

## Muslim, EU states affirm solidarity

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TUNIS, Tunisia -- Ten Muslim and European countries with a combined population of 238 million have implemented an ambitious plan to build an economic, political and cultural bridge across the Mediterranean Sea.

They described it as a "challenge and opportunity" to overcome differing levels of development and political differences and turn the Mediterranean into "a sea of peace."

At least for the time being, difficulties have been put aside amid euphoric statements that followed last week's summit and adoption of a "Tunis Declaration," which is intended to guide of the destiny of the western Mediterranean.

French President Jacques Chirac hailed the agreement as "historic." Italian President Silvio Berlusconi described it as paving the way to a "permanent dialogue between Europe and Islam."

The summit participants included five European countries -- Portugal, Spain, France, Italy and the island of Malta -- and five Muslim states on the southern side of the sea -- Libya, Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco and Mauritania.

Tunisian President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, host of the meeting, described the charter as the "beginning of a new process of cooperation and solidarity" in what was once the center of the Roman Empire.

In the summit's lengthy final communique, the signatories agreed to jointly struggle against international terrorism, improve trade relations and halt illegal immigration toward Europe.

Mr. Chirac, one of the most enthusiastic participants, said the Tunis summit was an "unquestionable success, remarkably well organized and conducted" which will accelerate political dialogue between Europe and the Maghreb, the Arabic name for northwestern Africa.

Foreign ministers of what has become known as the "5 Plus 5" -- a new logo in the international vocabulary -- have been assigned the task of translating the ambitious plans into acts, backed by joint working sessions and annual summit meetings.

To diplomats, the Tunis Declaration showed that dialogue between two different worlds was possible and their differences could be bridged. More practical links are likely to be more difficult.

The plans include cooperation among the interior ministers of the 5 Plus 5 to "fight terrorism in all its forms," hold annual business forums and create a Euro-Mediterranean bank.

The new grouping consists of 166 million people on the European side and 72 million in the five-nation Maghreb. Per-capita gross domestic product varies from \$25,000 in some European members to \$530 in the desert republic of Mauritania.

The partners along North Africa's Mediterranean coast regard the Tunis charter as a step toward closer relations with the European Union. They would like Europe -- influenced by the five Tunis Charter members -- to further open its markets to both produce and immigrants.

The Europeans, in turn, are urging their Muslim partners to intensify cooperation among themselves. "Europe will not invest more in an area divided by quarrels," one delegate said.