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MEDITERRANEAN: A WATERED INITIATIVE?**

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Paper prepared in the framework of the Programme for Promoting Conflict Prevention in the Mediterranean and the Middle East (CP Med) and published in "Conflict in Focus", no. 8 (August 2005)

IAI0537

ISTITUTO AFFARI INTERNAZIONALI

EU WATER POLICIES TOWARDS THE MEDITERRANEAN: A WATERED INITIATIVE?

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According to the United Nations, about 1.1 billion people on Earth do not have access to safe drinking water and about 2.4 billion people lack adequate sanitation. An estimated 6 000 children die each day from diseases associated with poor sanitation and hygiene and one in two hospital beds in the world is occupied by someone with a preventable water-borne disease. If current trends persisted, by 2025 the demand for fresh water is expected to rise by 56% – more than is currently available.

In the last years, the growing awareness of what could be referred to as the ‘global water crisis’ brought the EU to take action to grant water security for the 21st century. In March 2002, the European Commission adopted a “*Communication on Water Management in Developing countries*”¹ and the European Development Council endorsed, on 30 May 2002, a *Common Resolution*² on the same issue. The two policy papers acknowledged the importance of addressing the global challenge of growing scarcity and decreasing quality of water resources, particularly acute in developing countries, and were followed by the launching of the EU *Water Initiative* (EUWI)³ at the World Summit for Sustainable Development (WSSD) in Johannesburg in the summer of the same year. The initiative is designed to contribute to the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and WSSD targets for drinking water and sanitation, within the context of an integrated approach to water resources management.

The EUWI is based on a participative multi-stakeholder approach. Various strategic partnerships in specific regions draw together government, civil society, private sector and other stakeholders. A number of working groups have been established either with a regional/thematic focus (e.g. Water Supply and Sanitation in Africa) or concentrating on crosscutting issues (e.g. Research, Finance). An advisory board and a steering group ensure coherence of all EUWI activities.

The Mediterranean region - one of the most water-scarce of the world – is an important component of the EUWI. The MED EUWI covers an area⁴ in which the fresh water supply is very unevenly distributed and in which demographic growth, together with economic development, generally increased water demand while water ecosystems remain very fragile. Moreover, regional conflicts make international water management and cooperation extremely difficult.⁵

¹ European Commission, COM(2002) 132 final, Brussels, 12/03/2002 [http://europa.eu.int/eur-lex/en/com/cnc/2002/com2002_0132en01.pdf]

² European Development Council, 8958/02 (Presse 147), 30/05/2002
<http://register.consilium.eu.int/pdf/en/02/st08/08958en2.pdf>

³ See website [www.euwi.net]

⁴ The Med EUWI comprises the following Mediterranean partner countries: Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, Israel, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Palestinian Authority, Syria, Tunisia and Turkey and the following Southeastern European countries: Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYRM), Serbia and Montenegro, Bulgaria and Romania.

⁵ In the Mediterranean-Middle Eastern region there are three main water disputes, around the three main river basins: the Nile; the Jordan and the Tigris and Euphrates. See articles in this issue of Conflict in Focus.

In this context, the Med EUWI aims to better coordinate future and already existing water programmes and projects, targeting a more effective use of existing funds and mobilisation of new financial resources.⁶ The MED EUWI focuses on the following themes:

- ?? Water supply and sanitation, with emphasis on the poorest part of the societies
- ?? Integrated water resources management, with emphasis on management of transboundary water bodies
- ?? Water, food and environment interaction, with emphasis on fragile ecosystems
- ?? Non-conventional water resources
- ?? Transfer of technology, transfer of know how, capacity building and training
- ?? Education

The Med EU Water Initiative builds on and coordinates existing mechanisms, institutions and regionally led processes and initiatives in the Mediterranean, the most important of which is the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership.⁷

It is probably too early to give an evaluation of the Med EUWI. However, the impression is that while coordination structures and networks multiply with the positive effect of increasing public awareness on the urgency of the water issue, they still lack a clear political approach and strategy shared by all relevant actors. Through the MEDA or other cooperation tools, the EU is actually funding projects with a focus on water-related problems,⁸ but there isn't any Mediterranean water strategy emerging capable of overcoming, for instance, disputes and lack of cooperation within states. The one regional cooperation experiment - the Middle East multilateral working group on water resources - failed with Oslo.⁹

In addition, the EU Water Initiative has been heavily criticised by civil society groups, who are mainly concerned about the way European aid money and political influence is being used to promote *water privatisation*, rather than meeting real development needs in water and sanitation.¹⁰

The EU support for water privatisation is in line with broader international development policies. Just to mention a relevant example, the World Bank has found in "the weak performance of public utilities" the core of many problems in urban water supply and sanitation and has built its strategy on the "emphasis of private sector participation".¹¹

Civil society groups argue, on the contrary, that water privatisation in the last decade has failed and that multinational corporations are ill equipped to deliver clean

⁶ See the Mediterranean component of the EU Water Initiative on:
[<http://www.euwi.net/index.php?main=1&sub=1&id=127>]

⁷ For an overview see MEDA water on: [<http://www.emwis.org>]

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ The multilateral track of the Middle East Peace Process started in 1992 and consisted of 5 working groups (water; environment; economic development; refugees; arms control and regional security). The working group on water resources was co-organised by the EU and Japan.

¹⁰ See the letter sent by a platform of civil society groups and associations to EU commissioner for development and humanitarian aid Louis Michel in occasion of the World Water Day, 22/03/2005.
[<http://www.corporateeurope.org/worldwaterday2005.html>]

¹¹ As far as the MENA region is concerned see World Bank
[<http://lnweb18.worldbank.org/mna/mena.nsf/0/c9e83517ae931faf8525694400051ddc?OpenDocument>]

and affordable water to the poor. They also claim that the EU, as well as other international institutions, exercise pressure on developing countries to liberalise water services through trade negotiations, more to protect private sector interests than to foster sustainable development.¹² In their view, the EU should instead promote the universal human right to water and champion a different approach to water and sanitation in Europe and in Developing countries.¹³

International water activists believe that the steps needed for a water-secure future include the adoption of a Treaty Initiative to share and protect global water, to guarantee water as an inalienable political and social right and, finally, to exempt water from international trade and investment regimes.¹⁴

Indeed, an enforced international legal framework for water granting an equitable access and distribution for all would also help in reaching a just and durable solution for Middle Eastern present and future water disputes.

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¹² There are ten major corporate players now delivering fresh water services for profit. The two biggest are both from France (Vivendi Universal and Suez). In general, European companies control 95 % of global water industry. Maude Barlow; Tony Clarke, "Who Owns Water?" *The Nation*, 02/09/2002 [<http://www.thenation.com/doc.mhtml%3Fi=20020902&s=barlow>]

¹³ See Stefania Bianchi, "World Water Day: EU Urged to Stop Privatisation", *ipsnews*, 21/03/2005 [<http://www.ipsnews.net/interna.asp?idnews=27948>]

¹⁴ M. Barlow; T. Clarke, *op. cit.*