

# Germany: A Player in the Mediterranean

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### **Recent Developments –Germany and the Union for the Mediterranean**

Germany took over the EU Presidency for the first six months of 2007. The German Presidency coincided with the launch of the presidential election campaign in France and the infamous speech given by the then presidential candidate Mr Sarkozy in Toulon in February 2007 in which he argued, for the first time, for the creation of a Union of the Mediterranean (UM). Initially, the German government did not react to the proposal, assuming instead what could be called a “wait-and-see” approach. This attitude was adopted simply because both the Chancellery and the Foreign Ministry preferred to wait for the outcome of the French presidential elections, and because it was also believed that if Mr Sarkozy was elected, what was then still only a highly vague idea would naturally eventually be placed on the discussion agenda of the Franco-German cooperation scheme, which foresees a regular, bi-monthly consultation process usually attended by the German Chancellor and the French President.

To the surprise of the German governing elite, however, even after his electoral victory, Mr Sarkozy showed no intention of submitting the issue to the Franco-German consultation framework, despite making repeated, only slightly more nuanced public statements on the UM during his election night press conference in May 2007, as well as during his visits to the Maghreb countries in the second half of 2007. It took the German government until 5 December 2007, when Chancellor Angela Merkel, in anticipa-

tion of her meeting with President Sarkozy the following day in Paris and the Franco-Spanish-Italian summit that was to take place on 20 December 2007, finally openly criticised Mr. Sarkozy’s plans to restrict such a union of sorts to the Mediterranean riparian nations, thus potentially excluding Germany and all other EU Member States not bordering the Mediterranean.

That the conclusions of the Rome summit, namely the “Appel de Rome,” adopted the term “Union for the Mediterranean” (UfM) and acknowledged that the Paris summit of July 2008, which would supposedly inaugurate this union, should be attended by all EU Member States and all Mediterranean riparian nations, was considered a success within German foreign policy circles and seen as a direct response to Merkel’s growing criticism and the mounting German fears over potential divisions within the EU. Nonetheless, dissatisfaction continued to exist in Berlin due to the fact that the Appel de Rome spoke only of the alleged need to make the UfM complementary to the already existing Euro-Mediterranean structures, i.e. the Barcelona Process, and did not go so far as to conceive of it as an integral and upgraded part of the latter.

In February 2008, tensions mounted considerably after President Sarkozy cancelled a bilateral meeting with the Chancellor in the German city of Straubing at short notice due to alleged time constraints. Given that this was an opportunity for the two leaders, following long-standing practice, to coordinate their positions before the upcoming Brussels European Council summit and resolve remaining differences, this was perceived by the Chancellery as a major rebuff. Consequently, it was immediately communicated to the French Élysée that Germany would not shy away from opposing Mr Sarkozy at the European Council summit, and thus publicly damage the French President’s image, unless the UfM was transformed into an EU project based, in turn, on the Barcelona

Process and incorporating all EU Member States. As is now well-known, at an informal meeting with Ms Merkel in Hanover in early March 2008, Mr. Sarkozy, in the face of a major foreign policy defeat, the effects of which could have had serious repercussions on the French EU Presidency and Mr. Sarkozy's own domestic standing, abandoned his exclusionary plans and hence paved the way for what would later become known as the "Barcelona Process: Union for the Mediterranean" (BP: UfM).

## Germany's strong stance against a French-led UfM and in favour of maintaining, or at most strengthening, the Barcelona Process was widely interpreted as the beginning of a greater German involvement in Euro-Mediterranean politics

In the months preceding the European Council summit in Brussels in mid-March of 2008, as well as in the weeks thereafter, Germany's strong stance against a French-led UfM and in favour of maintaining, or at most strengthening, the Barcelona Process was widely interpreted by a large number of actors, especially in the southern Mediterranean, as the beginning of a greater German involvement in Euro-Mediterranean politics, and thus as a reflection of its growing engagement in Europe's southern neighbourhood. Yet, the question remains as to whether these perceptions are justified. To what extent did Germany's defence of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP) in 2007 and 2008 reflect a new-found interest in the Mediterranean? Is Germany a player in the Mediterranean, as the title of this chapter seems to suggest?

### Germany: A Player in the Mediterranean?

For decades, Germany's relations with the southern Mediterranean countries stood in the shadow of the Cold War and the corresponding block confrontation, as well as France and Britain's privileged relations with their former territories. Proactive German engagement was for a long time limited to Israel due to the moral imperative of the past, while other

parts of the southern Mediterranean were considered of only secondary importance to Germany's foreign policy agenda. Undoubtedly, however, the end of the east-west conflict and the numerous terrorist attacks seen in a number of southern Mediterranean cities over recent years, some of which claimed the lives of German citizens, increasingly brought the area within the enlarged focus of German foreign policy. In a way, greater sensitivity among the German foreign policy elite regarding political and economic developments in the southern Mediterranean was a consequence of Germany's participation in the EMP, as well as its participation in the Schengen Agreement, providing for the removal of border controls between the participating countries, which contributed to what many in Berlin felt to be Germany's growing proximity to Europe's southern neighbourhood.

In the early nineties, the German government under the then Chancellor Helmut Kohl participated from the very beginning in the transformation of the short-lived Euro-Maghreb Partnership into the EMP and was actively involved at the December 1994 Essen European Council summit in ensuring that the Mediterranean became declared an area of strategic importance for the EU. However, in contrast to the French and Spanish position at the time, the German government was not interested in bringing the southern Mediterranean partner countries closer to the EU, but rather emphasized the political, economic, and social importance of the region and the need to create a free-trade-based cooperation concept that would rule out any perspective of potential EU membership.

Until today, and in spite of greater awareness of developments in the southern Mediterranean and the learning process that its membership in the EMP and the previous Euro-Mediterranean cooperation frameworks entailed, Germany cannot be said to have a Mediterranean policy. In this vein, it is then hardly surprising that the work programme of the German EU Presidency for the first half of 2007, as well as the more extended joint 18 month work programme of Germany, Portugal, and Slovenia, only mentioned the Mediterranean and the EMP's second and third basket in a superficial fashion.

Given that there appears to be a consensus of sorts among the political elite that the Mediterranean does not form a homogeneous region, Germany has in recent years chosen to instead expand its bilateral relations with the countries of the southern Medit-

erranean, both in scope and depth, and has increasingly adopted a more visible political role, particularly in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and regional developments in the Levant. Unsurprisingly, such development was not accidental and, in fact, not limited to the southern Mediterranean alone. It was rather the consequence of Germany's unification and regaining of full sovereignty in 1990, coupled with subsequent governments' growing desire to exert greater influence internationally. This must therefore be interpreted as a modern form of revisionism, yet one embedded in multilateralism as well as international consultation and coordination mechanisms. However, especially with respect to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and its regional dimension, it has not always been clear whether Germany was acting on its own behalf or on behalf of the EU.

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### **Germany, the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict and the Regional Dimension**

Some critics have argued that German foreign policy under Chancellor Schröder and Foreign Minister Fischer was mainly prestige-oriented *Machtpolitik*, primarily aimed at elevating the personal status of both politicians and that of Germany. Although this cannot be denied in general, it is recognised that it was the red-green coalition, and especially the personal efforts of Mr Fischer, that granted the resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict a new importance on the German foreign policy agenda. While this reinforced interest was in line with, and somewhat a consequence of, previous initiatives by Chancellor Kohl –such as the expansion of development aid to the Palestinian Authority and the opening of a Foreign Ministry office in Jericho in 1994– Mr. Fischer was the first German Foreign Minister ever to claim the role of mediator and thus to explic-

itly engage Germany in the resolution of the conflict. His unrelenting travelling diplomacy, particularly during the Al-Aqsa intifada, not only earned him the respect of both conflicting parties, but more importantly, it contributed to a much more balanced perception of Germany in the southern Mediterranean and the Middle East. With the elaboration of both his initial seven-point "Idea Paper" of April 2002 and his second four-page Middle East peace initiative of late 2002, he substantiated this newly-gained confidence, and, although both initiatives proved unsuccessful, Mr Fischer managed to leave a very visible German imprint on the road map for peace, as well as all subsequent efforts of the international Middle East Quartet.

During the period of 2005-2009, Germany's role in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was comparatively less prominent and somewhat less balanced than under the previous administration. The Foreign Ministry is still the major actor in these affairs. Foreign Minister Steinmeier travels to the region frequently and has been instrumental in a number of areas, including the adoption of an EU action plan for the Middle East in the second half of 2007, the launch of the German-Palestinian "Future for Palestine" initiative, and the organisation of the Berlin conference in support of Palestinian civil security and the rule of law in the summer of 2008. Despite these initiatives, the Chancellery has increasingly displayed a more Israel-friendly position. Although it took Ms Merkel only two months after assuming office to visit both the then Israeli Prime Minister Olmert and Palestinian President Abbas, over the course of the years, she has increasingly made rather imbalanced statements in favour of Israel, such as in December 2008, when she defended Israel's actions during the Gaza War. This has undoubtedly been detrimental to previous efforts to establish Germany as an impartial negotiator in the conflict.

In part, these differences in approach between the Foreign Ministry and the Chancellery have also been visible with respect to Syria. While there is consensus among the two bodies with respect to the restoration of state sovereignty and reconstruction in Lebanon after both Syria's withdrawal in early 2005 and the July War of 2006, Ms Merkel and Mr Steinmeier have regularly been at odds with each other over the way Germany and the international community should deal with Syria. This came to the fore most obviously in January 2008, when Ms Merkel, in response to Mr Steinmeier's meeting with

his Syrian counterpart Muallim in Berlin, publicly disagreed with the move made by the Foreign Ministry to extend unconditional gestures of cooperation to the Alawite regime.

### **Germany and North Africa –Between Continuity and Change**

Relations between Germany and the Maghreb countries, as well as Egypt, are stable and good, having intensified gradually in the last twenty years. German-Libyan relations improved considerably after the lifting of all remaining UN sanctions against the country in the autumn of 2003 and in the wake of the Libyan regime's approval in 2004 to pay compensation for the victims of a bomb attack in 1986 on a Berlin-based night club –developments that paved the way for official visits by Chancellor Schröder in late 2004 and Foreign Minister Steinmeier in 2006 and 2007 respectively. Germany is among the four most important trading partners of all North African countries, and unsurprisingly, the promotion of economic development, as well as the reduction of the existing welfare gap –both ideally contributing to a containment of the high migration potential– are among the top cooperation priorities.

### **Germany's vocal efforts to safeguard the Barcelona Process do not reflect a newfound interest in Europe's southern neighbourhood**

In the last two decades, German foreign policy vis-à-vis the countries of the region has always been based on an understanding to promote and strengthen human rights, as well as democratic and pluralistic structures. Deficits in the field of human rights and democratic governance in most North African countries were highlighted by all eight human rights reports published so far by the various governments. *Grosso modo*, they were also the subject of discussion during the numerous bilateral consultations and were even addressed in a number of activities by the locally-represented German political foundations, such as the Friedrich Ebert Foundation or the Konrad Adenauer Foundation. Yet

a gap still exists between rhetoric and reality; all too often, too strong an insistence on improvements in key areas was either considered by the regime in question as foreign interference in domestic affairs, or was altogether sacrificed by Germany in order not to jeopardize economic interests, as was clearly visible during Ms Merkel's visit to Algeria in the summer 2008. Moreover, in light of the rise of radical Islamic fundamentalism in North Africa, which has in turn led to growing security concerns, the German political leadership has throughout the years remained close to the incumbent regimes, at times even publicly praising them as major and reliable stability factors. This attitude, in conjunction with a mutual agreement with almost all North African regimes to expand and deepen bilateral cooperation, particularly in areas such as anti-terrorism legislation or immigration, asylum, and border control, has contributed to, and reinforced, the growing securitization trend identified regarding Euro-Mediterranean policies, which has been visible since the events of 9/11 and undoubtedly comes as a blow to alternative, reform-minded actors in the region.

### **Conclusions**

Germany's opposition to the UM was rooted in a broad belief within German foreign policy circles that Mr Sarkozy's efforts were, firstly, seriously jeopardizing the long-standing Franco-German alliance, and secondly, potentially undermining the already fragile consensus within the EU over the need to maintain a collective EU policy vis-à-vis the Mediterranean region. Hence, Germany's vocal efforts to safeguard the Barcelona Process do not reflect a newfound interest in Europe's southern neighbourhood. Nonetheless, the development of the UfM does offer an opportunity, to the extent that a greater German engagement in the admittedly very slowly-evolving structure would indeed bring an end to the decade-old and rather artificial notion that the Mediterranean is the turf of southern European EU Member States only and that non-Mediterranean EU Member States, such as Germany, should instead focus on Central and Eastern Europe, as well as on the existing Baltic Sea State cooperation. This would in turn send a very strong signal that after years of Spanish-Italian-French dominion, Euro-Mediterranean cooperation is finally on the way to

becoming a truly European-Mediterranean issue –a development that could have positive repercussions for the EU’s Common Foreign and Security Policy and even for the emerging European Security and Defence Policy. While most of the southern Mediterranean partners would certainly welcome the involvement of more than just a few EU Member States, the proactive engagement of Germany and others would even appear to be a *conditio sine qua non* for the UfM to escape the same fate of the EMP, the Renovated Mediterranean Policy, or the *approche globale*. In light of the fact that so little time after its inauguration the UfM has already been hijacked by the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, in view of the growing dissatisfaction among the seven non-Arab and non-EU participants of the UfM over unfulfilled promises and unfavourable coordination and consultation mechanisms, and given the institutional imbroglio created when the Czech EU Presidency allowed France to retain the Co-Presidency of the UfM during its presidential term in the first half of 2009, it is clear that tensions are running high and, as such, that this project only stands a chance if the EU manages to speak with one voice. It remains to be seen, however, whether the German government intends to mobilize other Member States in joint efforts in that regard, or

whether –against the backdrop of the Franco-German row of 2008– it will not just take a back seat and watch as Mr Sarkozy sweeps up the broken pieces of a French-inspired project that is perhaps doomed to fail anyway.

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