

The Mediterranean, the Middle East and the Gulf Region – A Difficult Neighbourhood for Europe

Christian-Peter Hanelt and Almut Möller

Experts for the Middle East from Bertelsmann Stiftung and Center for Applied Policy Research (CAP)

(Contribution to the UNIFIL-Plus Task Force, June 2007)

In recent years, the situation in the direct neighbourhood of the European Union has come to a head: The disparities in living standards between Europe and its neighbours in the Middle East, but also within that region continue to grow. In some of these countries a process of economic opening and transformation is obvious (although speeds differ from oil producing countries on the one hand to countries without natural resources on the other). Processes of democratisation, however, are stalled. The demand for more participation on all levels remains largely unheard. Wars and state failure like in Iraq, in Palestine as well as in Lebanon contribute to a further destabilisation of the Middle East. Militias and terrorist groups operate increasingly unimpeded and cross-national. Religious conflicts between Sunnites and Shiites erupt with new intensity. The conflict on Iran's nuclear programme bears the risk of a new armament's race. Unemployment, poverty, territorial conflicts and state failure force many to leave their country. The conflicts in the Middle East increasingly impact migrants and exile communities of Muslims in Europe. A walling-off in the sense of a fortress Europe will not be possible.

The Israeli-Arab conflict, the future of the statehood of Lebanon, the imminent disintegration of Iraq, the conflict on Iran's nuclear programme as well as the burden of social, economic and political transformation: these different levels of conflict are not only interwoven, they also have regional, if not international impact. With the start of negotiations for an accession of Turkey to the European Union the hot spot Middle East has come closer to the EU. The desperate situation in parts of Iraq increasingly weakens the US as a security guarantor for the region.

A look at this landscape of conflicts extending from the south of Europe via Turkey, Israel, the Arab countries in Maghreb and Mashreq up to Iran indicates the priority of stability and security for the EU-27. Therefore, the EU fields various instruments in order to achieve a social and economic transformation of the countries in the region. Reducing and directing migration to Europe constitutes an additional European interest. At the same time, because of the vulnerability of its own societies the EU needs a dialogue with Islam. Europe is interested in a resolution of the pivotal conflict in the Middle East: the Israeli-Palestinian conflict or the Israeli-Arab conflict constituting an enormous potential of escalation for the whole region. As a result of its history Europe acknowledges its special responsibility for the existence of the state of Israel in the region. At the same time the Europeans accept the rights of the Palestinians to have their own state. In the competition of global markets the Europeans pursue the same economic interests in the region. New economic relations are being established, e.g. within the framework of a free trade agreement with the states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). More and more Europe faces a competition on energy security and needs safe ways of transport for oil and gas imports from the region.

This constellation of interests sways the EU to a growing engagement in Northern Africa, in the Middle East and in the Gulf region. Europe has a broad range of instruments of cooperation, of conflict management and of conflict resolution: Mediterranean and neighbourhood policy, joint diplomatic engagement in the Middle East Quartet, economic cooperation, technology transfer and development assistance, education initiatives and promotion of civil society. Some examples of direct engagement:

- German and European blue helmets secure the Israeli-Lebanese ceasefire and the sovereignty of Lebanon.
- European customs officers support the control of the movement of goods between Gaza and Egypt at the Rafah border crossing.
- Europeans train Iraqi policemen and generals in the United Arab Emirates.
- European diplomats play a pivotal role in the mediation of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (Middle East Quartet) and in the resolution of the nuclear conflict with Iran (EU3 plus 3: France, Germany, Great Britain with Solana plus China, Russia, US).
- European experts monitor elections.
- European development workers are active in the region and the European Union is the most important donor of development assistance for the Palestinians.
- Within the framework of the “Euro-Mediterranean Partnership” (EUROMED) the EU tries to set up a – together with Israel, Turkey and the Arab countries– a zone of peace and prosperity as well as cultural dialogue around the Mediterranean. Since 2004, this effort is flanked by the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) intended to set up a zone of peaceful and good neighbourly relations with all neighbourhoods of the EU.
- The EU gets involved in order to organise a dialogue for the promotion of security for Iraq and its neighbouring countries and for the reconstruction in Iraq.
- Together with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), the promising mechanism of cooperation in the Arab world, the European Union is setting up a free trade zone as a basis for enhanced trans-regional partnership.
- Second-track initiatives seek answers to complex questions within and for the region by building networks between differing cultures, languages and ethnicities.

In the region Europe is first and foremost a civil power. In recent years, the European Union has extended its engagement also to the sector of security policy. But in view of its deficits in foreign, security and defence policy, the EU is not capable to act as an independent security actor in its neighbourhood, not even with 27 members. A security situation growing more acute and unmanageably more complex within the region together with a loss of authority and capabilities on the part of the US might be a catalyst. With the Constitution Treaty the member-states have further developed the instruments and procedures of the foreign, security and defence policy. An implementation to these reforms, no matter when and under which form this new primary law will enter into force, maybe even outside of the treaties, would be a foreseeable and welcome development.

Beyond the further development of the existing instruments, however, the European Union should take the region also more into focus under the aspect of concept and strategy. The EU still lacks an overall strategy for the three components: Gulf region, Mediterranean and Middle East. However, the strategies that already exist for individual (conflict) regions have to be further developed and integrated.

The Gulf region involving the regional powers Iran, Iraq and Saudi Arabia: Along the lines of the recommendations presented in our discussion paper “Security Situation in the Gulf Region Involving Iran, Iraq and Saudi Arabia as Regional Powers. Policy Recommendations for the European Union and the International Community” we argue for a setting of a date for a withdrawal of the US forces from Iraq. Such a date would put pressure on Iraqi groups and on neighbours to contain the chaotic situation in Iraq and to take responsibility for the security and the future of their (neighbour) country. Regarding Iran we argue that the two-track strategy of the international community (support of the restrictive measures of UNSCR 1747 on the one hand and continuation of efforts for a negotiated solution on the other) should be continued persistently. As main consumers of Iranian oil and gas, Japan, South Korea, China, India and Indonesia as well as the countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council should be included more intensely in the efforts for an international isolation of Iran as pursued by the UN and Germany. Regarding Saudi Arabia we argue that those responsible in Europe should support the regional engagement of the Saudi dynasty.

Also the ongoing negotiations for a free trade zone of the EU with the GCC (with Saudi Arabia as the main political actor) should be finalised as soon as possible.

In the Middle East conflict (Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Israeli-Syrian conflict, Israeli-Lebanese conflict, Israeli-Arab conflict) the instrument of mediation by a third power plays a central role. The Middle East Quartet of European Union, the US, Russia and the UN (formed in 2002), however, could tap more of its potential. If the Quartet was politically in charge not only of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict but of all conflicts in the Middle East, it would send a signal to the region that the Quartet and hence the international community acknowledge that the conflicts in the Middle East are interconnected and that a solution can come only in a package. The political partition of the Palestinian areas into a Gaza strip under the control of Hamas and a West Bank under the control of Fatah and the will of the Quartet and Israel to support Palestinian President Abbas now open a window of opportunity for the creation of a provisional state of "Palestine" on the West Bank.

In a parallel process the Quartet together with the **Arab League** could continue to implement its peace vision with Israel (declarations of the summits of the Arab League in 2002 and 2007). A combination of the Road map of the Quartet and the Peace Plan of the Arab League could become the heart of a path-breaking strategy. More personal presence of the members of the Quartet in the region, such as joint visits of Condoleezza Rice, Javier Solana, Ban Ki-moon, Sergey Lavrov and the new Special Representative Tony Blair together with Secretary General of the Arab League Amr Moussa, could campaign politically for this initiative.

In the next months another initiative could be that Europe supports together with the Middle East Quartet **Israel and Syria** to undertake negotiations for a **peace agreement**. This strategy could be the urgently needed positive signal from the region regarding the recently escalated situation in Palestine and the spreading fatalism. Peace with Syria could also deescalate the situation in Lebanon, release Syria from the coalition with Iran, settle the conflict between Israel and Lebanon and last but not least put a successful end to the mandate of the UN mission to South Lebanon.

The new **Special Representative** of the Middle East Quartet – former British Prime Minister Tony Blair – will add to Europe's weight in the Quartet and strengthen its transatlantic axis. It remains to be seen, however, whether Blair can count on support from the Arab world, especially from Saudi Arabia. Russia too has shown some scepticism vis-à-vis Blair. The procedure of Blair's appointment, which the US administration failed to co-ordinate with the German EU Presidency, displeased the German government. It also remains to be seen, how the division of labour and the teamwork between Blair and Javier Solana, the EU representative in the Middle East Quartet, will function in practice. In order to be able to act successfully, Blair will need a clear mandate and corresponding instruments. A purely economic mandate without political negotiation authority, like his predecessor James Wolfensohn had, will not be sufficient. Therefore, it remains to be seen whether the new representative will succeed in strengthening the Quartet and to define a positive course.

With regard to the **Mediterranean Policy of the EU ("Barcelona Process")** as well as the **European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP)** the European Union should aim not to establish double structures, to set more priorities ("less is better than more") and to enforce the mechanisms for incentives and pressure in the countries involved. In this context the proposal to form a "**Mediterranean Union**" of EU-Mediterranean member-states and the states of the south rim of the Mediterranean in the sense of a differentiated integration seems to be a model that deserves a closer scrutiny.

References:

Discussion paper "Security Situation in the Gulf Region Involving Iran, Iraq and Saudi Arabia as Regional Powers. Policy Recommendations for the European Union and the International Community" (July 2007)

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Contact:

Christian-Peter Hanelt: christian.hanelt@bertelsmann.de

Almut Möller: almut.moeller@lrz.uni-muenchen.de

translated by Gudrun Staedel-Schneider (staedelschneider@gmx.de)