

## A new Mediterranean Union will mean a weaker Europe

By Kerry Longhurst

**Europe's relations with the states of the Mediterranean are not working, says French President Nicolas Sarkozy. His alternative, a 'Mediterranean Union', may still be shrouded in mystery, but the French president is determined to make it a reality in 2008 and during a state visit to Morocco last week (22-24 October) invited partners to join him.**

But beyond France, the appetite for a Mediterranean Union is little more than lukewarm. Is there widespread support behind Sarkozy's vision and will it make a difference?

The aim is bold and compelling. A "heightened level of co-operation" between Europe and Africa based on greater prosperity, solidarity and stability. But this goal is not entirely new, so where is the added value?

First, the Sarkozian Union will lie outside the EU and will have an 'exclusive' membership. Of the 27 EU member states only those that lie directly on or close to the Mediterranean will join, the rest will be left out. Invitees from across the water will include Israel, Algeria and Morocco among others, but also Libya, which is denied full participation in EU policies. Sarkozy aims to deal with Turkey by offering Ankara a leading role in the Mediterranean Union, as an alternative to EU membership.

The EU has long had relations with its Mediterranean neighbours. Beginning in 1995 with the 'Barcelona Process', and then in 2003 with the European Neighbourhood Policy, which lumped into one pot neighbours to the East and the South, the EU has endeavoured to surround itself by a 'ring of friendly states'. Despite geographical diversities, the EU's logic is that its southern and eastern neighbours, such as Moldova and Algeria, share similar problems and therefore require a common EU approach to tackle weak democracies, rising poverty, migration, a potential for political extremism as well as regional conflicts.

Is Europe's neighbourhood more secure and prosperous because of EU policy? Sarkozy is not alone in giving an emphatic 'No'.

Sarkozy's agenda is front-loaded with concerns about immigration, energy, security and counterterrorism. His solutions are regional integration and a new set of institutions, including a G8-style Mediterranean Council and a Mediterranean Investment Bank.

Proximity, history and economics mean that France, like other southern European states, has immediate and tangible interests in the Mediterranean region. Much of Sarkozy's gripe is that the EU has neglected its southern neighbours, in favour of the east. He is also concerned that Europe is losing ground to China and the Gulf States, which have become key investors in North Africa.

Is Sarkozy barking up the right tree? North African partners are dissatisfied with the EU. Unfair trade and the EU's double standards particularly on Israel/Palestine, weaken Brussels' credibility. But when it comes to alternatives there is concern that Sarkozy's Union will just be a tool for French interests and will simply replace an existing policy that does not work, with something new that also will not work.

A desire to strengthen the southern dimension of EU policy is also shared by Spain, Portugal and Italy, but there is not yet full commitment to Sarkozy's Mediterranean Union.

Will a Mediterranean Union mean a prosperous neighbourhood and in turn a stronger Europe? While Brussels concedes that EU policies towards its southern neighbours are under-performing, opinion holds that only the EU in its entirety can do the job.

As well as institutional confusion and duplication, a Mediterranean Union would create two separate neighbourhoods – the south and the east. Certainly, EU member states have different neighbourhood priorities and interests, but for Europe's foreign policies to work, the EU as a whole needs to be involved. The problems and opportunities that persist on Europe's borders are not unconnected, they are transnational. Migration, both legal and illegal, from Ukraine affects Portugal as much as it does Germany. Likewise, the sources of terrorism or the disruption of the supply and security of energy, whether in the southern or eastern neighbourhoods, are of direct concern to all EU member states.

Solidarity and speaking with a common voice is what EU states have only recently learned to do. The strength of the EU is that when it acts together it can be effective – this is the logic behind the new Lisbon treaty, which should improve EU foreign policy making.

There is no place for a Mediterranean Union. Exclusive clubs or mini-clubs of dissenting voices damage the EU internally and externally. The way to upgrade Europe's relations with its neighbours in the South is via the EU, in its entirety and based on a simple understanding that seems to be missing from Sarkozy's initiative. Just like a good local neighbourhood watch, trouble at the top of the street cannot be escaped or ignored by those living at the other end of the road.

- Kerry Longhurst is a researcher at the Institut Français des Relations Internationales (IFRI), Paris.