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Union of the Mediterranean launched

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Leaders emphasise peace-building, and seek to smooth over differences over the new Union

PARIS - Over 40 heads of state gathered this weekend in Paris to launch a new club of states, the Union for the Mediterranean, that, in the words of the summit's host, French President Nicolas Sarkozy, should enable countries in the region "to learn how to love each other... instead of continuing to hate and wage war."

The first summit of the Union, which brings together all 27 EU states and 16 states and government from the southern and eastern rim of the sea, closed on the same themes of war and peace, condemning "terrorism in all its forms" and stating the "objectives of achieving peace, stability and security" in the region.

Sarkozy and his French colleagues stressed the significance of the moment, describing the Union as an extraordinary gamble and a great act of courage. Sarkozy particularly emphasised that "it is an extraordinary concept to imagine the Arab states represented at the highest level, and sitting in the same room as the Israeli prime minister."

And it was the Israeli prime minister, Ehud Olmert, who provided Sarkozy with reason to believe, as the French president had said, that the Union's members can "build peace in the Mediterranean together". Olmert said, after a meeting with the leader of the Palestinian authority, Mahmoud Abbas, that "we are closer than ever to a possible (peace) agreement today" with the Palestinians. Olmert, who is currently under investigation by the Israeli police, gave few details.

Olmert also said he hoped for direct contacts "soon" with Syria. Though Olmert and Syrian President Bashar al-Assad sat around the same table, there were no contacts between the two and Assad left before Olmert gave his speech. Syria's foreign minister, Walid al-Muallem, also left the room when his Israeli counterpart, Tzipi Livni, got up to speak.

The summit itself was boycotted by Libya's leader, Muammar Gaddafi. And, while all states sent a president or prime minister to attend, only senior representatives were sent by Belgium, Morocco and Jordan.

Sarkozy also needed to placate Turkey, which he sought to do by holding a separate bilateral meeting with Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. Turkey had initially displayed reluctance about joining a regional alliance for fear that it was intended as an

alternative to the full EU membership that Turkey seeks.

The Barcelona Process cont.

The unprecedented gathering of heads of state marks a new stage in the EU's 13-year-old effort to establish deeper, formal ties with countries on the sea's southern border, a point evident in its formal title – Barcelona Process: Union for the Mediterranean – and its reference to the summit in Barcelona in 1995 that marked the first significant outreach to the southern Mediterranean region.

The transformation of the Barcelona process into a formal club has also been the subject of significant political clashes within the EU, particularly between France and Germany, which had objected to France's initial proposal that the Union exclude non-Mediterranean EU states while requiring them to subsidise its operations and projects.

Both sides were emollient in their words, with Sarkozy referring to Germany's Chancellor Angela Merkel as a "decisive partner and friend," while Merkel said the meeting "was a very, very good start for a new phase in the cooperation."

The closing declaration also listed six firm commitments by the members of the Union: a reduction in pollution of the Mediterranean Sea, including coastal and protected marine areas; development of both coastal motorways and land highways; a civil protection plan against natural disasters; a Mediterranean solar plan to provide well-needed alternative sources of energy; a Euro-Mediterranean university to encourage exchange programs, higher education and research; and further Mediterranean business development initiatives.

The Union's co-presidency

The first co-heads of the Union, Sarkozy and Egypt's President Hosni Mubarak, emphasised that success would hinge on more than specific projects. The missing element in the picture, Sarkozy said, was not funding but rather trust, as a great deal of money was already involved in the Barcelona Process. Mubarak, for his part, said security was key to economic development. Stability, he said, will "attract more investor confidence."

The dual presidency will be held jointly for rotating terms by one country within the European Union and one country on the Mediterranean shore; summits will be organized every two years while foreign ministers will meet every year.

While a secretariat will be created to supervise the projects, its composition, size and location are also undetermined and not likely to be decided on before November.

However, the fact that all nations around the table were able to agree on a joint declaration as well as the six concrete projects was itself a great success, said Sarkozy.

"The way forward is open, and no one can take away from it."