

Mediterranean nations to fight terror, boost trade

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TUNIS, Tunisia -- Muslim and Catholic states from both sides of the western Mediterranean intend to join forces to combat terrorism, secure peace in the region and increase trade.

A summit meeting of the heads of state and government of 10 European and North African countries closed here yesterday with growing concern about international terrorism, restrictions on immigration to Europe and growing racism in some European countries.

The 10, know as "5 plus 5," include Portugal, Spain, France, Italy and Malta in the north and Libya, Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco and Mauritania in the south. They pledged to "jointly confront" the challenges and opportunities of a new era and coordinate various activities against terrorism and illegal immigration toward Europe.

The Tunis meeting was regarded as a major platform to improve relations between Islam and Christianity, strained by international terrorism, the blocked peace efforts in the Middle East and the precarious situation in Iraq.

Before the meeting convened, Tunisian Foreign Minister Habib Ben Yahia called for "global strategy" and more intense international cooperation in the fight against terrorism.

"We need more coordination among the intelligence communities," he said in an interview. "There is no line of demarcation between terrorism, the drug traffic and organized crime."

The five Arab states from the Union of Arab Maghreb (UMA) -- an economic and social alliance established in February 1989 with the five southern Mediterranean states as its members -- also sought a privileged relationship with their richer partners along the northern coast of the Mediterranean. Except for Libya, a former Italian colony, the others once were colonies of France, whose colonial period in North Africa ended with Algeria's independence in 1962.

Mauritania, a desert country south of Morocco's Atlantic coast, is considered "Mediterranean" mainly because of its membership in the Maghreb Union.

Some Maghreb countries are concerned by the expansion next May of the European Union to 25 from 15 members, fearing their traditional Mediterranean partners could pay more attention to the new members in Central and Eastern Europe than to their former African colonies.

At a preliminary meeting a month ago that set the stage for the summit, various officials complained that the gap between rich and poor countries was growing and that the Arab world was excluded from major international decision-making.

Tunisian President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali called for a policy of "hands across the sea" that would alleviate the region's different standards of living, "preserve the social and human equilibrium, and peace and security in the two regional groupings." Mr. Ben Ali also proposed an international charter that would govern migration between North Africa and Europe, which has suffered because of European concern about terrorism.

At various working sessions before the summit, foreign ministers had adopted resolutions urging reinforcement of the dialogue between Europe and the Maghreb because of its "strategic importance for peace, stability and the region's development."

At the meeting, the officials supported Mr. Ben Ali's proposal for the creation of a Euro-Mediterranean bank to enhance the area's economic links and commercial development.