

Mediterranean Union: Oasis or Mirage?

by Christine Bierre

Two words come to mind when trying to evaluate the founding in Paris, over the July 12-13 weekend, of Nicolas Sarkozy's Union for the Mediterranean. The first is an oasis, an area of vegetation in the midst of a desert, around which man builds the possibility for life to exist. A water source where travellers can drink and refresh themselves, oases have been, historically, commercial crossroads for travellers and trade. The other is *Fata Morgana*, which, contrary to a source of life, designates a purely optical illusion. That type of mirage was first identified by the Crusaders who, when sailing in the mist by the Messina Strait in the Mediterranean, believed they were seeing fantastic castles reflected on the waves.

Such are the two possible directions for the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM) launched by French President Nicolas Sarkozy, whose founding sometimes took on a grandiose character typical of events which could have long-lasting effects on the world. No fewer than 43 heads of state gathered around the table to discuss peace and development projects, among them, the leaders of countries involved in what have been among the longest and most difficult conflicts in contemporary history: Israel, the Palestinian Authority, Hamas, Lebanon, and Syria.

In the beginning, the UfM's stated scope was limited to economics, bringing peace and stability to the nations of the Mediterranean, through cooperation on great projects of mutual interest. However, as Syrian President Bashar al-Assad declared in an interview on Radio France International, "This approach revealed itself to be unrealistic, which is why we Arab partners asked that the political panel be considered as central."

And indeed, in the end it is perhaps the political issues dealt within the context of the summit, which will have a bigger impact than the economic aspects. The fact of assembling in Paris, at the same table, the main actors from countries in conflict in Southwest Asia, was a strong signal for peace, at the very moment when the British Empire is on rampage worldwide, trying to take advantage of the political void created by the lame-duck period of the Bush Administration, to provoke a war against Iran. Whether or not the British and the Bush Administration will move for war against Iran was, of course, one of the main topics of speculation at the summit. In the same interview mentioned above, Syrian President Assad said that there was no objective reason for war, but warned that, "the American administration is one whose policy is founded on war and seeks for pretexts to justify mil-

itary operations only later."

Beyond the usual jargon of summitry, intense political activity occurred in bilateral talks on the side of the summit. The presence of Turkish Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan was the occasion for more progress on the indirect talks between Assad and Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert; there were meetings between Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak and Assad; and those between Assad and Mahmoud Abbas, President of the Palestinian Authority, will also contribute to re-establishing unity among Palestinians, given the influence that Syria can exert on Hamas, whose top leader is based in Damascus. The announcement by the Syrian President that he is willing to exchange ambassadors with Lebanon, a first since the independence process began 60 years ago, will eliminate, once and for all, ambiguities concerning Syria's acceptance of Lebanese independence. The bilateral meetings between Assad and the new Lebanese President Michel Sleiman will further contribute to normalization of the relations between both countries.

Finally, outside the scope of the UfM meeting, and confirming a general tendency towards conflict reduction, Israel and Lebanon exchanged prisoners and the remains of soldiers who fell in the successive wars between both countries, including the remains of the two Israeli soldiers whose capture by Hezbollah had provided Israel with a pretext for the war against Lebanon in 2006.

A Strong Franco-Syrian Relationship

Above all, the two main elements emerging from the summit are the new central role of Syria, at the crossroads of all these conflicts, and the strategic partnership between France and Syria, which goes well beyond a simple reestablishment of the relations broken in 2001 by former French President Jacques Chirac, following the murder of his personal friend, former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri, in February 2005. Sarkozy announced that he will be travelling to Damascus before mid-September, a trip that will be prepared by the visit of Syrian Vice Prime Minister Abdullah Dardari, and of French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner to Syria in the coming days.

During the joint press conference of Sarkozy and Sleiman, Assad also proposed that France co-sponsor the Israeli-Syrian peace process, with the United States. Insisting that this process will not get off the ground without the United States, and without a new U.S. administration, Assad underlined the complementary role that France could play: "Through its knowledge and its historic relations with our region, ... France can help the Americans elaborate a vision. The United States is far from this region, and it is difficult for them to understand the details of many of the events which occur there. There, the role of France can intervene, not as a simple mediator but rather as a partner of the United States, in the sponsoring of the peace process when direct negotiations take place." In other interviews, Assad indicated that the aim of the pres-

ent, indirect negotiations with Israelis is to reestablish trust after many years in which there were no discussions of the recent Israeli war against Lebanon, and other such incidents.

Another of Syria's preoccupations which will lead to further negotiations with France, is the disastrous economic situation of the country, in particular concerning food supplies and agricultural production, due to the huge rises in oil prices. Syria is on the lookout for preferential oil contracts with different suppliers, and is especially considering the need to build its own refinery at home. Christian de Marjorie, president of the French oil company Total, which already has a strong presence in Syria, will arrive soon in Damascus to discuss such matters. Assad mentioned also the possibility of transporting "oil between Syria and Iraq, in a North-South axis between Turkey and the Gulf, and East-West, up to the Mediterranean."

Although Syria has gone a long way from its classification by the U.S. as a "terrorist country," through its official leadership of the Arab League, and its participation in this summit, to reintegrating itself with the international community, Assad didn't push his luck by calling for French cooperation to develop civilian nuclear power. He stated ironically that Syria would only be allowed to have nuclear technologies, "when all the other countries in the world have them."

Calm in the Midst of the Storm

While the French contribution to peace at the summit was a strong one, demonstrating once again what France can do when it acts on its sense of mission towards the world, the fact is that the French initiatives are taking place in the midst of one of the worst economic storms since the end of World War II. Can this lead to permanent peace? Is this initiative aimed only at securing the dangerous period before a new U.S. administration takes power in January? The factors of instability which could cause this initiative to fail are enormous, starting with the possible fall of Ehud Olmert; nobody knows if he will be able to carry out his engagement for peace until that is determined. And even if the Israeli chiefs of staff and the Mossad seem to be against a war against Iran, Likud party leader Benjamin Netanyahu is still on a war footing, as are his sponsors in Britain and in the United States. While Lebanon has been greatly stabilized by the new national unity government—the opposition is confident with its 11 ministers, and with the important, even though symbolic presence of a close collaborator of Lebanese Gen. Michel Aoun (ret.), Vice President Issam Abou Jamra—Saudi Arabia is still financing Salafist terror in several areas of the country.

But it is undoubtedly the economic side of this policy which is likely to sink deeply in the Mediterranean, like the fantastic castles imagined by the Crusaders. While it is not impossible that such an organization could play a useful role in strengthening the collaboration between the two sides of the Mediterranean, in order to do so, it would have had to be based on principles totally counter to those that have led the world economic system to the present financial chaos. The

stated objectives of the UfM are to promote joint economic great projects in order to better deal, through growth, with the problems of poverty, immigration, and security. An added objective is to give Europe and the Mediterranean region further leverage to face up to the "ferocious" competition of Asia on the one hand, and the United States on the other.

In view of these objectives, it was a grave mistake for France to back down to German Chancellor Angela Merkel's pressure to place the Mediterranean Union partially under the control of the European Union, and to adopt once again the agenda of the Barcelona Process launched ten years ago by the EU, which has been a total failure. A Union for the Mediterranean created outside the EU, assembling only the Mediterranean countries around economic projects of common interest, as the original project called for, could have opened the way for decisions among sovereign nations, to proceed with some useful projects. Originally, water management, rapid transit systems, and even nuclear energy projects were discussed. But no sooner had these proposals been made public, than advisors to the German Chancellor were already panicking that France would use this occasion to promote its nuclear power stations and TGV trains everywhere!

Instead of taking up those projects, the EU's list of projects of low-intensity technologies was adopted, among them, the de-pollution of the Mediterranean, the establishing of sea highways (ferrying of trucks from one side of the Mediterranean to the other), the creation of 44 solar energy plants, and the founding of an association to support small and medium-sized companies. Moroccan, Tunisian, and Algerian officials and experts interviewed during the summit expressed distress over the fact that the Union was not dealing with the grave problems of the moment: the food crisis, the lack of sufficient water, the need to develop nuclear power as an alternative to the present hyperinflation of oil prices, rapid transportation corridors along the coasts, and bridges.

Even Jean Louis Guigou, whose IPeMed (Institute of Economic Forecasting for the Greater Mediterranean) played a role in the founding of the UfM, timidly proposed some high-technology projects, and expressed his bitterness in an interview to France Info radio on July 14, calling the de-pollution of the Mediterranean a "project for the rich." Guigou complained that nothing was said about such key projects as electrification or water generation.

Other elements of the Barcelona Process run counter to the stated aims of the UfM, such as the projected free-trade zone to emerge by 2010, which, with its opening of all borders, will only generate legions of unemployed and lower the living standards of the people, increasing out-of-control immigration and security problems.

In the midst of possibly the worst financial crash in all history, the project of the Union for the Mediterranean, as it stands now, will most likely be swept away by the wind, like the sands of the legacy of King Ozymandias of Shelley's celebrated poem.