebrations. Chirac was a close friend of the assassinated Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri and was bitterly critical of Sarkozy’s invitation to Assad to take part in the ceremonies in Paris.

Sarkozy’s orientation towards the US and Israel, which marks a sharp break with former Gaullist policy, has led to charges from his political opponents in the Socialist Party that he is an “American neo-conservative with French passport.”

There are other voices warning the French president of the consequences of drawing too close to Washington. Writing on the *Rue89* web site, Thierry Fabre warned, “To attempt to close ranks with NATO and the United States at this point, in complete disregard of the military intervention in Iraq and its disastrous consequences, poses a serious problem to the credibility of France.”

However, Sarkozy is clearly not operating simply as a surrogate of Washington. The Bush administration remains hostile to Syria, yet the Syrian president was able to exploit his trip to Paris, giving interviews to the French press on Monday criticising American policy in the Middle East and warning of the consequences of a war against Iran.

Under conditions of enormous flux in Middle East politics primarily resulting from the Iraq war, Sarkozy is attempting to steer a course which enables France to increase its economic and political influence in the region. At the same time, he wishes to avoid any open conflict with America.

The effects of the Iraq war coupled with increasing economic woes have led to increasing instability in the Middle East. Media commentators have noted that the attempts by the beleaguered Israeli prime minister to use the Paris conference to divert

attention from his own political crisis and upstage his domestic critics failed miserably. Confronted with a string of corruption charges, Olmert is under fire from inside his own party and is regarded as a lame duck leader lacking any political credibility.

Turkey’s Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan issued a statement before leaving for Paris in which he sharply criticised France for its opposition to Turkish membership in the EU. Political analysts say the only reason for Erdogan’s attendance at the conference was to use the opportunity to solicit support from the leaders of European and Middle Eastern states for his own battle against the Turkish Supreme Court, which is attempting to ban his party.

Sarkozy’s joint chairman at the conference, Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, presides over an increasingly unstable country which has been repeatedly hit in recent months by food riots.

Any attempt by Sarkozy to effectively fill the vacuum in the Middle East and Mediterranean region requires that he secure firm allies for his project among the other major European states. At various stages, Sarkozy has made overtures to Great Britain and Germany, but the links remain tentative. Differences have emerged between Germany and France in recent months over a number of economic issues—most recently over the finance policy of the European Central Bank.

Under German pressure Sarkozy revised his plans for the Mediterranean Union. In return, the German chancellor expressed her approval of the proceedings in Paris, but the relationship between the two countries remains insecure.

Summing up the conference, the French newspaper *Les Echos* declared that “the real victor at this huge party will not be Sarkozy, but Angela Merkel.” The article continued: “The German chancellor has prevailed in trimming the wings of the Mediterranean Union ... Angela Merkel did not want a Mediterranean Union that divides the 27. And she has held sway. Nicolas Sarkozy was forced to capitulate to save their marriage ... After the disputes and the unfaithfulness, the couple once more comes across as united and harmonious ... But further infidelity will not be tolerated. Angela Merkel has forgiven. But she does not want the Union to be disrupted once more. Nicolas Sarkozy is under observation.”

Merkel expressed her approval for the Paris conference because at this point in time the French president’s foreign policy initiatives are largely in line with those of Berlin. However, increasing discord between the major European powers has been a major factor in the destabilisation of the European Union. There is no reason to assume that Sarkozy’s project for a Mediterranean Union will fare any better.



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