

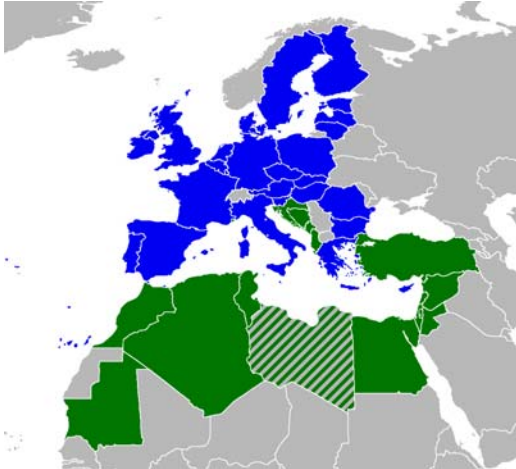


“L’Union Pour la Méditerranée (UPM)”

A Gamble for France and a Controversy for the Arab World

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Published: July 16, 2008



This past weekend, French president Nicolas *Sarkozy* took a visionary gamble on “Mediterranean Unity”. His success in getting the heads of state of 43 countries to endorse his view and convene in Paris should not be underestimated. *Sarkozy*’s original goal was a partnership limited to the countries immediately surrounding the Mediterranean, with France taking the lead for the European nations. His Napoleonic ambition of creating an entity distinct from the European Union was, however, instantly opposed by France’s northern neighbors, particularly Germany, who

saw his move as enhancing France’s prestige at the expense of the EU. *Sarkozy* engineered a pragmatic compromise with German Chancellor *Merkel* on March 3rd, 2008, to include all the EU countries and to have the initiative be a revitalization of the moribund Barcelona Process,¹ under the new title: *The Barcelona Process: Union for the Mediterranean*. However, Sunday’s inaugural conference has already divided the Arab World. While the initiative seeks to tackle serious economic, social and environmental issues facing countries on both sides the Mediterranean, PI Online examines other noteworthy political developments surrounding the conference.

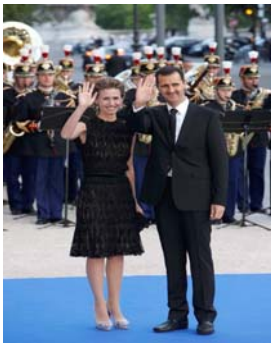


1. The Rising Star: *Bashar Al-Assad*

Former U.S. Secretary of State, Henry Kissinger, is credited as saying: “It is impossible [for the Arabs] to go to war without Egypt. It is also impossible to have peace without Syria.” As Washington has watched in frustration, *Sarkozy* apparently concluded that U.S. sanction of his initiative was unnecessary because Israel was on board, despite U.S. objection. As Syrian President *Bashar Al-Assad* stated in an interview with Alain Gresh on the eve of the conference, “it is the first time that an administration recommends to

¹ The Barcelona Process also known as the Euro-Mediterranean partnership was launched in November 1995. It brought together the 27 members of the European Union and 12 Southern Mediterranean countries.

Israel to refrain from getting engaged in the peace process.”² More importantly, if *Sarkozy* could achieve some tangible success that would be recognized by the participants prior to the conference, his decision to convene the conference would be validated. To that end, *Sarkozy*’s sought and received the cooperation of *Al-Assad*. In a surprise announcement the day before the conference, *Al-Assad* and his Lebanese counterpart, *Michel Suleyman*, declared that the two countries were establishing formal diplomatic relations, including ambassadorial representation. This was news of major importance as Lebanon and Syria have not had formal diplomatic relations since they declared independence in 1943 and 1945, respectively. Until now, Syria had always maintained that Lebanon and Syria are one country. For the French, who were responsible for the establishment of Lebanon in 1920, Syria’s action was an early payoff for their efforts.



While the handshake between *Al-Assad* and Israeli Prime Minister *Olmert* did not materialize, the Syrian president indicated that indirect negotiations between the two countries are progressing with Turkish mediation. He also stated that with serious effort from both sides peace can be achieved between the two countries in six months to two years. *Al-Assad* was also consulted on the possibility of Syria acting as mediator between Iran and the West. When dinner was served in the “Petit Palais” that evening, *Bashar*, with his elegant western-dressed wife at his side seemed much more at ease with the notion of a Mediterranean Union than with an Arab/Islamic one. His performance led *Zvi Bar’el* and *Barak Ravid* to declare in *Haaretz* yesterday that “a new star was born: Assad.”³ He was the man with all the answers to regional conflicts.” Although that assessment may seem somewhat euphoric, *Sarkozy*’s gamble had clearly paid off.

2. The Role of the Arab League:

The Emir of Qatar, sheikh *Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani*, is known to be an energetic no-



nonsense personality. Lately, he is also known for striking some of the most difficult deals in the Middle East. After a year of fruitless shuttle diplomacy by *Amr Moussa*, the Secretary General of the Arab League, to resolve the crisis in Lebanon, which was unable to elect a president, it was the Emir who stepped in to conclude the Doha accord between the rival Lebanese factions on May 21, 2008. It was therefore fitting that, when Syria and Lebanon announced the establishment of diplomatic relations, it was the Emir rather than *Amr Moussa* standing center stage.

Amr Moussa seemed concerned over the diminishing importance of the Arab League. He shared the sentiments of Libyan President *Mu’ammur Qaddafi* who boycotted the

² *Le Monde Diplomatique*, July 9th, 2008 source: <http://blog.mondediplo.net/2008-07-09-Rencontre-avec-Bachar-Al-Assad>

³ Source: <http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/1001650.html>

conference claiming it was meant to divide the Arab World. *Qaddafi* argued that if the Europeans wanted to cooperate with the Arab countries, they should do so through the Arab League or the African Union. During an interview with Euronews⁴ on the eve of the conference, *Moussa* was critical of the event and proposed a forum where all Arab countries will be represented. He seemed fearful of any solution to regional conflict that did not involve, and was not sanctioned by, the Arab League. Until now, however, the Arab League has produced rhetoric and objections but no solutions. Nevertheless, if it was *Sarkozy's* intention to sideline the Arab League, it was not to happen. The final communiqué of the Mediterranean conference accorded the League of Arab States “permanent invitee” status. Egyptian President *Hosni Mubarak* most likely played a role in including that statement in the communiqué. The charges filed against the Sudanese president in the International Criminal Court that morning, were a rude awakening for *Mubarak*, who is extremely concerned over Egypt’s relationship with its southern neighbor. [see [PI Online 554](#)] *Mubarak* was undoubtedly reminded that the ability of the Arab League to raise objections can have some value.

While the oil rich countries of the Gulf can maintain their independence and propagate their influence through their wealth, the Arab countries bordering the “*Mare Nostrum*” may find that being part of a Mediterranean Union is more advantageous than belonging to the Arab League. It remains to be seen, however, whether sufficient funds to support the initiative will be forthcoming. That may depend less on the Latin passion of *Sarkozy* and more on the pragmatism of German Chancellor *Merkel*.



⁴ Source: Euronews 7/12/2008 – <http://www.euronews.net/fr/article/12/07/2008/paris-gathering-will-not-lead-to-normalisation/>