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MEDITERRANEAN POLICY
AND ITALIAN ATTITUDES TOWARDS
THE PALESTINIAN QUESTION**

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Introduction

The aim of the present study is to situate the various attitudes and policies towards the Palestinian question expressed overtime by the Italian public opinion, the main political forces and the government in the context of the global evolution of Italy's foreign policy towards the Mediterranean region since the second World War.

The determinants of Italy's Mediterranean policy

Italy's foreign policy well represents the "medium power typology", as defined by theorists of international relations: Italy's plays its role mainly within the limits of its own region and influences the international system only because changes in its basic alignments may indirectly affect the overall balance of power.

Within the limits of this paradigm, the profile of Italy's foreign policy was enhanced in the last decade and the Mediterranean - Middle East region has been among its main areas of action.

Contrary to some perceptions, however, Italy's main geopolitical area of interest is not the Mediterranean. In fact, in modern times Italy's foreign policy has been firmly anchored to alliances which -from the "Tripartite Alliance" of 1882 to NATO and the EC- have their geopolitical center of gravity in continental Europe and relegate the Mediterranean dimension to a marginal position.

This relative lack of emphasis on the Mediterranean on the part of the "anchors" of Italian foreign policy has been the source of a potential political contradiction, as most of the areas of strategic interest to Italy are in the Mediterranean region, that from an Italian perspective, includes all littoral countries as well as their regional systems: the Balkans, Maghreb, Mashreq and Gulf sub-regions. The littoral countries of the Adriatic, the Strait of Sicily and the maritime regions extending west to the Balearic islands and east to Crete command Italy's territorial security to the South, while the Mediterranean region as a whole remains vital for Italy's economic security.

During the postwar period, in an effort to minimize this potential contradiction, Italy's foreign policy had the dual objective of consolidation of NATO and the EC, and the achievement of full integration of Italy within these alliances. The attainment of these objectives was appropriately identified as the essential (but not the only) condition for involving the allies in the Mediterranean dimension which was marginal to the center of gravity of these alliances, but geopolitically indispensable for Italy.

In other words, in the postwar period the pursuit of good economic and political relations with the countries of the Mediterranean region has been a secondary -although significant-goal in Italy's foreign policy. As a consequence,

contrary to current beliefs, the existence of a prominent and relatively coherent Mediterranean chapter in Italy's foreign policy is a recent phenomenon dating back not earlier than the mid 1970s.

The Palestinian question emerged as an issue in Italian politics since the mid Sixties, first as the result of the support extended by the left parties to national liberation movements worldwide, namely by the Italian Socialist Party - PSI, the Italian Communist Party-PCI and some smaller groups of the extreme left. Then, since the mid Seventies, the Palestinian question became the subject of distinct government's attention as a sub-sector of its overall Mediterranean policy, an more precisely as a component of the preponderant Arab chapter within that policy.

The distinction between these two sources of the Italian policies towards the Palestinian question -the mass movements of the Left and the government-remained evident until the late Eighties, when the government official line adopted most of the traditional requests of the Left (most noticeably regarding the recognition of the PLO) and the Left dropped its most radical demands. Thus, since 1989, the official line of the government towards the Palestinian question, based on the recognition of Palestinian right to self-determination, gained the support of the main Italian political forces.

The development of Italy's Mediterranean policy

In the immediate post-war period Italy had many disincentives to active involvement in the Mediterranean region: first, the country's economic and political fabric was in shambles and its freedom of maneuver was limited de facto and de jure (its admission to the UN did not come until 1956); secondly, after Italy joined NATO in 1949 and the left parties were ousted from government, the alignment with US foreign policy directives was total; thirdly, the notion of a national Italian Mediterranean policy was too reminiscent of Fascist imperial ambitions to be palatable domestically.

As a consequence, recognition of the state of Israel came automatically from the Italian government, whose policy was modelled on that of the US; also the parties of the Left did not object to the recognition of Israel in 1949 and paid little attention to events surrounding the Suez war in 1956. Even the development of a national economic foreign policy in the key sector of energy supplies proved ahead of times, as shown by the case of Enrico Mattei, the president of the State oil agency (ENI), killed in 1962 in a mysterious plane crash when on the verge of signing an agreement with neo-independent Algeria.

During the early 60s the parties of the Left developed much stronger attitudes towards anti-colonialist, anti-imperialist struggle as well as direct ties with national liberation movements. In this framework also the Palestinian question came to be known and supported in Italy.

Although Italy actively contributed to the development of the so called EC Mediterranean policy launched at the beginning of the 1970's, it was not until after the first oil shock (1973) that the Italian government sought a reappraisal of its relations with the countries of the Mediterranean region; however, the results of this renewed attention to the region were on the whole more impressive in economic than in political terms.

It was at this stage that in most Italian political forces, namely in the

Christian Democratic Party-DC, emerged a trend favorable to the political discourse of the Arab countries, or, as some commentators like to describe it, pro-Arab lobbies, naturally opposed to pro-Israeli lobbies sometime coexisting in the same political parties.

In this evolution, economic opportunism -arising out of the need to acquire and keep an adequate share of the Arab market to counterbalance the booming oil bill- was the prominent, but not only reason.

Political attention and solidarity activities towards the Palestinian question by the left parties were strengthened in the late Sixties - early Seventies period. However, the close association between the Left and the support of the Palestinian rights limited the positive impact of these activities on the government line, a political hindrance only partially mitigated by the interest in the Palestinian cause of some sectors of the Catholic movements.

Meanwhile, the renewed interest towards the Arab world translated in the first official act of support on the part of the government: in late 1974 the presence in Italy of a PLO representative was officially authorized, although only as an attaché to the diplomatic delegation of the Arab League in Rome. Also since 1974, it became the norm for Italian governments to consider the Arab League consensus on the Palestinian question as one of the basis for its own positions on the matter.

However, regardless of the imperative to increase economic relations with the Arab oil producing countries and of the ensuing relative pro-Arab tilt, a coherent Mediterranean chapter was still lacking in the dormant Italian foreign policy.

From the late 1970's to present

The picture changed significantly from the late seventies, when Italy ceased to be little more than a spectator of international events. The reasons for the change in Italy's international status are too complex to be analyzed here, but can be summarized as the result of the convergence of domestic and international developments that mitigated the fragility of the Italian political and economic system and gave more weight to the whole Western Europe on the international scene.

By 1980 Italy had become the biggest provider of export credits for the Mediterranean countries among all OECD countries, had signed a treaty guaranteeing Malta's neutrality after the British withdrawal, and chaired the EC presidency that issued the Venice declaration offering an active European support for a diplomatic solution of Arab-Israeli conflict.

The EC Venice declaration of June 1980 recognized for the first time both the rights of the Palestinian people to self-determination and the right of the PLO to be part of the negotiating process.

At the same time, although constantly reiterating Israel's right to live in peace and security within international recognized borders, the Italian government refused to accept the annexation of Jerusalem and the Golan, the colonization policy in the occupied Territories, and officially condemned Israeli military aggressions, from the bombing of the Baghdad nuclear reactor to the invasion of Lebanon.

In the same period, Italy also stepped up relations with the PLO: official

meetings between Khaddoumi (head of the PLO political bureau) and Italian foreign Ministers were held since 1977, starting with the meeting with the Christian Democrat Arnaldo Forlani. Formal recognition of the PLO as the only legal representative of the "Palestinian nation" was still lacking, but Yasser Arafat came to Rome in 1982 and was received, albeit in a private capacity, by the foreign Minister and the President of the Republic; only the then Prime Minister Giovanni Spadolini, of the small and pro-Israeli Republican party-PRI refused to attend the meeting.

Also, since the late Seventies Italy expressed its concern for peace and stability in the Middle East with the participation of Italian soldiers in all UN peace-keeping forces in the region, as well as by taking part in the multinational forces in Sinai and Lebanon. In fact, the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon marked a peak in the solidarity of the Italian public opinion with the Palestinian cause.

In more recent years, the Italian public opinion has continued to follow attentively the main events concerning the Palestinian question. Extensively covered by the media in 1988 and 1989, the Intifada has in fact renewed the empathy of the Italian public and led to a new mobilization of popular support. This mobilization translated into a number of initiatives by the Italian political forces: Arafat address to the European Parliament (sept. 1988) was largely engineered through the Italian Socialist Party-PSI, while strong new requests for the recognition of the PLO and the newly self-declared Palestinian state were set forth in the Parliament.

In May 1989 the Italian Parliament finally voted its recognition of the PLO as the only legitimate representative of the Palestinian people, but the government did not, arguing that, to be politically significant, recognition should come simultaneously from all EC members (a line finally accepted by all major parties). In the same year, the PLO delegation in Italy was given an autonomous diplomatic status.

Palestinian support for Iraq in the Gulf crisis was hard to understand and accept for most Italian supporters of Palestinian rights. However, although this attitude did result in drop of popularity of the Palestinian cause both at the public opinion and government level the centrality of the Palestinian question for Middle East stability was not put into question.

As of mid-1992, it can be argued that while interest and support for the Palestinian cause remain in the Italian polity, a number of factors have partially modified the traditional Italian attitudes towards it.

At the general public opinion level, the emotional solidarity bond seems to have receded, possibly as a consequence of the Gulf crisis, the flux state of the intifada and the resurgence and multiplication of independentist struggles worldwide. As for the main political forces, the process of adjustment of the former Communist party (now Democratic Party of the Left-PDS) and of the left parties at large, to the new international and domestic situation has led to the marginalization of their traditional 'radical' demands in foreign policy.

At the same time, the evolution of Palestinian politics as well as of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict have imposed internationally the autonomy of the Palestinian question within the broader regional questions to which it remains linked. This reality is reflected in the present formulation of Italy's Mediterranean policy.

By 1990 Italy's relations with the countries of the Mediterranean region had long ceased to be considered in narrow economic terms (raw materials in exchange of export markets) and were mainly considered as a facet of the overall national security policy.

At the heart of both the bilateral and multilateral dimensions of Italy's present Mediterranean policies lies a comprehensive concept of security that regards political, cultural and economic factors as more important than purely military ones in determining instability and conflicts in the region.

According to this concept of comprehensive security developed by Italian policy makers in the last decade, what is at stake in the Mediterranean is a cultural and social balance that is definitely more complex than the military one.

As a consequence, Italy's foreign policy strives at developing a strategy of cooperation with the countries of the region apt to contribute to the elimination of the social and economic causes of instability, to the reinforcement of democracy, and to the establishment of an intercultural dialogue.

Recognizing that national resources cannot suffice to develop this strategy of cooperation that requires the mobilization of significant economic and political resources, Italy has worked together with the other Southern EC members (mainly France and Spain) to have this strategy of cooperation adopted and implemented by the European Community as a whole. In fact the Community is the only multilateral framework that -after its transformation into a full fledged Economic and Political Union- will be able to integrate European economic, political and security policies vis-à-vis the Mediterranean.

The aims of this strategy of cooperation were illustrated in the proposal for a Conference on Security and Cooperation in the Mediterranean-CSCM set forth by Italy and Spain in September 1990. The CSCM proposal has yet to be realized and it is possible that it will never be; what is more important, however, is that its spirit and modalities have been captured in the two most important diplomatic initiatives in progress in the region: the multilateral talks in the Arab-Israeli peace process and the Western Mediterranean Group (a regional cooperation network between the five countries of the Arab Maghreb Union, Malta and the four South-Western EC members) .