

# **French Ambitions through the Union for the Mediterranean: Changing the Name or Changing the Game?**

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## **RÉSUMÉ**

Fraîchement élu président, Nicolas Sarkozy a pris tout le monde par surprise lorsqu'il a lancé en avril 2008 une grande initiative visant à rénover la coopération dans la Méditerranée sous contrôle français. Le projet Union pour la Méditerranée (UPM) est effectivement compatible avec les options diplomatiques traditionnelles de la France. Depuis le 19<sup>e</sup> siècle, la Méditerranée a toujours été une pièce maîtresse du système extérieur de l'influence de la France. Alors que les Français ont en partie compté, au cours des 15 dernières années, sur les capacités européennes pour défendre une perspective de développement de la Méditerranée, leur relation quelque peu trouble avec l'UE et la désillusion face à la Politique européenne de voisinage (PEV), les a finalement conduit à rechercher de nouvelles options géopolitiques qui correspondraient mieux à leurs intérêts nationaux. La saga de l'UPM devrait donc d'abord évaluer, comme un coup d'essai, les nouvelles ambitions diplomatiques et le style de Nicolas Sarkozy: en introduisant un changement de nom, sinon un changement complet du jeu, cela permettrait aux Français de détenir le copyright pour le nouveau nom.

## **ABSTRACT**

Freshly elected President Nicolas Sarkozy took everyone by surprise when he launched in April 2008 a grand initiative aimed at renovating co-operation in the Mediterranean under French supervision. The Union for the Mediterranean (UfM) project is actually consistent with France's traditional diplomatic options. Since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Mediterranean has always remained a centre piece of France's external system of influence. While The French have partly relied for the last 15 years on European capacities to uphold a Mediterranean development perspective, their somewhat troubled relationship with the EU and disillusionment with the European neighbourhood Policy (ENP) finally led them to search for new geopolitical options which would match better their national interests. The UfM saga should thus first place be assessed as a test case of

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Nicolas Sarkozy's new diplomatic ambitions and style: introducing a change of name, if not as a complete change of the game, yet ensuring that the French hold the copyright for the new name.

## Introduction

One year after the impressive launching of the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM), at a brilliant diplomatic summit held in Paris right before the 14<sup>th</sup> of July French national holiday, confusion persists regarding the true objectives and achieved results of the whole operation. Looking back to recent developments of French foreign policy through 2007 and 2008, the story of the UfM seems to take part in a new French national, if not nationalist saga. While the result of its takeover on the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP) looks as a relative diplomatic failure, one could nonetheless assert that France has in fact advanced its interests in the region through the UfM manoeuvre. The traditional interaction between French diplomacy and EU policies in the Mediterranean has already been analysed as a technique to crystallise at a relatively low cost France's influence and its objective leverage on regional realities. When envisaged in continuity with that historical tradition, the UFM exercise appears as remarkable success, very much illustrative of France's new diplomatic style: the Ufm introduces a change of name, if not as a complete change of the game, and what may be more significant to the French is that they hold the copyright for this new name.

## The Mediterranean as a Background Permanent Theme of French Foreign Policy

Envisaged within a long historical perspective, the UfM project appears as the latest manifestation of France's old, permanent Mediterranean ambition. Since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, French efforts have indeed been crucial in promoting the Mediterranean as a sustainable political or economic region *per se* and introducing the autonomous concept of a "Mediterranean policy". The obsession to protect French interests and the nation's tireless commitment to make prevail its influence in this area obviously expose the attitude of an intermediate power dedicating energy to keeping control over what it regards as its geopolitical backyard<sup>1</sup>.

*The Mediterranean as a historical legacy: an ambiguous asset*

France's presence in the Mediterranean can be traced back in centuries, but its major imprint dates from the colonial period starting with the conquest of Algeria in 1830. The Maghreb remained France's principal zone of expansion and influence, yet the Near East was also a zone of interest, partly dominated in the 20<sup>th</sup> century after the end of the First World War.

All French Mediterranean colonies became independent in the two decades following Second World War. Since then, France has been trying to reinvent its ties with the new Arab states, maintaining a relationship which constantly hesitates between informal alliance and some kind of patronising proximity. The political legacy of colonialism is indeed mixed and ambiguous. Discussing past French presence in Algeria in serene terms is for example still hardly possible in France, while the Franco-Algerian diplomatic relationship remains partly poisoned by the repeated evocation of the independence war and its consequences<sup>2</sup>. Moreover, some French politicians recently overtly expressed their nostalgia for the times of the Empire. The debate was publicly opened in 2005 with the attempt by some Algerian repatriates to lobby at the Assembly in favour of a law on the benefits of colonisation. Excerpts taken today from some of Nicolas Sarkozy's presidential discourses do confirm this temptation to rehabilitate French colonial memory<sup>3</sup>.

This colonial legacy and the post-colonial complex attached to it still obviously question France's legitimacy to intervene in the region on democratic grounds. Whatever happens, the message conveyed by the French will always be analysed with caution by the Southern shore of the Mediterranean; caution and attention at the same time, as political socialising is still guided in the region by principles inherited from this historical past. A strong tradition of complicity thus remains between some Arab regimes and successive French governments. As recent developments in the near East do show, France also occasionally likes to portray itself as a possible "*deus ex machina*" capable of settling internal or inter-state disputes and showing the way to bigger players<sup>4</sup>.

*Origins and permanence of French "mediterraneism"*

France started early on to develop a geopolitical, comprehensive appraisal of the countries it dominated in the Mediterranean. Three successive historical and political strata can be identified in its appraisal of the region. Until the Second World War, the Quai d'Orsay regularly commented on its "Muslim

policy”<sup>5</sup>; the “Arab policy” (“Politique arabe de la France”) took the relay in the 1960s, after the debacle in Algeria and the six-day war<sup>6</sup>. Finally President François Mitterrand promoted the Mediterranean in the 1990s as a less emotionally loaded framework for regional co-operation<sup>7</sup>. This Mediterranean background theme has been reactivated episodically ever since, always with a view to neutralise the two other perspectives (“muslim”, “arab”), considered as too openly discriminating and inducing conflicts.

In the aftermath of 9/11, Samuel Huntington’s culturalist vision of international affairs widely imposed its mark on the international debate. France under President Jacques Chirac nonetheless resisted quite well this intellectual fashion, its traditionally secularist interpretation of politics standing at odds with the inclination to reinterpret conflicts in the Middle East only in religious terms. Until Nicolas Sarkozy’s recent revisiting of the “politique méditerranéenne”, the French thus continued to defend the centrality and the political utility of the Mediterranean region, as a neutral space where people from different ethnical origins, religion or political beliefs have coexisted for centuries.

One should at that stage bear in mind the highly valuable contribution of several prominent French intellectuals to the “invention” of the Mediterranean as an autonomous concept, from the first works of modern cartography in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, through the Braudelian era, up to present “mediterraneists” working in Aix-en-Provence or Marseille<sup>8</sup>. The Mediterranean could in fact easily be described as a constructivist concept, partly grounded in geography but with a specific political perspective and sometimes a heavy culturalist clothing. Some historians have documented precisely the emergence and consolidation of a unifying vision of the Mediterranean as a world in itself in the course of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a vision implicitly supporting the political project of expansion pursued at the time by the French<sup>9</sup>. Fernand Braudel, in contrast, later accompanied the de-colonisation movement. As a result of these successive trends in interpretation and intellectual manipulation, one can still assign today two different sides to the French political project for the Mediterranean: Between building a community of equal partners and assuming French national leadership.

### *The Mediterranean as a presidential “accessoire”*

From the 1960s on, the institutions of the Vth Republic turned foreign policy into a strictly presidential accessoire in France<sup>10</sup>. Within such a system, the Mediterranean appears as a classic of the French diplomatic tradition and a

gift that each president would faithfully transmit to his successor. Taking into account the strong willingness of Nicolas Sarkozy to introduce a clear break with Jacques Chirac's practice of power on every front, the new President's challenge was to appropriate this Mediterranean legacy while renovating it. For Mitterrand, designing a new Mediterranean policy had been a solution to overcome the Arab policy complex; in the case of Sarkozy, there was even more urgency to do so because Jacques Chirac had been an "Arab policy" type of President. Sarkozy's determined interest in the Mediterranean has yet another trivial explanation: he early announced his intention to re-balance France's position vis-à-vis the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and therefore many analysts would simply announce him as the gravedigger of the old *Politique arabe*<sup>11</sup>. In practice, Nicolas Sarkozy would also show some remarkable skills in using the Mediterranean as an identity landmark for his electorate.

### **A French Appraisal of European Efforts in the Mediterranean**

In the 1970s and 80s, France progressively learnt to integrate the European dimension into its own Mediterranean policy scenarios. By the beginning of the 1990s, it was fully admitted that such an adjustment was necessary to work out a more ambitious regional project. Yet after years of low activity within the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership frame, disappointment with the European Neighbourhood Policy probably accounts for France's late attempt to divorce the EU team to offer new Mediterranean initiatives.

#### *Europe as an enhancer of French leverage in the Mediterranean*

France historically played a major role in pushing for the institutionalisation of EU Mediterranean policies since the 1970ies. It notably inspired the Mediterranean Global Policy introduced by the Commission in 1972 and fought at the same time to install the Mediterranean on the agenda of European Political Cooperation (EPC). In the 1980s, the Commission headed by Jacques Delors was also very active in promoting a vision of the Mediterranean as a free trade space<sup>12</sup>.

French Mediterranean activism passed on the next gear at the beginning of the 1990s, a period when the French tried to constitute new sub-regional political groupings, somehow overlapping or competing with EU policy efforts. The 5+5 Group (Western Mediterranean) and the Forum of the Mediterranean, activated in 1990, can nonetheless be retrospectively seen as intermediate political steps before the official launch of the Euro-

Mediterranean Partnership (EMP) in Barcelona in 1995. The different sub-regional frames were temporarily put to rest to support the EMP initiative; they became active again after 9/11 and have now recovered a significant role to sustain French autonomous *protagonismo* in the region<sup>13</sup>. Yet from 1994 on, the French decidedly played the EU channel through a Franco-Spanish alliance, merging their national interests under the European banner to broaden their scope of action and reach greater efficiency<sup>14</sup>.

### *Maintaining the Euromed status quo*

Since 1995, France has been an important contributor to the functioning of the EMP, both stimulating the search for new fields of cooperation and moderating its political ambitions. This general line of behaviour, which could be labelled as cautious if not conservative, remains in fashion today, as one can clearly infer from Nicolas Sarkozy's early discourses relating to his new Mediterranean project.

Through the years, France hence systematically defended the importance of the "Southern" perspective vis-à-vis the "Eastern" one in the debate concerning EU's external policies. This Mediterranean preference appeared in a particularly vivid way after the + 10 enlargement which ushered into the EU a cluster of states who were less attached to such a geopolitical viewpoint. The urgency of a series of issues linked to conflicts in the Middle East, such as global terrorism or the debate on exporting democracy, helped the French make their Mediterranean priority prevail after 9/11 – subsequent presidencies of the EU getting now used to keeping a sharp eye on all Mediterranean developments.

France's overall contribution to the reinforcement of the EMP should however be appreciated in a rather nuanced manner, as it undoubtedly helped advancing the Euro-Mediterranean economic design (2<sup>nd</sup> basket), while not supporting too seriously the political and strategic ambition of the Partnership. Disillusioned by the failure of the Security Charta which it heavily sponsored, France always looked uneasy with the democracy promotion agenda that gained momentum after 2004. France also regularly tried to impose its command over the management of the 3<sup>rd</sup> basket of the EMP, or the cultural one, unsuccessfully trying to control the Cultural foundation (Anna Lindh Foundation for the Dialogue between Cultures, 2005), later launching in parallel its "Atelier culturel méditerranéen" (2006). French ambitions within the EMP framework thus provoked occasional clashes with other competing EU members, such as Spain or Italy. One must acknowledge at that stage that

France's appraisal of EU's internal balance of forces on Mediterranean policies seemed to integrate from the beginning only Mediterranean competitors – probably explaining why Germany was later downplayed as a stakeholder in the UfM adventure.

### *Disenchantment with the Neighbourhood*

The setting up of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) was initially received as a shock by defenders of the Mediterranean perspective. The ENP indeed did not seem to offer anything new or consistent to Southern Mediterranean partners when compared with the EMP, while it seemed to seriously jeopardise the comprehensive regional perspective<sup>15</sup>.

When confronted to this new vision promoted by the Commission, a design in fact firstly imagined for Eastern European countries, France immediately stood up in defence of the Mediterranean and fought to have Southern partners included in the picture. It later lobbied to ensure a fair repartition of ENP's financial resources between the East and the South. Yet the mood of the French administration has since remained suspicious vis-à-vis the ENP, considering it more as a German-friendly concept, an abstract invention in any case patently irrelevant to the Mediterranean region.

When envisaged into a recent historical perspective, it is nevertheless manifest that French interest in the Mediterranean as a specific space of action has declined with the second presidential mandate of Jacques Chirac, who we suggested was more a supporter of the "politique arabe" line. While still publicly defending the centrality and absolute political necessity of the Mediterranean, French national diplomacy in fact focused more on a few hot political issues, like the Syria-Lebanon dilemma or the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

### **Changing the Game: the «Union for the Mediterranean», Spearhead of the New French Diplomacy**

Nicolas Sarkozy's public speeches during the campaign for the 2007 presidential election were unusually rich in diplomatic references. The future President early affirmed his determined intention to make use of all presidential prerogatives, including playing with France's prestigious diplomatic toolbox. Just as reform becomes a constant domestic obsession, change is the motto on the international stage. In practice, Sarkozy's announcing a grand Mediterranean project in February 2007 in Toulon may have been initially taken as a purely rhetorical motive; more than two years,

after months of hard bargaining with European partners, the UfM initiative can in fact be considered as one of the first significant tests for the President's new diplomatic vision and style.

### *The new diplomacy syndrom*

As a presidential candidate, Nicolas Sarkozy presented himself as the man who would strike a decided rupture in French politics. On the diplomatic front, Sarkozy clearly declared before being elected that he wanted to have a more “doctrinal” foreign policy. Three main influences seemed to shape his discourse at the time<sup>16</sup>. Firstly, an interest in American neo-conservative ideology, combined with a naturally atlanticist inclination, lead him to envisage international relations as a mere power game, where democracies should both focus on the defence of freedom and democracy, and fight the American “war on terrorism”. Neo-gaullism is the second specific feature of Sarkozy's national re-appropriation of foreign policy: one of the President's closest counsellor on diplomatic issues, and actually the inspirer of the new Mediterranean project, Henri Guaino, is a rather classical sovereigntist, believing in France's special political genius, deprived of any sense of guilt regarding France's colonial past and advising the President to maintain a high profile on the international scene. A last, more controversial thread is woven with these two first influences: Henri Guaino himself partly embodies a kind of neo-leftism, that one would have expected Bernard Kouchner to incarnate also as a socialist Minister of Foreign Affairs in an otherwise very right-winged government. In fact, as a former human rights activist, Kouchner has developed particular skills at socialising and dealing with the media, both qualities that would turn out to be crucial to manage the UfM operation.

Regarding Mediterranean issues, what was essentially known of Sarkozy in 2007 was his overt pro-zionism and spontaneous aversion for France's traditional Arab policy. Therefore, most observers feared that he would turn away from the Mediterranean as a President, in order to distance himself from his predecessor Jacques Chirac. Given such parameters, the candidate Sarkozy finally took everyone by surprise when he first presented his grand Mediterranean design in February 2007.

### *The President's true Mediterranean motives*

The Toulon discourse is a piece of rhetoric worth being analysed in depth, both for its stylistic qualities and because of the avalanche of new ideas that it



brought to the traditionally very politically correct expression of the French on the Mediterranean<sup>17</sup>. Sarkozy basically proposed to establish a new system of co-operation in the region, in the form of a “Mediterranean union” designed on the pattern of the European Union, limited to coastal countries and structured around a set of institutions (a Council of the Mediterranean, a bank for the Mediterranean); a frame that would allow partner countries to work together on “concrete solidarities” in a series of areas: environment, education, energy, migrations and security were mentioned as priority issues on the new common Mediterranean agenda. The project rested on a strong criticism of EU Mediterranean policies and would supposedly be kept separated from the EMP: a parallel and complementary process.

Several rational motives can explain for the very creative mood of the future President on Mediterranean matters. The Mediterranean first appeared as a good campaigning topic for purely domestic reasons. Sarkozy wanted to catch the attention of the French Mediterranean community at large, including both Arab migrants and the offspring of colonial settlers from North Africa. One should indeed not forget that the discourse was pronounced in Toulon in front of an audience largely composed of Algerian repatriates. The Mediterranean is marketed here as a common legacy, a space that unites people from all ethnic types and religious origins. This appealing to a sense of Mediterranean community was even more needed politically speaking as Sarkozy was known to be a hard liner on migration issues.

A series of external considerations also account for Sarkozy’s new Mediterranean enthusiasm. According to us, the main objective of the future President was to re-impose French leadership, to re-affirm the Gaullian “*grandeur de la France*” in a region that still appeared as a natural zone of influence<sup>18</sup>. Sarkozy’s true willingness to restore a common regional dynamic, through building trust and installing a positive mood, should however not be underestimated. The Mediterranean Union project also provided a solution for a specifically French diplomatic difficulty: the Toulon discourse clearly presents the Union as an alternative to EU membership for Turkey – a consolation lot that the Turks would in fact never appreciate in the fashion the Elysée had hoped<sup>19</sup>.

At the same time, Sarkozy introduces in Toulon a proper French vision on what used to be so far a legally European affair. When criticising the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership, while proposing another solution to Mediterranean problems, Sarkozy solemnly presents France as the ultimate

rescuer, a potential redeemer of declining EU policies. The same methodology would later apply with the Constitutional treaty, transformed into the “small”, yet more palatable Lisbon Treaty, thanks to the tireless efforts of France – a version of the story widely publicised by the French themselves.

*Changing the Mediterranean game: The French team versus the rest of the World*

The UfM was introduced from the outset as a revolutionary initiative, bound to finally overcome all political blocks met so far in the course of Euro-Mediterranean co-operation. As the brief description given above tells, the list of changes, with respect to the Euro-Mediterranean scheme prevailing until then, was important. First, a change in the institutional ambition of the project: the French announced no less than a political union of Mediterranean states. Second, a change in the selection of players: the EU was considered as no more concerned as such by Mediterranean co-operation, a business that Mediterranean countries should take care of between themselves. A change of methodology as well: no more talking, only action, or “concrete projects”, also to avoid negative political interference that could hinder the good will of new stakeholders, as for instance private businessmen who were supposed to contribute to the financing of the project.

The diplomatic difficulties that the UfM went through have been largely reported by now<sup>20</sup>. In Summer 2007, Nicolas Sarkozy communicated around his Mediterranean initiative without detailing too far the roadmap to reach his objectives. Spain immediately expressed its concern through the voice of minister Miguel Angel Moratinos, questioning the necessity and feasibility of the proposal and emphasising that the French project would compete with the EMP, or “Barcelona process”, framework. In Autumn, Sarkozy established a special team at the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, headed by Ambassador Alain Leroy, who would take up the hard task of giving concrete contents to the presidential grand vision. In December the French faced combined Spanish and Italian opposition an official summit in Rome, which ended with the issuing of a common call for reinforced European co-operation with the Mediterranean, in fact severely bringing French ambitions into line with EU realities. The “Mediterranean Union” thus officially became “Union for the Mediterranean”, a “Union of projects” retaining the centrality of the EMP as the backbone of all Mediterranean co-operation efforts, and not interfering with current EU accession processes - Turkey therefore being theoretically protected from French national pretensions to decide on its own on the future borders of Europe.

These first “intra-latin” adjustments were only a pre-taste of a harsher confrontation with Germany that took place at the beginning of 2008. German Chancellor Angela Merkel made her opposition to French ambitions early known on a series of points: no new political union could be superimposed over the EU structure; Euro-Mediterranean co-operation should involve all EU member states, not only Mediterranean ones; ENP’s funding could not be automatically earmarked to back the French project if this one was labelled as a national initiative. After weeks of skirmishes, a Franco-German consensual non-paper was finally delivered, reaffirming again the centrality of EU policies and the common commitment of the French and German governments to work together on the project. The European Council later passed on the responsibility to the Commission to elaborate a communication that would fix guidelines for the development of the “Union for the Mediterranean – Barcelona Process.” Another background battle then started between the French administration and the Commission, in order to ensure that the latter would not denature the substance of the French vision<sup>21</sup>.

The progressive but strict re-framing of initial French intentions could be assessed as a first diplomatic downturn for Nicolas Sarkozy, who was already spectacularly active on several other international fronts. What should strike the observer watching the UfM battle is France’s striking return to a rigorously national understanding of its diplomatic interests in the region, and its very nationalistic attitude as well in dealing with European counterparts, be they the member states or EU institutions like the Commission or the Parliament. Notably, Spain’s reluctance to join the French initiative was immediately interpreted as a defensive stance meant to protect the Barcelona political *acquis* – in other words, to keep the Spanish copyright on Euro-Mediterranean co-operation. A matter of name that actually became the centre of the debate, once admitted that the EMP would remain the overarching structure for Euro-Mediterranean co-operation.

### **Changing the Name: in Search of a new French Copyright on EU’s Mediterranean Policies**

«France is back»: by these words, French Minister of Foreign Affairs Bernard Kouchner expressed in an interview in Fall 2008 his satisfaction to have pushed his country ahead on several crucial international files lines during the hard summer of the French Presidency of the EU<sup>22</sup>. Emphasising the success of the July 13<sup>th</sup> Paris summit on the Mediterranean, Kouchner quotes the UfM

as one major result of French foreign policy efforts. The Minister thus reveals an important new bias in calculating the cost / benefit *ratio* of French diplomatic actions: Visibility is by now held as an autonomous goal of French diplomacy and communication has become an essential tool in order to persuade both the French public and other international partners that the UfM process has not gone out of control. In fact, while the French team was probably never assured that it would be able to overcome or bypass all obstacles on its proposed new Mediterranean way, provide a new impetus and impose its methodology, re-branding the EMP was finally admitted as a minimal objective to reach: since changing the game was impossible, changing the name became a rather satisfactory option.

### *A succession of “Etats d’âme” at the Elysée*

As stated earlier, it is only after three months of presidential talking that a team was established at the Quai d’Orsay, yet under direct supervision of the Elysée, in order to provide contents to the UFM vision and cope with all bilateral and multilateral diplomatic difficulties arising.

Several signals were sent during the first semester of 2008 that dissent was actually growing inside the French administration as about the purpose, style and realistic goals of the Mediterranean project. While the Franco-German dialogue was experiencing growing difficulties, the Secretary of State for European Affairs, Jean-Pierre Jouyet, publicly expressed his disagreement with the presidential strategy, notably arguing that “the UfM will not be done without the EU”<sup>23</sup>. Seen from the inside, the early diplomatic misfortunes of the UfM impacted very negatively the cohesion of the French administrative team. Information later leaked that Alain Leroy threatened to resign several times when being confronted to Henri Guaino’s sovereignist obstination, while Jean-Pierre Jouyet had led a secret mission to Berlin without the approval of the Elysée in order to try and make up for French political miscalculations<sup>24</sup>. In short, the conditions to lead a serene and firm foreign policy, resting on appeased domestic grounds, were not met.

### *Communicating around the UfM*

Under such circumstances, mastering the whole communication channel on the UfM became an essential prerequisite, in order not to give European partners the impression that the French ship missed a pilot or that it was facing rebellion from its own troops.

The importance of communication was in fact obvious from the very beginning of the story – communication actually being one of the most thrilling skills of the new President. Between February (Toulon) and October 2007 (the Tangiers discourse), Nicolas Sarkozy continuously evoked the Mediterranean topic in a rather lyric but growingly undetermined way; enough to popularise it with the French public and the French media, who were rather unanimously supportive of the project, while criticisms were arising everywhere else from Europe. The commenting machine regarding the UfM was set in motion rather late and from the outside; Foreign media and analysts' attention was immediately caught by the topic, but they had to ask for clarification in the first place<sup>25</sup>.

Clarification never really came from the Elysée, as the diplomatic battle over the UfM imposed in fact more and more contradictions to the little substance of the initial dream. The relative absence of transparency in the management of the project by the French administration, combined with its growing complexity, made communicating a more difficult exercise with time. For one thing, the French were never to publicly admit that their initial ambition had been watered down by relentless bargaining with partners and the search for short term diplomatic equilibriums to save the general structure of the UfM. Remarkably, they would globally deny that the final merging of the UfM with the EMP marked the victory of the pro-EU camp – French Prime Minister François Fillon for instance overtly contradicting Angela Merkel's declarations on the subject, after the Franco-German reconciliation in March 2008<sup>26</sup>.

### *The EMP re-branded?*

Once the European turmoil was appeased over the UfM, in the Spring of 2008, all French efforts concentrated on re-marketing the initiative in order to transform it into a diplomatic success. While some French diplomats publicly admitted that the UfM was now reduced to a mere "label"<sup>27</sup>, this re-branding could be presented as a success *per se*. In the interval of time between the European Council of March and the Paris summit, Spain obtained that the official expression to designate Euro-Mediterranean co-operation would be "Union for the Mediterranean – Barcelona Process"; the "Barcelona Process" extension was later dropped in exchange for the new Secretariat to be established precisely in Barcelona. This whole re-branding operation was not neutral, as it introduced in some way a new French copyright on the EMP name – if not on its contents.

As soon as the name was stabilised, the visibility of the UfM became again an objective *per se* for the Elysée; the launching of the not so new system was announced as a highlight to come of the French Presidency of the EU in the second semester of 2008. The high profile summit convoked in Paris, gathering almost all head of States of the new Euromed perimeter (43 countries, 41 acting political leaders attending), effectively performed as a big show of France's short term diplomatic savoir-faire, bringing little result but producing great impression<sup>28</sup>. It then seemed again that France had achieved something in term of foreign policy status.

### **A Return to Pragmatism: the Various Uses of UfM for France**

It is by now widely accepted at least that, despite the weak results of the ongoing restructuring up to now, the UfM project helped fostering the public debate on the Mediterranean, stressed new emergencies for co-operation and helped clarifying priorities. Issues related to climate change, environmental degradation and the need to promote sustainable energies in the region have attracted a good deal of attention and now feature higher the common Euro-Mediterranean agenda<sup>29</sup>. Politically speaking, the balance sheet cannot be drawn yet insofar as the process has slowed down almost to a halt since the beginning of 2009. One could nevertheless argue that beyond the change of name, the new, even shaky, political dynamic and the minor institutional arrangements that were agreed could hearten French activism in the Mediterranean, through a variety of channels.

It is true that Euro-Mediterranean co-operation has been caught since December 2008 in the Gaza deadlock, prompting some observers to suggest that the UfM saga definitively ended with the actual killing of the so much criticised EMP. Since the Paris summit, hard politics had in fact re-imposed its heavy logics on the whole process. The admission of the Arab league as a permanent observer at the Marseilles conference in Fall 2008 politically sealed the fate of the UfM, making it more vulnerable to the hazards of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict than ever. Yet the return of politics to the Euro-Mediterranean game cannot be considered as an entirely negative result for French diplomacy. The Paris summit was an outstanding demonstration that France still has significant bilateral leverage with every single partner country in the region when need be. With that event, the French wanted to show that they can easily socialise and even mediate between Mediterranean countries when it matches their own political objectives; one should remember that

media comments during the summit fostered almost exclusively on the presence of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad in Paris and the possibility for Sarkozy to advance a deal between Israelis and Syrians<sup>30</sup>. Later on, during the Gaza crisis, the French President, who had passed the relay of the EU Presidency to the Czechs, justified his travelling to the Near East on the grounds that he was still the acting co-president of the UfM.

The new institutional arrangements introduced with the UfM do thus satisfy at least partly French ambitions. While letting slip the Secretariat to the Spaniards, France obtained the two-year long co-presidency with Egypt and is now fighting to maintain this advantage, precisely contested on legal grounds by other partners. More precisely, the French now keep negotiating informal deals with their other EU member states in order to avoid that the presidency of the UfM turn with the passing of the EU presidency from one member state to another. Nicolas Sarkozy apparently persuaded quite easily the Czechs that he was more in a position to exert the authority attached to the function, and would in exchange support their views on Eastern Europe and the Balkans. The Swedes were initially not ready to accept a similar transaction but pragmatism could prevail to ease down the tensions that may arise with the French on other files – Turkey's accession process for instance remains an important bone of contention between the two countries. Allegedly, a kind of comprehensive and preventive pact would in fact have been agreed between France and Spain to ensure that the exercise of the UfM Presidency remain in Mediterranean hands for the next three years<sup>31</sup>.

Another channel of influence could be strengthened with the concrete enforcement of UfM's so far very idealistic and abstract scheme. Henri Guaino's stating in a UfM meeting held in Paris at the end of June 2009 that "the projects are going faster than the political process" – despite the fact that only 5 projects out of the 200 examined could be retained – provides new evidence that the French are not ready to lower their ambitions<sup>32</sup>. Retaining this very pragmatic project-based approach could also open new channels of influence for French private companies doing business in the Mediterranean, if they finally decide to enter the Euro-Med game through a strategic alliance with the French government. Until the concrete execution of the projects, the selection of players remains a rather non-transparent process, where quasi-clientelistic arrangements could be made.

In conclusion, if considered within a longer historical perspective, the UfM added value for French foreign policy is anything but negligible, be it in terms

of visibility or effective political weight. France is definitely back in the Mediterranean, even if it may be consciously playing the same old game of influence, under a new name.

## NOTES

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12. Marcel Scotto, "La politique méditerranéenne prend tournure", *Revue du Marché commun* No. 194, March 1976, pp. 123-126; Simon J. Nuttall, *European Political Cooperation*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1992, p. 119; Jacques, Delors, interview with *Le Monde*, September 4, 1990.
13. Dorothee Schmid, "France and the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership", *op. cit.*
14. Ester Barbé, "The Barcelona Conference: Launching Pad of a Process", *Mediterranean Politics*, Vol. 1, No. 1, Summer 1996, pp. 25-42.
15. Elisabeth Johannsson-Nogués, "A 'Ring of Friends'? The Implication of the European Neighbourhood Policy for the Mediterranean", *Mediterranean Politics*, Vol. 9, No. 2, Summer 2004, pp. 240-247.
16. Nicolas Sarkozy, "La France, puissance d'avenir", interview with *Politique internationale*, No. 115, Spring 2007, pp. 143-159, simultaneously published as "Making France a power for the future", in *The national Interest*, available on [www.nationalinterest.org](http://www.nationalinterest.org); see also the press conference on foreign policy given on February 28, 2007, hôtel Méridien Montparnasse, Paris, on [www.sarkozy.fr](http://www.sarkozy.fr).
17. Nicolas Sarkozy, Toulon presidential campaign discourse, 7 February 2007, on [www.u-m-p.org](http://www.u-m-p.org)
18. Dorothee Schmid, "Méditerranée: le retour des Français?", *Confluences Méditerranée*, No. 63, Fall 2007, pp. 13-23.
19. Dorothee Schmid, "La Turquie et l'Union pour la Méditerranée: un partenariat calculé", *Politique étrangère*, Vol. 73, No. 1, Spring 2008, pp. 65-76.
20. To follow the different steps of elaboration of the UfM, see notably Rosa Balfour and Dorothee Schmid, "Union for the Mediterranean, Disunity for the EU", *Policy brief*, Brussels, European Policy Center, February 2008; Dorothee Schmid, "L'Union pour la Méditerranée: coup d'essai de la diplomatie sarkozyenne?", *Annuaire français des relations internationales*, 2009 (forthcoming).
21. Through various interviews conducted by the author between December 2007 and June 2008, officials both from the French administration of Foreign Affairs and the EU testified of a highly strained climate.
22. "La France est de retour" is the exact expression used by Bernard Kouchner. Interview published in *Politique internationale*, No. 121, Fall 2008, pp. 11-24. Supporting his Minister's view, Jean-Pierre Jouyet, Secretary of State for European Affairs at the time, affirms that with the French Presidency of the EU "Europe progressed from influence to power"; interview with the daily *Libération*, 21 December 2008.

23. See for instance on his blog, “L’Union pour la Méditerranée ne se fera pas sans l’UE”, <http://www.jpjouyet.eu>, 11 January 2008.
24. Interviews, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Spring 2009.
25. Michael Emerson, and Natalie Tocci, *A little clarification, please, on the ‘Union of the Mediterranean’*, CEPS Commentary, Brussels, CEPS, 8 June 2007.
26. At a press conference, François Fillon presented again the UfM as an autonomous, French inspired project, comparable to the Baltic Union; he soon issued a disclaimer, arguing that he had not been aware of the Sarkozy-Merkel compromise, yet spreading the impression that the sovereigntist line inside the French administration was not satisfied with the Franco-German deal.
27. “Sarkozy et Merkel trouvent un compromis sur l’Union pour la Méditerranée”, on [www.Euractiv.fr](http://www.Euractiv.fr), 5 March 2008.
28. Dorothee Schmid, “Le sommet de Paris est un bricolage diplomatique à court terme”, Euractiv, interview, 11 July 2008, [www.Euractiv.fr](http://www.Euractiv.fr).
29. Gaëlle Dupont, “L’Union pour la Méditerranée tente de se relancer grâce au développement durable”, *Le Monde*, 26 June 2009.
30. French efforts to re-engage Syria being widely appreciated as an innovative and productive strategy; see Crisis Group, “Engaging Syria? Lessons from the French Experience”, *Middle East Briefing*, No. 27, 15 January 2009.
31. Under this arrangement, France would hold the job for two years and then hand over the reins to Spain for the next two years; see Tony Barber, “Spanish-Belgian squabble puts EU foreign policy in a poor light”, 29 June 2009, on [blogs.ft.com/brusselsblog](http://blogs.ft.com/brusselsblog), and Fathi B’Chir, “UE/EUROMED: Bruxelles dénonce la mainmise franco-espagnole sur l’UpM”, [www.medafrique.info](http://www.medafrique.info), 29 June 2009.
32. Quoted by *Le Monde*, *op. cit.*