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## **MEDITERRANEAN: INVENTING A COOPERATIVE IDENTITY**

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After the Second World War the Mediterranean concept flourished because of the interplay between anti-American trends in Southern Europe and Cold war alignments. In Southern Europe, France - as a country with persisting great power ambitions - and a number of political groups in Southern Europe - as leftist parties in many countries and the left wing of the Christian Democratic party in Italy - tried to create the sense of a Mediterranean solidarity so as to oppose it to the strongly emerging role of the United States in the area. From the global point of view, the Cold War objectively brought together former colonizers and colonized under the umbrella of Communism or anti-imperialism. These political trends were seated on a Mediterranean identity ideology, which proved attractive and helpful even for non-state actors, as the emerging Italian oil company's struggle against the "Seven Sisters" and the Vatican policy towards the Terra Santa.

The Mediterranean ideology slipped into the European Community because of the overwhelming French influence on everything had to do with former colonies - in particular development aid to African and Mediterranean countries. In 1972, Brussels technocrats, always under French influence, launched the "politique méditerranéenne globale" (comprehensive) with the aim of homogenizing policies towards the regional countries and rationalizing their management. It was a hub and spoke policy. It was construed as the expression of the special Mediterranean solidarity existing between Europe and the Southern Mediterranean countries.

This Mediterranean geopolitics is only Europe's. During the Cold war, both the Soviet Union and the United States used to distinguish on strategic ground between western North Africa and the Middle East, as a huge area stretching from the eastern Mediterranean to the Upper Gulf. Today, particularly in American eyes, the Middle East has enlarged to the Greater Middle East, the Maghreb remaining aside. Europe has retained its Mediterranean policy instead by developing it into a Mediterranean Partnership. The strategic and geopolitical reality of the Mediterranean is fragmentation and opposition, however, with conflict flashing here and there.

While Mediterranean identity is an invention, though, this is not a good reason to reject it. People have many identities, some of them obviously bound to prevail. Any cultural or political attempts at making people believe that there is a "natural" identity bound to prevail (so as if one happens to be Italian has to believe that "right or wrong, my country") must be rejected. We have many identities, many riches, and we are responsible for choosing those identities which fit to with a view to make public good and human solidarity prevails.

In this sense - admittedly, in a very rationalist perspective - a Mediterranean identity can be of very good use. After the end of the East-West confrontation, the attempts made by the European Union to upgrade its Mediterranean policy - the Barcelona process - are reflecting a number of objective changes and emerging trends in the area. With respect to emerging trends, the setting up of a Mediterranean framework sounds like a good suggestion. In fact, the most significant such emerging trends is a peaceful cohabitation in Palestine of Israelis and Palestinians. We don't know if and when the

Middle East peace process will succeed. If – as this author believes – it will, the Mediterranean solidarity could be a sound platform to make cooperation work between Arabs, Israelis and to include the Europeans in such cooperation.

Such Mediterranean arrangement in Euro-Arab-Israeli relations would make much more sense than the idea that there would be two separated identities, one Arab and one European, Israel being a country destined to become an EU member - thus included in Europe. Including Israel in the European identity would not only create unease and misunderstanding with the Arabs but also with a good number of Israelis. If a Mediterranean identity is accepted, it could work as a unifying factor, stirring cooperation between diverse peoples, as “invented” as it may be. Making it acceptable is a “rationalizing” act governments and NGOs should prepare carefully, so as to make it a convincing and convenient option for interested people.

Besides being a convenient framework for fostering Arab-Israeli cooperation in a triangle with Europe, the Mediterranean concept may help also with respect to changes stemming from migration. Emigration towards Europe from the Middle East and North Africa, from Arab and Islamic countries, has substantially changed a previous situation of asymmetry, whereby Arabs and Muslim were scarcely present in Europe, whereas Europeans presence in the Middle East and North Africa was fairly developed. This balancing trend has been fully realized by the Catholic Church, for example, who was used to look at the Middle East in the same way as the United States and the Soviet Union/Russia and is looking today at it as a component of a single Mediterranean area to which both Europe and the Middle East pertain: the Catholic and Christian communities in the Middle East being now balanced by the Arab-Muslim communities living in Europe. European governments should well retain this Catholic vision as well.

There is no doubt that migration goes beyond ideology and invention: today’s Arab-Muslim migrants will become tomorrow’s European citizens. In this perception the Mediterranean can be seen as a substantive ties between countries. It can legitimately be assumed as something people have in common. We have, thus, at least two examples in which it fits to have a Mediterranean identity, independently of whether it really exists or not.