



## France, the European Union and the Middle East in the Sarkozy Era

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*Executive Summary: President Nicolas Sarkozy, since his accession in May 2007, attracts considerable attention and media coverage, not only for his captivating private life, but also due to his numerous internal reform initiatives and his intensive diplomatic agenda on the international scene. Sarkozy's policy represents traditional French aspirations to play a prominent role in the international arena in general and in the Middle East in particular. Thus, it embraces past objectives and perceptions, while concurrently adopting new energetic methods and activism adapted to Sarkozy's style and worldwide vision. Sarkozy aims to increase France's influence and promote French interests in the Middle East, by strengthening the European Union's global role and by advancing initiatives such as the Common European Foreign and Defense Policy (CFDP) and the Mediterranean Union (MU). Sarkozy's vision for France, the EU and the ME is meeting considerable challenges and obstacles not insurmountable as long as realism and prudence prevail.*

### **Internal Reforms**

During his electoral campaign, Sarkozy pledged to rehabilitate France's ailing economy and to deal with problems such as illegal immigration, suburban violence, unemployment, a cumbersome legal system and faltering education and health systems. The first months of his presidency were indeed marked by the launching of numerous and profound internal economic, social and political reforms designed to modernize his country and enable it to better compete in a globalized world. However, some ominous signs of difficulties are already apparent, leading to significant decrease in Sarkozy's popularity in public opinion surveys.

### **A Strong European Union**

Another sphere of Sarkozy's endeavor to restore French power and influence is related to his attitudes towards the EU. Seemingly, France, as a middle-sized power, perceives the creation of a politically and militarily strong Europe as a tool for promoting French influence in the international arena. Thus, in his first address to the diplomatic corps on August 27, 2007, Sarkozy stressed: "The construction of Europe will remain the absolute priority of our foreign policy. France is not strong without Europe, just as Europe is not strong without France."

In June 2007, a short time after his election, Sarkozy led a successful initiative to extricate the EU from its constitutional stalemate and adopt the abridged constitutional treaty. The abridged treaty could lead to a more integrated and coherent CFDP and enable Europe, according to Sarkozy's vision, to address international crises through military intervention, humanitarian assistance and financial aide. In the second half of 2008, when France assumes the rotating presidency of the EU, promoting the CFDP will probably play a major role.

Yet, the EU is still coping with unsolved internal problems and challenges, such as the integration of the new member states recently incorporated into the EU, and significant differences of opinion between France and Germany, the two states who have always been the driving force behind the European construction. Subsequently, the adoption of ambitious plans risks arousing disagreements and might become counterproductive.

### **The Middle East**

The Middle East remains a pillar of high priority in the construction of Sarkozy's foreign policy. Historical presence since the crusades, geographic proximity, colonial history and shared economic and strategic interests as well as tight personal contacts between French leaders and Middle Eastern and Muslim leaders led to the well-known French "Politique Arabe."

Soon after assuming his post, Sarkozy, with his hyperactive style and his determination to promote the French economy, launched numerous foreign policies, establishing the basis for more active French involvement in the Middle East. Assisted by Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner, known as the "French doctor," a humanitarian activist with interventionist inclinations, Sarkozy occupied the headlines with numerous overtures to Libya, Iraq, Syria, North Africa, the Gulf countries and Egypt, with mediation efforts in Lebanon, a fund raising conference for the creation of a Palestinian state and meetings with Israeli and Palestinians leaders. A noteworthy development in French Middle East policy is the offering of civilian nuclear cooperation to a range of Arab countries, including Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Libya, the United Arab Emirates and Morocco. Confronting criticism in the EU and elsewhere, Sarkozy asserted that in principle Muslim and Arab states have the same right to civilian atomic energy as any other part of the world.

Despite Sarkozy's new style, and his energetic initiatives, Sarkozy's Middle East policy does not represent a break with traditional French policy but essentially preserves its main features.

### **The Israeli-Palestinian Conflict**

Sarkozy's election sparked expectations in Israel of a new era in French-Israeli relations. These were related to Sarkozy's friendly declarations towards Israel, including his sensitivity to Israel's security. Indeed, the ambiance of French-Israeli relations has improved considerably after the election of Sarkozy. The tightening and broadening of bilateral relations, a process which had started during Chirac's tenure, is equally evident.

Nonetheless, substantial differences of opinion, which have characterized French-Israeli relations in the past, still persist. For instance, France and Israel diverge over the interpretation of UN Security Council Resolution 242 concerning border modification in the final peace arrangement. In addition, major differences of opinion exist, as in the past, regarding Israeli use of force against Palestinian terror. Thus, despite France's unequivocal condemnation of the launching of rockets from Gaza, it also expresses its opposition to Israeli military operations, demanding Israel's restraint.

In a January 2008 meeting with Ehud Barak, Sarkozy expressed his conviction that following the Annapolis conference (November 2007) and the conference of donors in Paris (December 2007), a Palestinian state would be created by the end of 2008. Sarkozy declared in his August 2007 speech: "Peace will be negotiated first and foremost between the Israelis and the Palestinians." Hopefully, France and the EU adopt this approach and refrain from pressing Israel for premature and hasty concessions that might lead to counterproductive results.

### **The Lebanon Crisis**

Sarkozy's policy on Lebanon, which displays a great measure of continuity, emphasizes France's historical and emotional ties with Lebanon and its uncompromising support for Lebanon's territorial integrity and sovereignty. France continues to declare that its ultimate intention is to bring about the dismantling of the militias in Lebanon according to UN Resolutions 1559 and 1701. However, it stands by its refusal to declare Hizballah a terrorist organization, claiming it constitutes an integral part of political life in Lebanon. This policy was adopted by the EU as well.

Sarkozy's France made clear its intent to use its diplomatic influence in order to reach a national agreement between the opposing factions in Lebanon and avoid the eruption of a new civil war. Against the backdrop of political paralysis, French inability to impose a compromise threatens to undermine French prestige and influence in the region. Moreover, the failure to reach a solution entrains a political confrontation with Syria and Iran due to their meddling in Lebanese internal affairs.

### **Iran**

Apart from the Lebanese context, Sarkozy leads a hard line against Iran's nuclear intentions, which he considers as a major threat to the world's security. Consequently, France advocates a third sanctions resolution at the UN Security Council and also conducts intensive efforts to promote unilateral European sanctions. Evidently, Sarkozy's position against Iran is more hard-line than that of his predecessor and is followed by tightened cooperation with the US on this issue. However, France has encountered serious difficulties in convincing European countries, notably Germany and Italy, to support unilateral sanctions against Iran.

### **Mediterranean Union**

As part of his Middle East vision, Sarkozy proposed the creation of a Mediterranean Union (MU), which illustrates Sarkozy's perception of the interdependence of the EU and the Middle East. The MU is a proposed community of countries bordering the

Mediterranean Sea, planned to be established in 2008, and to deal with issues such as counter-terrorism, immigration, energy, trade, water and sustainable development. Upon launching this ambitious initiative, Sarkozy declared enthusiastically: "What was done for Europe 60 years ago, we will do today for a Mediterranean Union."

The idea of the MU, at its present blurry stage, already encounters criticism and skepticism. It was seen as a French endeavor to bypass the existing 12-year Barcelona process and promote France's own influence in the EU at the expense of other states such as Germany. Severe criticism equally emanates from Turkey, which perceives the MU as a means of rejecting Turkey's accession to the EU. Moreover, skepticism concerning the prospects of implementing the MU is expressed as a result of the undemocratic, economically underdeveloped character of some of the Mediterranean countries.

Yet, among the pessimistic prognostics some optimistic observations and prospects might be discerned: First, Israel might benefit from the general perception of viewing the Middle East's problems as a whole and not through the sole prism of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In addition, it might be feasible to accomplish modest specific projects that would enable the long term creation of regional cooperation in the Middle East. It should be stressed that Sarkozy indeed declares his determination to fight against radical Muslim terror organizations that wish to prevent Western influence, though he concurrently expresses his wish, as his predecessors, to avoid a clash between the Islam and the West.

## **Conclusion**

Sarkozy's vision for France, the EU and the ME is meeting enormous challenges and obstacles. Indeed, Sarkozy's worldwide vision, his energetic activism as well as French diplomatic expertise are an important asset in the making of a strong EU and might lead to positive developments in the ME for the long term. Nevertheless, vision and activism must be balanced with a practical, realistic, and cautious approach since there are no instant magic formulas for solving ME problems.

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