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**PEREJIL/LEILA  
AND THE EURO-MED PARTNERSHIP**

*by Roberto Aliboni*

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## PEREJIL/LEILA AND THE EURO-MED PARTNERSHIP

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During the Spanish-Moroccan crisis over the Perejil/Leila islet both the European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) have squarely supported Spanish sovereignty. They have completely ignored the special co-operation promoted with the Mediterranean countries from the mid-1990s onwards. This is particularly true with respect to the EU-initiated Euro-Mediterranean Partnership, whose ambitious agenda contemplates an articulated political and security agenda of collective co-operation with the Southern Mediterranean countries, including Morocco. For a number of reasons, the partners have failed to turn their aims into a practical reality. Nonetheless, co-operation is still on the agenda and the parties to the scheme are still apparently committed to it. It is true that one witnessed the same kind of response from the Arab side. The Arab League supported Moroccan claims just as unambiguously as the Western or European side did Spain. How can one explain that precisely at the time when the spirit of Euro-Med co-operation was most necessary it vanished?

The answer to this question is at least partly tied to the ambiguous nature of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership. Is it the germ of an organisation of peers like the OSCE? Or is it the latest of a long series of EU policies towards the Mediterranean? Clearly, rhetoric notwithstanding, at present the EMP is EU policy towards the region. Only very recently and very timidly were there hints that it was necessary to establish 'co-ownership' of the EMP. For the time being, however, the partnership is still an EU rather than a truly collective Euro-Mediterranean policy. Thus, because Spain is a member of the EU, the latter was a party to the dispute and could not mediate, as the United States was. Were the EMP to be the OSCE of the Mediterranean, it could have mediated through instruments of its own. It might even have had the duty to mediate and, by the same token, the two parties in dispute would have been bound to accept the results of the mediation.

Unfortunately, this does not explain the whole of the problem. Such points explain the legal profile of the question but are politically not as relevant. One cannot overlook that the Europeans failed to manage a limited crisis that affects a region they consider to be a key security area, and that the Americans did not intervene in their Middle Eastern diplomatic enclosure but in the Maghreb and the Mediterranean, two areas over which according to conventional wisdom Europe has recognised authority and interests. Furthermore, after spending many years and resources trying to persuade the Southern partners of the peaceful intent of EU military instruments (including Euromarfor), a EU member was able to deploy force in a traditional and disproportionate way. The perception of an overwhelming and superior offensive military capacity of the North has played a central role in slowing down security co-operation within the EMP framework.

However legally correct the inertia of the EU may be, it wrought significant political damage. This raises two key questions: Could the EU have adopted a more political

position to deal with the crisis and should it speed up EMP 'co-ownership', and turn it into a true organisation of peers? Regarding the first question, there is no doubt that a more courageous EU Presidency could have acted with greater awareness of its role as the presidency of the EMP. In this case, the Presidency could have taken a risk and attempted mediation. Why would Spain refuse the EU Presidency what it gave the American Secretary of State, namely a return to the *status quo ante*? Would Morocco necessarily have refused to recognise the authority of the EU, given its multifaceted relations with the latter? It would appear that the EU was simply unwilling to engage in political action. The Danish presidency declined to qualify in its 13 July declaration of staunch support for Spain sovereignty. The High Representative did his best to persuade the Commission that it had no role to play and that the prerogatives of member states should be preserved. At the same time, the member states got what national interest dividends they could from the crisis. Worse still, the national representatives in the new Political and Security Committee of the EU failed to emit any statements on the issue. This is more than just an exposition of the weakness of CFSP. It is a worrying spectacle of incompetence and petty nationalism.

Regarding the second question, the EU and its Mediterranean Partners have long talked about setting up Euro-Med instruments for joint crisis management and prevention. Immediately after the Barcelona Declaration an Action Plan was debated that outlined a conflict prevention agenda. Subsequently, an attempt was made to establish a framework akin to a Charter for Peace and Stability. Nothing came from these efforts partly because of the collapse of the Middle East Peace process, and partly because of the perception of asymmetry of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership. The kind of partnership based on the desire of the EU to manage South-South conflicts with Southern consent, but silent or ambiguous about North-South crises. The Perejil/Leila situation has exposed the unilateral character of the EMP by demonstrating that when it comes to North-South crises it is useless. To get beyond this impasse it is necessary to introduce 'co-ownership' so as to make the EMP important for the Southern partners in security terms. Should this occur, the EMP will provide greater security for the EU and increase its political stature.