

Gerrit F. Schlomach: Applying Germany's Experience in the Middle Eastern/Mediterranean Region in European Foreign and Security Policy

When France's president, Mr Sarkozy, presented his country's initiative to form a Mediterranean union, Germany's chancellor, Mrs Merkel, was noncommittal. Her critical reserve towards the French idea was probably motivated by both intra-European reasons and her personal experience in dealing with the Middle Eastern and Mediterranean region. Diverse trips to these areas have given Mrs Merkel a feeling for the conditions and problems of our southern neighbours. She knows about the value of small steps that create trust and about the importance of a realistic and constructive policy that harmonises regional needs and international interests. The 'big throw' of a Mediterranean union, as suggested by Mr Sarkozy, is not her cup of tea.

If we take a look at the genesis of the union concept, we can see that France's president has pursued potentially incongruent goals at different times. While in the election campaign he seemed anxious to woo right-wing voters with his No to Turkey's accession to the EU, he may have endeavoured to appeal to north African voters with a migration background later on. Besides, Paris could not neglect its vital interests in the region, and it was important for it to develop new markets for its nuclear and arms industries.

Further inconsistencies emerged when the question of who was to participate in this union was addressed. Some people said that it should be supported by the six Mediterranean EU littoral states together with Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria, and Turkey, with the question of whether to integrate the entire EU left unanswered. Others suggested that it should include all Mediterranean and Balkan countries. According to yet another version, all EU member states as well as all countries interested in the Mediterranean region, including the Gulf States, were to be involved. However, the question of what the final composition of the envisaged union will look like and how to tie in the project with the Barcelona process and/or the new European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) still remains open.

The fact that Sarkozy had to campaign to obtain consent for his project showed its lack of maturity. France's endeavours to convince the countries in the south Mediterranean region and in Europe were marred by clumsy political communication. Algeria, Morocco, and Egypt responded with criticism or open scepticism. As the negative attitude of France's president towards the current negotiations about the country's accession to the EU is widely known in Turkey, criticism there was particularly sharp, especially because France's initiative was seen as an attempt to make a loose connection with the EU – in the form of a privileged partnership – attractive to Turkey so as to keep it from obtaining full EU membership. And even among the European countries, the suggestion from Paris met with little success. Madrid and Rome did indicate cautious support but the trilateral 'Appel de Rome' did not have the desired catalytic effect within the Community. It seems that even the basic strategy of Mr Sarkozy's Middle Eastern and Mediterranean policy differs from Mrs Merkel's political approach. A vaguely unilateral idea is confronted by a policy of small steps inside and outside Europe, which relies on multilateralism to build confidence.

When the grand coalition assumed office in Berlin, Germany's Middle Eastern and Mediterranean policy gained in importance, witness the increase in Germany's diplomatic and security-policy presence in the region. Chancellor Merkel came to know the region's political complexity on her first trip to Israel and the Palestinian Territories early in 2006. As chancellor and president of the EU Council, she succeeded in giving a fresh impetus to the relations between the Federal Republic and Europe on the one hand and the Middle Eastern and Mediterranean region on the other, always concentrating on tackling regional challenges and searching for peaceful solutions.

What is more, the timing and destination of Mrs Merkel's trips also were advantageous – on the eve of the decisive talks between the rival Palestinian parties, she went to Mecca after consulting with Israel's prime minister, Mr Olmert, in Berlin late in 2006; early in 2007, she went to Washington to meet US president Bush; and she met Jordan's King Abdullah in Berlin. In Riyadh and Mecca, Mrs Merkel met strategic partners who shared Germany's anxiousness to promote security and stability in the region. Furthermore, she showed the flag in Lebanon in the matter of setting up an international court of justice to investigate the murder of prime minister Rafiq Hariri.

Mrs Merkel's endeavours to establish peace between the Palestinian parties and to settle the conflict between Israel and Palestine were fully appreciated. On her third trip to the Middle East, Mrs Merkel welcomed the road map for peace endorsed by the Arab League in Beirut in 2002, which had been achieved not least because Syria was included. At the same time, chancellor Merkel warned against forgetting about the recognition of Israel. Germany's foreign minister, Mr Steinmeier, and Mrs Merkel herself highlighted the special nature of German-Israeli relations, and Mrs Merkel said that interceding for Israel's security was 'part of Germany's *raison d'état*'.

Next to engagement in favour of Israel, doing justice to Arab and Palestinian interests also plays an import role in German politics. Thus, Mrs Merkel visited Palestine's president, Mr Abbas, in Ramallah on her trip to Israel early in 2006. Prior to the celebrations of the 60th anniversary of the foundation of Israel, she invited Israeli and Palestinian representatives to come to a security conference scheduled for the summer of 2008 in Berlin.

Furthermore, Germany's Middle East policy focuses on establishing peace in Lebanon. To achieve this goal, Mrs Merkel visited Beirut on her third trip to the Middle East. When the German Navy took over the leadership of the maritime UNIFIL-II task force at the end of 2006, this was the end of a stony political path. Israel had asked Germany for military support, Syria had given its consent, and even Beirut had asked Germany to participate.

Finally, the Federal Republic is interested in reintegrating Syria into the community of responsible states. Mrs Merkel repeatedly called upon Syria to support the peace process constructively, to enter into diplomatic relations with Lebanon, to fix the borders, and to suppress cross-border arms smuggling.

The federal government led by Mrs Merkel has gathered valuable experience in dealing with the complex problems in the Middle East, and it has developed its own strategy. It should increasingly apply its experience to Europe's foreign and security policy in the Middle Eastern and Mediterranean region. Unilateral actions will not lead to success, while multilateral harmonisation has proved effective. Creating trust, listening, developing empathy, and using opportunities by taking small steps – these are the components of a policy with which the German side successfully met the complex situation in the Middle East. It would be sensible to continue Mrs Merkel's constructive and critical path to establish the French idea within a harmonised multilateral framework. After all, it must be in everybody's interest to avoid more confusion and new rifts not only between Europe and the Middle Eastern and Mediterranean region but also within the union itself and in its relations with its transatlantic partners.