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France and the Mediterranean

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Introduction: France and the Mediterranean in 2011

On 27 February 2011 President Nicolas Sarkozy reshuffled the French cabinet. Justifying his ministerial choices in a seven-minute televised address, Sarkozy made the link between domestic politics and the ‘immense upheaval’ on the ‘other side of the Mediterranean’ explicit from the outset:

Arab peoples are taking their destiny in hand, overthrowing regimes which, having been agents of emancipation during the era of decolonization, had become instruments of servitude. Since the end of colonization, all Western states and successive French governments have maintained economic, diplomatic and political relations with these regimes, despite their authoritarian character, because in the eyes of all they seemed to be ramparts against religious extremism, fundamentalism and terrorism.¹

This *mea culpa* dispensed with, paralleling Sarkozy’s policy errors with those of his presidential predecessors and conveniently submerging French strategic myopia in shared Western responsibility, Sarkozy hailed a new era in France’s relations with North Africa:

This change is historic. We must not be afraid. It carries extraordinary hope because it has been accomplished in the name of our most precious values, human rights and democracy. For the first time in history, these can triumph on both sides of the Mediterranean.

1 ‘Allocution radiotélévisée du Président sur la situation internationale’, 27 February 2011, <http://www.elysee.fr/president/les-actualites/discours/2011/allocution-radiotelevisee-du-president-sur-la-10756.html?search=allocution&xtmc=allocution&xc=7> (accessed 1 October 2011).

If the mistakes of the past were collective, Sarkozy argued that France's historical and geographical ties with the region and unique civilizational message positions the *Hexagone* – and by inference Sarkozy – as a major player in a more radiant Mediterranean future. This special role is nevertheless to be realized not through bilateral relations but through multilateral instruments. In his reshuffle address, Sarkozy referred to a 'recasting' of the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM), the much maligned French – and now European Union – initiative, which began life with the recently deposed Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak as joint president and the now beleaguered Syrian president Bashar al-Assad as special guest at both the July 2008 launch meeting and Paris's Bastille Day celebrations. Sarkozy also suggested in his speech recourse to the European Council for a collective response to stem the inevitable migratory flows resulting from the Arab Spring.

Despite Sarkozy's claims of historic change and a new era, there is little that lends itself better to analyses of continuity than French politicians – of all parties – claiming a new start. Nowhere is this perhaps more true than in the overlapping spheres of Franco-African, Franco-Mediterranean and Franco-Arab relations. Sarkozy's 2011 reshuffle speech encapsulates entrenched themes in French policymakers' – admittedly often hazy – conceptualizations of 'the Mediterranean': it is both a proximate space in which ambitious foreign policy can flourish and the worryingly close location of an invading 'other' which needs to be contained and controlled. Both these fantasies are of domestic importance, with the potential to garner electoral support for 'statesman-like' politicians and generate interminable media and political debate on immigration and national identity. The ministerial changes of 27 February and subsequent events – notably the Franco-British-led military involvement in Libya and Franco-Italian challenges to the Schengen agreement – have fuelled this French Mediterranean imaginary.

In the reshuffle, the foreign, defence and interior ministries changed hands – clearly demonstrating what Sarkozy believes to be the strategically important areas for both France in the world and Sarkozy in the 2012 elections. Notably, out went foreign minister Michèle Alliot-Marie, embroiled in scandal over her use of a private jet belonging to an ally of the deposed

Tunisian president Zine El Abidine Ben Ali whilst on holiday, and under fire for her offer to the Tunisian and Algerian regimes of French 'savoir faire' in maintaining law and order.² In came Alain Juppé, judged a 'safe pair of hands' and notably a panacea for increasingly vocal criticisms, not least amongst diplomats and Quai d'Orsay civil servants, of the Elysée's ad-hoc and haphazard foreign policy making under Sarkozy.³ The controversial Ministry for Immigration, Integration, National Identity and Codevelopment, created by Sarkozy in 2007, was disbanded and immigration reattached to the Ministry for the Interior, under the president's close adviser Claude Guéant, on the right of the right-wing Union pour un Mouvement Populaire (UMP). Despite the death of the ministry, Sarkozy's flirtation with extreme-right discourse has thus continued, with Guéant declaring that 'uncontrolled immigration' has led to 'the French' sometimes not feeling 'at home' and referring to the French intervention in Libya as a 'crusade'.⁴

On the eve of the extraordinary European Council meeting on the Libyan situation on 11 March 2011, and with the help of public intellectual and media celebrity Bernard-Henri Lévy, Sarkozy scrambled to make France the first state to officially recognize the National Transitional Council of the anti-Gaddafi opposition. The move – symptomatic of the highly media-tized, voluntarist style of Sarkozy's 'hyper-presidency' – was apparently without the approval or knowledge of Juppé, at the time in Brussels.⁵ Both France and Britain initially attracted domestic plaudits for their military

2 E. Martin, 'Faut-il s'étonner du silence français?', *Un monde libre* (14 January 2011).

3 Marly group, 'La voix de la France a disparu dans le monde', *Le Monde* (22 February 2011). In 2010, two former foreign ministers, including Juppé, wrote an opinion piece for *Le Monde* in which they criticized the impact of budget cuts on the functioning of French diplomacy. A. Juppé and H. Védrine 'Cessez d'affaiblir le Quai d'Orsay!', *Le Monde* (7 July 2010).

4 'Immigration: Guéant suscite la polémique', *Europe 1*, 17 March 2011, <http://www.europe1.fr/Politique/Immigration-Gueant-suscite-la-polemique-458409/> (accessed 1 October 2011); 'Le Talk: Carl Meeus reçoit Claude Guéant', 21 March 2011 <http://www.lefigaro.fr/le-talk/2011/03/21/01021-20110321ARTFIG00452-claude-gueant-invite-du-talk.php> (accessed 1 October 2011).

5 A. Cabana, 'Quand Juppé menace Sarkozy', *Le Point* (17 March 2011).

intervention in Libya on 19 March 2011 against the forces of Muammar Gaddafi, the long-time international pariah whom both countries had so recently rehabilitated. Ostensibly installing a no-fly zone and protecting civilians under UN resolution 1973, the novelty of this 'humanitarian' mission with no clear exit strategy quickly began to wear off.⁶ Germany was sceptical from the outset. Russia was highly critical of French admissions in late June of arming anti-Gaddafi forces, describing it as a 'serious violation' of UN resolution 1970.⁷ Sarkozy also – unsuccessfully – sought to resist NATO taking over the military command of the no-fly zone, despite the president's instrumental role in orchestrating France's reintegration into NATO's military command in 2009.⁸ On the international scene, Sarkozy is clearly seeking to regain the initiative as a credible and decisive player, legitimizing and rendering financially viable unilateral policy through multilateral instruments whilst simultaneously foregrounding France's precursory contribution in defining international action. This task is rendered all the more difficult by a plethora of other actors also seeking to give the appearance of redefining their foreign policy, including the United States, as demonstrated by Barack Obama in his 19 May speech on the Middle East and the EU, which on 29 June created the post of EU Special Representative for the Southern Mediterranean Region. Spanish diplomat Bernardino

- 6 The France Inter radio station press review on 18 March 2011 refers to plaudits in the *Daily Mail* (UK), *La Stampa* (Italy), the *Times of Malta* and *Le Figaro* (France) amongst others, <http://www.franceinter.fr/chro/larevuedepresse/102614> (accessed 1 October 2011). A survey of 1,006 French people aged over eighteen between 24 and 26 May 2011 showed that 55 per cent were in favour of military intervention in Libya, down from 66 per cent at the start of the intervention three months previously. Ifop for *Dimanche Ouest France*, 'L'approbation de l'intervention militaire en Libye', 26 May 2011, http://www.ifop.com/media/poll/1513-1-study_file.pdf (accessed 1 October 2011).
- 7 'Livraisons d'armes aux rebelles libyens: accords et désaccords', *L'Express* (1 July 2011).
- 8 K. Willsher, 'Sarkozy Opposes NATO Taking Control of Libya Operation', *The Guardian* (22 March 2011).

Leon was promptly selected to fill the post.⁹ The choice of a Spaniard for this role merits reflection. The freshly appointed secretary general of the UfM, Moroccan diplomat Youssef Amrani, officially welcomed the development; Algerian newspaper *Liberté* interpreted it as another obstacle to French attempts to shape policy in the region.¹⁰

As France rushed to bid adieu to selected North African *anciens régimes*, the border controls which Ben Ali and Gaddafi enforced for the EU collapsed. The Mediterranean Sea started to fill with ever-increasing numbers of migrants, with thousands arriving on the small Italian island of Lampedusa. A year away from 2012, the toxic tandem of immigration and crime, which dominated the 2002, and to a lesser extent 2007, presidential elections, was once again pushed to the fore. Seeking to capitalize on favourable poll showings and having already argued that France should pass bilateral agreements with Spain and Italy in order to ‘push back into international waters migrants who want to enter Europe,’ Front National leader and MEP Marine Le Pen visited Lampedusa on 14 March. Accompanied by Mario Borghesio, an Italian MP and member of the right-wing anti-immigrant Lega Nord, Le Pen attacked what she described as the European failure to deal with the problem.¹¹ As the Italian authorities on the mainland issued migrants with

9 Obama’s Middle East speech, 19 May 2011. Available at: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/8083250.stm> (accessed 1 October 2011); ‘Catherine Ashton Proposes Bernardino Leon as New EU Special Representative for the Southern Mediterranean Region’ (29 June 2011), http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_data/docs/pressdata/EN/foraff/123285.pdf (accessed 1 October 2011).

10 Secretariat of the Union for the Mediterranean, ‘Secretary General Amb. Amrani: “The Secretariat stands ready to work in close co-operation ...”’ (8 July 2011), <http://www.ufmsecretariat.org/en/secretary-general-amb-amrani-the-secretariat-stands-ready-to-work-in-close-cooperation-with-both-the-eu-special-representative-and-the-task-force-to-promote-joint-regional-projects/> (accessed 1 October 2011); D. Bouatta, ‘Union pour la Méditerranée: UE saborde les efforts du président français,’ *Liberté* (11 July 2011).

11 ‘Marine Le Pen, président du Front National, “On peut repousser humainement des bateaux dans les eaux internationales”,’ *RTL* (1 March 2011), <http://www.rtl.fr/emission/l-invite-de-rtl/ecouter/marine-le-pen-presidente-du-front-national-on-peut-repousser-humainement-des-bateaux-dans-les-eaux-internationales-7664513013>