

Building Bridges Across The Mediterranean

by Gail G. Billington

Five Muslim and five European nations, representing a combined population of 238 million people, held a first-of-its-kind summit in Tunisia in the first week of December 2003, to map out a strategy for overcoming differences in political and economic areas with the intent of turning the Mediterranean into “a sea of peace.” The summit, hosted by Tunisian President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, may be the first of its kind, but it has been in the making for over 20 years.

Summit participants included Portugal, Spain, France, Italy, and the island nation of Malta from the European Union (EU); and Libya, Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco, and Mauritania from the North African Arab *Maghreb* Union.

The “5+5” configuration was first envisioned during a foreign ministers’ meeting of the ten nations in Rome nearly 15 years ago. That Oct. 10, 1990 meeting issued what has become known as the Rome Constitutive Declaration; and the “5+5” have continued to meet annually ever since to deal with three areas: political and security issues; social and cultural issues; and economics, the most advanced of the three.

In 1995, the grouping was augmented to 27 members at the summit held in Spain, in what has become known as the Barcelona Process—or, more generally, the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership. This broadening was to include Egypt, Israel, Jordan, the Palestinian Authority, Lebanon, Syria, Turkey, and Cyprus; Libya’s status is limited to “observer,” pending resolution of issues related to its role in the downing of Pan Am 103 over Lockerbie, Scotland.

With the Pan Am 103 case settled, and the Libyan agreement to dismantle their primitive nuclear program, the ending of Libya’s isolation is giving new life to the development of the Mediterranean region through the “5+5.” On New Year’s Eve, Libya’s head of state Col. Muammar Qaddafi called EU President Romano Prodi, who has played a central role in bringing Libya back into cooperation with the world community. According to europa.eu.int, Qaddafi “underlined the importance over the years to be able to count on the permanent dialogue offered by President Prodi, proving this dialogue-strategy to be the only winning one. (This contrasts to Bush Administration claims that Libya only opened up to the West out of fear, after the U.S. invasion of Iraq.)

Prodi emphasized to Qaddafi that “concrete projects could be considered quickly for promoting improvements of the regional infrastructure networks, water supplies, education,

and culture. He invited Qaddafi to Brussels to “seal this process officially as early as possible.”

The Barcelona Declaration of 1995 spelled out the intentions of the member states as follows: 1) Establish a common Euro-Mediterranean area of peace and stability based on fundamental principles including respect for human rights and democracy; 2) Create an area of shared prosperity through the progressive establishment of a free trade area between the EU and its partners, and among the Mediterranean partners themselves, accompanied by substantial EU financial support for economic transition in the partners and for the social and economic consequences of this reform process; and 3) Develop human resources, promote understanding between cultures, and rapprochement of the peoples in the Euro-Mediterranean region; develop free and flourishing civil societies.

Tunisia Seizes Initiative

Host country Tunisia was the first *Maghreb* state to seek a partnership by signing an Association Agreement with the European Union (AAEU) eight years ago; and although it represents only about 4% of the region’s population, Tunisia has received 14% of the financial support allocated to countries in the region.

The “5+5” consists of 166 million people on the European side and 72 million in the five *Maghreb* nations. But per capita gross domestic product varies from \$25,000 in some European member states, to \$530 in the desert republic of Mauritania. The North African members of the group regard the “Tunis Charter” emerging from the December 2003 summit as a step toward closer ties with the EU, and would like the EU to further open its markets both to produce and immigrants.

Europe’s response has been to urge greater cooperation among the Maghreb members. As one delegate said, “Europe will not invest more in an area divided by quarrels.” However, one initiative that emerged from the talks was President Ben Ali’s proposal for the creation of a European-Mediterranean bank, to enhance economic links and commercial development.

Nor, in this regard, were security concerns and terrorism left out of the mix. Tunisia’s representatives, who have submitted proposals for consideration under the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership, have stressed the importance of adopting a comprehensive and multifaceted approach, repeatedly stressing the need not only to discuss “security” *per se*, but also to tackle root causes, including poverty and marginalization of populations.

In the end, the summit in Tunis was hailed as “historic” by French President Jacques Chirac; while Italian President Silvio Berlusconi described it as opening the door to “permanent dialogue between Europe and Islam.” President Ben Ali, who guided the proceedings, hailed the results as the beginning of a new process of cooperation and solidarity.