

What Role Does the USA Play in the Mediterranean?

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It was with an Israeli war against Gaza that the year 2008 closed, coinciding with the end of George Bush's second presidential term. It was a lean year in terms of the United States' involvement in the Mediterranean. What were the key actions of this *American year* in the Mediterranean? Before continuing, we shall first ask an underlying question in order to better define the issue. Does the United States really play a role in the Mediterranean? The response is far from simple: certainly it is a Mediterranean actor, but without a Mediterranean strategy. In this paper, we will discuss this absence of strategy in depth and examine how the USA perceives the Mediterranean, using an approach combining analysis and information, and having recourse to factual data to support our analyses.

The United States of America, a Mediterranean Actor

The US burst onto the Mediterranean stage early on and its involvement has never been interrupted since then. Its presence has been permanent thenceforth (6th Fleet). This strong, continuous presence denotes a certain interest in the area. Due to its historical presence and above all its unmatched strength, the United States is a Mediterranean actor par excellence, even if it has no Mediterranean strategy. This would seem like a paradox. Latent and open conflicts (the Arab-Israeli conflict, Western Sahara, the Balkans, Cyprus, Ceuta and Melilla, etc.) cannot be stabilized –i.e. main-

tenance of the status quo– nor regulated without US involvement. Even low-intensity crises (of the Perejil/Leila type) require its intervention. We might therefore consider whether the failure/mixed results of initiatives in the Mediterranean Region are not due to the absence of US involvement as well. Local actors count on its intervention. It is sometimes called upon to intervene and when it does so, not always in the best manner, it is denounced. It is true that the United States cannot manage to find the balance between indifference and interventionism. In sum, in certain matters, US strategic *exclusiveness* remains intact.

Lack of a Mediterranean Strategy

All of this contrasts with the absence of the Mediterranean as an independent, or at least autonomous, category in American perception and strategy. The Mediterranean is considered a route, hence its particular position, not as an area but as a strategic passageway for oil from the Gulf and North Africa and for American troops. No need for a strategy, therefore, for a corridor.

Insofar as geography, interests and concerns, the Europeans employ the Mediterranean as an operative concept, a category structuring their thought and regional strategies. The Americans, on the other hand, do not think in terms of a Mediterranean area, but in terms of the Middle East, an area whose borders change according to events and the strategies developed in Washington. Moreover, the Mediterranean constitutes an area of rivalry with Europe, though it is an inclusive rather than an exclusive rivalry (in the Middle East, American handling of Israeli-Arab matters is exclusive). In fact, it is the Mediterranean periphery (the Persian Gulf, the Sahel, the Horn of Africa, and so on) that interests it the most. Hence, to speak

of a US role in the Mediterranean is to give the latter a status that it does not have in American strategic planning.

The Mediterranean is a flexible concept allowing the Americans to conceive of it more as Europe or more as the Middle East. A flexibility that reveals its dependence vis-à-vis other circles. Three essential elements explain the absence of a Mediterranean strategy for the US: 1) The Mediterranean is a corridor not requiring a global strategy; 2) The density of Euro-Mediterranean relations obliges acknowledgement –not necessarily implying non-competitive behaviour– of European influence. In the Middle East, however, American monopoly is evident, whereas the role of Europe there is minor; and 3) The possibility for America to take an interest in the peripheries without having a Mediterranean strategy. This *geopolitical flexibility* combined with the attractiveness for Mediterranean States of bilateral relations with the United States do not incite the latter to approach the Mediterranean as a separate region.

The Mediterranean Perceived through its Peripheries

Hence, not having construed the Mediterranean as a strategic zone, the United States does not feel the need for a Mediterranean policy. It plays a clever game in the Mediterranean: it tolerates the fact that it is an area of European influence, but via bilateral tracks, it undermines this influence from within. This effective bilateralism based on a subregional approach allows them, moreover, to avoid entering into open rivalry with Europe and to employ a selective approach insofar as regional issues to be dealt with. Yet its differences with Europe are relative. On global issues, they disappear: with regard to weapons of massive destruction (WMDs) and terrorism, it is difficult to find any major differences. Indeed, it is the nature of these issues that define their regional extent. The proliferation of WMDs and missiles lends the Mediterranean, in American perception/practice, its entire strategic significance, though always in a relationship of subordination to the Middle East.

The Mediterranean is divided into subregions, and when it is approached in a more or less global manner, it becomes dependent on a circle or a subregion, whether it be Europe –as well as NATO– when it is approached in terms of threats from the South, including the Maghreb; or the Middle East when the Arab-

Israeli and/or Gulf (Iraq and Iran) issues take precedence over other considerations. Thus, the Americans perceive it according to a breakdown into the subgroups (Near or Middle East, Maghreb, Balkans, etc.) comprising it, and they act accordingly. In perceiving it in a subregional light, they follow an issue area approach, as testified by certain prioritised spheres of cooperation with the countries in the region: antiterrorist struggle (Algeria, Morocco...), normalisation of Arab-Israeli relations (Egypt, Jordan, Turkey), energy (Gulf States, Algeria and Libya). This multiple-level strategy allows the US to simultaneously deal with their old and *new* Arab allies (from another regional political chessboard).

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In addition, the Mediterranean does not exist in the US strategic breakdown of the world. The geographical distribution of military commands reveals that the majority of Mediterranean countries fall under the jurisdiction of the US European Command (USEUCOM), while others fall under the jurisdiction of the US Central Command (USCENTCOM). With the creation of the US African Command (USAFRICOM), three US military commands will have jurisdiction over the Mediterranean. This obviously poses the question of the absence of a strategic Mediterranean identity.

This American approach makes a certain amount of sense. The Mediterranean is a set of subregions that, despite certain common features, are rather or even very different: distance between the North and South shores; difference between a structurally unstable Near/Middle East and a relatively stable Maghreb. For the US, what matters most is the nature of the Mediterranean areas and contiguous zones: the Middle East (Israel and the Gulf States), Europe, and recently, the Maghreb as well as the Sahel. These zones lend it its strategic importance as a pathway. Since threats and interests evolve, certain adjoining regions can gain importance, lending the Mediterranean value. This is the case of the Sahel, which has

become a focal point in the US struggle against terrorism and US deployment in Africa, *lending value* to the Maghreb and, indirectly, the Mediterranean. The American military relocation from Europe towards the Maghreb/Sahel, as attested by the creation of USAFRICOM –still *homeless* for lack of a country wishing to host their headquarters– attests to this strategic *flight* across the Mediterranean. The United States is thus interested in the peripheries of the Mediterranean, as it was interested in Europe during the Cold War and immediate post-Cold War period (stabilisation of the East and enlargement of NATO). At the same time, it has maintained an interest in the eastern periphery, namely the Gulf States. Following the 9/11 attacks, redeployment has focussed on the Mediterranean area itself to a certain extent through the intervention of NATO (*Active Endeavour*), but the predominant trend of conceiving of the Mediterranean through its peripheries remains intact (Sahel).

Regarding highly sensitive bilateral Mediterranean border demarcations, the United States has registered success in the stabilisation of Greek-Turkish relations, assisted in this undertaking by NATO and the EU (as per Greece and Turkey's Member status in NATO, as well as their Member and pre-accession status in the EU, respectively). Greek-Turkish pacification was therefore not exclusively the USA's doing. On the other hand, it did not succeed in carrying out a similar *feat* with Algeria and Morocco. Its alignment on Morocco's position concerning Western Sahara and its designation of said country as a major non-NATO ally confirm its preference for Morocco. But this has not prevented it from developing relations with Algeria, engaging in a dangerous balancing game in the Maghreb.

The American Mediterranean, More Eastern than Western-Oriented

Though the Western Mediterranean is the centre of gravity of the United States military presence in the Mediterranean, US priorities are essentially *eastern*. Only the anti-terrorist struggle encourages consideration of the western part of the Basin. This eastern penchant can be ascribed to a certain US acknowledgement of European influence in the Maghreb. But this explanation is insufficient. A certain degree of American deployment (security and economy) in the Maghreb is also done to the detri-

ment of Europe. Moreover, it is the USA that sets the *tone* for European conduct in the Mediterranean: the *rehabilitation* of Libya was an American doing; Europe did nothing but follow suit. It is the USA that points out the *direction* for certain European policies relating to the Mediterranean. It is the major actor in the Mediterranean arena, even if this region is absent from US strategic discourse, and therefore highly developed and at times even inflationist in terms of concepts and categorisations. In fact, the eastern penchant is dictated by two primary factors: Israel and energy (Persian Gulf). Not one Strategy, therefore, but many pressure point strategies according to each country's profile and American interests at a given moment. The reorientation towards the East (Afghanistan) undertaken by the new administration would imply that the Mediterranean will remain a simple pathway, all the more so because a certain European follow-my-leader attitude does not prompt the Americans to *Mediterraneanise* their priorities.

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The four main lines of action underlying US conduct in the Mediterranean remain: the security of Israel; the security of energy supplies; *hard* security (proliferation of WMDs and terrorism); economic markets and, incidentally, democratisation –if not contrary to strategic imperatives. To succeed in these lines, it relies on a number of States according to an *issue area* logic. A single country can form part of two or even three issue areas (anti-terrorist struggle, energy, etc).

Two Functions of the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM)

Although American support for the UfM at its founding summit (July 2008) was circumspect, the Arab-Israeli dimension boldly addressed at the summit could not leave the United States indifferent. Yet

its position seems ambivalent. The USA appreciates the fact that the UfM is involved in the Arab-Israeli process and has made Syria enter the *ranks*, but it does not approve of this *rehabilitation* of Syria without its having broken its alliance with Iran. Normalising relations with Lebanon was too exorbitant a price to pay for reintegration, and a strategic concession was necessary as well. The UfM's function as tribune for Israeli-Arab normalisation thus interests the United States, as long as it does not undermine the US monopoly in any way. The other UfM function that the US certainly hopes for is eminently strategic; an updating of the dependence of the Southern shore vis-à-vis the EU and, indirectly, a response to serious US and EU competitors (China, Russia and India). By admitting the fact that the Mediterranean is traditionally a zone of European influence, they expect Europe to assume its role as a shield against the establishment of these global competitors in the Mediterranean in exchange. Certain strategic parameters go beyond the Mediterranean sphere proper.

A War instead of a Palestinian State

The USA was *absent* from the Arab-Israeli arena in 2008 and the 2007 Annapolis Conference produced no results. Insofar as the Road Map, it went off route. The situation deteriorated, culminating in a war against Gaza. Nevertheless, in 2004 Bush committed to working towards the creation of a Palestinian State by the end of 2008 and reiterated this in Annapolis. No-one expected his engagement to be concrete, yet no-one imagined a war of such magnitude as a close to the *American year* in the Middle East. Instead of culminating in a Palestinian State, the two initiatives (the Road Map and the Annapolis Conference) have led to a war against the Palestinians. A great deal of conferences and processes, but very little peace!

For an entire year, the United States was content to simply deal with the consequences of the occupation by using Hamas as a target and reiterating Israel's right to legitimate defence. At the same time, they deny the Palestinians this same right and, incidentally, forget that Hamas is a product of Israeli occupation. In fact, on the Israeli-Palestinian level, the year began with an Israeli military operation against Gaza (February) causing 130 Palestinian victims, and ended with a war, once again against Gaza, causing the

death of over 5,000 Palestinians as well as thousands of wounded.

Following more or less in the tracks of his predecessor on the Palestinian issue, Barack Obama will apply the memorandum of understanding signed with Israel to tighten the noose on Hamas via a maritime blockade of Gaza (already operative), imposing unilateral disarmament.

Pressure on Syria

American pressure on Syria continued with the aim of causing a fissure in the Syrian-Iranian alliance and definitively neutralising Syrian influence on Lebanon, to no avail. In targeting Syria for an entire year, the United States was thinking more of Iran and Israel than of Lebanon. It maintained sanctions against Syria and supported the Israeli raid against Syria's *nuclear* facilities. Yet its pressure was slightly disrupted by Israeli ambivalence and by a French initiative. Israel engaged in indirect negotiations with Syria under the aegis of Turkey while the Bush Administration was banking on its isolation. And France organised Syria's return to the Mediterranean arena, proceeding to a separation of the Lebanese and Iranian tracks. Nonetheless, contact between the two countries was not broken off thanks to parliamentary diplomacy (visit of French Congress Members to Damascus in 2008).

Focus on the African Peripheries of the Mediterranean

The United States was more occupied in 2008 with Mediterranean peripheries than with the Mediterranean itself: the Sahel insofar as terrorism, and Sub-Saharan Africa in general with a view to installing USAFRICOM. The tools of their presence are: the *Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Initiative*, designed to provide support and aid to countries in the region; and the military bases of Djibouti and São Tomé e Príncipe. Securing maritime routes in Africa (the Gulf of Guinea in the west and the Gulf of Aden/Horn of Africa in the east) is their priority, particularly in the face of piracy near Somalia. In 2008, pirates intercepted some 40 ships, including a Saudi oil tanker and a ship transporting Ukrainian military material to Kenya, inciting the United States and France to mobilise their troops to secure navigation in this key zone.

Western Sahara: All Quiet on the Western Front

The US position on the Western Sahara issue is favourable to Morocco and therefore against the right of the Sahrawi people to self-determination. According to Robert Ford, then US Ambassador to Algeria, “the Polisario and the Moroccans must discuss the perspective of an autonomy [under Moroccan sovereignty].” (*Le Quotidien d’Oran*, 23 June 2008) After travelling through the Maghreb in September 2008, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice declared in Rabat that the United States was in favour of a “mutually acceptable” solution. Did this amount to making the Polisario settle for an autonomy status within Morocco? This declaration was thus meant to clear the way for advancing in the Manhasset negotiations process, at a deadlock.

The interest shown by the United States in the struggle against terrorism and the *precious* collaboration of Maghreb countries does not encourage them to work towards a modification of the regional configuration. This can be attributed to the fact that the status quo suits the United States and Morocco fine, and to the fact that the threshold of Maghrebi demands is so low that the Americans make no efforts in favour of the Maghreb as a region.

The Maghreb, Marginal among American Priorities

The Maghreb has always occupied a marginal position in American politics; even the struggle against terrorism and the issue of energy, two supreme motivations for US deployment, do not allow it to compete with the Middle East for US priorities. Three major elements relegate the Maghreb to a minor status. Firstly, the centrality of Israeli security to American strategy; and Israel’s immediate strategic environment is certainly the Middle East, from the Near East to the Persian Gulf (Iran). Secondly, the Maghreb is closer to Europe, and thus considered its zone of influence, even if this does not rule out economic rivalry. Moreover, the absence of major strategic imperatives in the Maghreb, in contrast to the Middle East, makes it a relatively *stable* area. The USA can therefore *afford* to let Europe *take care of things*, but it cannot outsource strategic matters, which explains the perpetuity of the American monopoly on the Israeli-Palestinian case despite a proliferation

of European initiatives in the Mediterranean since the Oslo agreements. In sum, the Americans define the strategic contours of European regional projects.

The Maghreb is still contingent to extra-regional considerations (interests in the Middle East and rivalry with Europe). Purely Middle Eastern issues condition the conduct of the United States in the Maghreb, as demonstrated by its attitude towards democratisation. In this regard, it should be kept in mind that the year 2008 was marked by a downgrading of the democracy issue in its policy. Certain of its initiatives continue to function, such as the Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI), through which several subsidies were granted in 2008. This notwithstanding, strategic imperatives always take priority over ethical considerations for the USA (the case of Libya).

With this perspective, what can we say about the bilateral track? US relations with Morocco, its traditional ally, are experiencing a strategic convergence (major ally status, free trade agreement...) and are constantly being reinforced. But the key element in 2008 was the reaffirmation of support to Morocco concerning Western Sahara. This is not surprising, but from a Moroccan perspective, it represents the consolidation of a certain strategic position in the Maghreb. Apart from the struggle against terrorism, energy is in the process of becoming a key element in US-Algerian cooperation (Algeria is a supplier of the United States). The third element is the role of stabiliser played by Algeria in the Sahel and in combating terrorism and traffic of all sorts in that zone. Insofar as US-Tunisian relations, they have developed over the past few years, in particular with regard to security (struggle against terrorism) and economic issues, but in 2008, the Bush administration did not succeed in two of its major endeavours in its relations with Tunisia: concluding a SOFA (Status of Forces Agreement) and a free trade agreement. With Libya, on the other hand, it completed the last year in the process of rapprochement: a visit by Rice to Tripoli and the investiture of the American ambassador to Libya. And finally, with Mauritania, relations are rather at a standstill since the coup d’état. Contact is contingent on a return to democracy. The military leaders affirmed they would maintain diplomatic relations with Israel, which was well-received by the Americans. But after the war against Gaza, they decided to break them off, which will complicate their position.

Once the United States has adopted a clear Maghrebi strategy, it could then outline a Mediterranean strat-

egy. The parallel with Europe is interesting: Europe's Mediterranean policies have always had their point of reference in the Maghreb. From a European perspective, to think of the Maghreb is to think of the Mediterranean, and to think of the latter is, above all, to think of the Maghreb.

What Are the Perspectives?

The Mediterranean will continue to be conceived of as a passageway whose securing is a means and not a goal in and of itself. Nothing would indicate that Obama will yield to a structural trend in American conduct. The Arab-Israeli conflict remains the hotbed of cross-cutting tension par excellence because its implications are multi-directional. In terms of instability/insecurity, it lends the Mediterranean a certain strategic sense. It is on the analysis level that we should seek the possible perspectives. But the change that Obama advocates does not seem to affect US policy concerning this conflict, apart from possible superficial adjustments. His election elicited a certain degree of hope in the region, but it evaporated upon US silence on the war against Gaza. The American attitude towards this conflict has further complicated regional imperatives, polarising inter-Arab policy and putting Washington's Arab "allies" in a poor regional position: infra-State forces (Hezbollah in 2006 and Hamas in 2008) have succeeded in standing up to

Israel where the Arab States have failed... This is the primary strategic lesson to be gleaned from the Israeli war against Gaza.

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With Israel's veering to the far right and the geographic accents (Gaza vs. the West Bank) of inter-Palestinian divisions, peace efforts will settle for a minimum requisite (the status quo). One could, on the other hand, envisage the US *opening* to Syria, but that could become a sort of surrogate measure, failing a real breakthrough on Israeli-Palestinian affairs. Relations with Syria could take on strategic overtones, given Russia's repositioning on the Mediterranean stage. In the Maghreb, Obama's policy could be limited to the anti-terrorist struggle and energy, which does not differentiate it greatly from that of Bush. The centre of gravity of US policy is eastern (the Iraq-Iran-Afghanistan triangle), far from the Mediterranean, therefore, even if the inclusion of Iran is linked to the preservation of Israeli nuclear exclusivity. The prolonged *American moment* in the Middle East contrasts with its *deserting* the Mediterranean, except as a route of passage towards other areas.