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IN THE ITALIAN EU PRESIDENCY**

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## MIDDLE EAST AND MEDITERRANEAN IN THE ITALIAN EU PRESIDENCY

*by Roberto Aliboni*<sup>1</sup>

Italy presented its July-December 2003 EU Presidency programme in the July 21, 2003 Council. The programme is articulated in a document entitled "Europe: Citizens of a Shared Dream". In this document, the Mediterranean and the Middle East are rather prominent. Three issues are regarded as priorities the EU Italian Presidency intends to pursue: (a) post-war Iraq; (b) the "road-map" process in the Middle East; (c) the development of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership in the Mediterranean area.

True, Iraq is regarded by the Italian programme less as a regional than European and transatlantic issue. What comes in the forefront of Italy's action, in its capacity as the President of the EU, is the target of getting Europeans reconciled among them and with the United States. The programme stresses the transatlantic perspective in which Italy will pursue EU reconciliation: "The Iraqi crisis has, of course, had the effect of weakening the transatlantic link; we therefore need to put that critical phase behind us and re-establish the traditional special relationship with Washington". In this sense, what the Italian Presidency is tackling with respect to the Middle East and the Mediterranean regards less Iraq than the "road-map" and Euro-Med issues.

As far as the "Middle East peace process" is concerned, the programme underscores that "The formation of a representative Palestinian government, the publication of the road-map and the renewed involvement of the United States, Europe and Russia in re-launching the peace process - these entail increased responsibilities for the Italian Presidency, but they also point to considerable opportunities". In fact, the Italian government is devoting special and assiduous consideration to Israeli-Palestinian relations in the framework of the road-map process.

In general, Italy is sceptical about the possibility of organising the conference that would allow proceeding from the first to the second stage of the road map. However, it is acting to organise the donor's conference. The approval of the so-called "Marshall Plan for Palestine" by the G7 in Dubai is a step towards achieving a plan Italy has always supported and fostered.

When it comes to the attempts at settling the conflict, the main guidelines of its diplomatic action are clearly stated in the Declaration on the situation in the Middle East released by the Presidency on September 11, 2003 in Brussels. In this Declaration, the Presidency points out the short term goals the two parties are expected to pursue in order to create the proper conditions for the road-map to be achieved:

"The European Union urges the two parties to remain strongly committed to the need of an ongoing dialogue and the implementation of the road map, and, in this regard, to take the following measures:

- The PNA: forming a new government; re-organising its security forces; re-establishing public order and undertaking visible efforts to dismantle the terrorist

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organisations; implementing the reforms already started and organising free and transparent elections.

- The Israeli government: withdrawing the army from the autonomous areas; putting an end to target killings; relieving the Palestinian people from the road blocks and other restrictions imposed on them; freezing all settlements activities and the building of the security wall along a track that jeopardises a political solution to the conflict.

A characterising point of the Presidency's policy is to assure a balance between European relations with Israel and Palestinians alike. In the Italian government opinion is very firm the sense that the Israeli misperception of a European imbalance towards the Palestinians has to be corrected. This asks for a "confidence-building campaign with respect to Israel and Israelis as well as a conduct constantly geared at maintaining and acquiring credibility on both sides

However, in its day-to-day diplomacy, Italy, while insisting with the Palestinians on the absolute need to contain and suppress terrorism so as to establish proper conditions of security for their counterpart, in their talks with the Israelis colleagues has not failed to note the necessity to provide the new Palestinian leadership a more convinced support; the incompatibility of targeted killings with any cease-fire; and the fact that the construction of the security fence can seriously compromise any chance of agreement. All these measures weaken the new Palestinian leaders the West countries tries to support with a view to replace the old leadership's ambiguities.

In particular, Italy has condemned the idea of expelling, let alone killing, President Arafat. While new leaders have to be supported, Arafat has to be respected as it expresses a wide Palestinian consensus.

With regard to the international community, Italy believes that monitoring activities, currently being planned within the Quartet, have to initiate already in the current first stage with a view to reassure Palestinian people against Israeli re-occupation of territories. According to the Italians, Europe can already provide a contribution to monitoring, taking advantage of its previous experiences in civilian monitoring (the force deployed in Hebron) and the new assets within the framework of the European Security and Defence Policy-ESDP. Europe should couple the Americans, who are presently conducting monitoring activities by themselves. Furthermore, their activities focus on security against terrorism, while neglecting people broad security.

With respect to the second Italian priority, i.e. the Euro-Med Partnership, the role of the ESDP is also a central one. The programme says that "The Italian Presidency intends to pay special attention to the dialogue with the countries of the Southern Mediterranean ... with which it is important to establish the ESDP as a factor for regional stability, and therefore of mutual benefit." In this respect, Italy is pursuing what the 23 April 2002 Valencia Action Plan has envisaged by stating that "the political dialogue ... must focus among other things on ... effective dialogue on political and security matters, including on the ESDP ...". The successive Presidencies have pursued that task by organising special seminar with a military participation (Barcelona, May 2002; Rhodes, November 2002 and Corfu, May 2003). In the same perspective, during the Italian semester, the EU-ISS has organised on September 18, 2003 a seminar in Brussels on "ESDP and the Mediterranean" at the request of the Political and Security Committee. The Italian Military Centre for Strategic Studies has organised a similar seminar in Rome on September 25, 2003 on "Security, Stability and Cooperation in the Mediterranean

region”. Both seminars have discussed the potential of the ESDP in the Euro-Med framework.

Beside ESDP developments and their relevance for the EMP, the Italian government set out its priorities in full detail in the document on “common strategy” that every Presidency has to prepare following a broad rule established by the Common Strategy of the European Union for the Mediterranean Region adopted by the Santa Maria de Feira European Council in June 2002. This document states three main priorities:

- Completing the project of a Euro-Mediterranean Foundation for the dialogue between cultures and civilisations, thereby facilitating its establishment;
- Promoting the evaluation of the functioning of FEMIP with a view to incorporating FEMIP in a EIB majority-owned subsidiary dedicated to the Mediterranean partners;
- Including in the Euro-Med framework a Euro-Med Parliamentary Assembly with consultative powers by easing the necessary accord on such assembly by the European Parliament and Euro-Med national assemblies.

The Commission, in a mid-October 2003 communication with a view to set the agenda the Ministerial conference of December 2-3, 2003 in Naples, has recommended these three objectives explicitly.

The Foundation for Dialogue between Cultures and Civilisations is expected to ease contacts especially at the level of civil society and help policies on migration, the struggle against racism and xenophobia, as well as broad mutual understanding.

As for the existing FEMIP (Facility for Euro-Mediterranean Investment and Partnership), established according to the decision made by the Barcelona European Council of March 2002, as an EIB counter, it will be incorporated in EIB subsidiary with the task of fostering private investment in the Southern Mediterranean Partners. In the past, the Italian government had supported in many venues the idea of setting up a Mediterranean Development Bank. The EIB subsidiary will not be a bank of its own. However, it will be an independent body dealing with the substantive challenge of encouraging European private saving to be invested in the South of the Mediterranean and hopefully act as a decisive factor for its development in the Euro-Med framework.

To use its own words, the Italian Presidency programme hopes “to turn to good account” all these initiatives at the Euro-Mediterranean Ministerial Conference in Naples at the beginning of December.