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Making an effort but making little headway: EU Middle East Policy under German Leadership

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During the preparations for and the term of its EU Presidency, the German government found itself confronted with an intensification of the conflict situations and with new constellations in the Middle East. The map of conflicts must be reappraised, especially in light of Iran's regional ambitions and its nuclear program. The list of the interrelated crises, conflicts and wars playing out in the immediate vicinity of the Europeans is long. Instability in Lebanon, with the simultaneous presence of European troops in the south of the country; nearly daily bombings and the ever greater probability of a failed state in Iraq; an Israeli head of government weakened by the Lebanon war; the takeover of the Gaza strip by Hamas in June 2007, and a new quality of the confrontation between Sunnis and Shiites in the region.

A stronger European role

At the same time, a slow transformation of the roles played by the European Union as well as Germany in the Middle East can be observed.¹ Debates about the involvement of the European Union in the region continue to be dominated by critique – with good justification. The effectiveness of EU programs like the Barcelona Process and the European Neighborhood Policy are judged critically, and the experience of the division of the EU over the issue of Iraq are emphasized, along with the deficits in European Foreign, Security and Defense Policy. Yet two recent examples illustrate that the EU is increasing its importance as a security player in the region: The European Union, or at least the EU-3 (France, Great Britain and Germany), with the support of the High Representative for Common Foreign and Security Policy, Javier Solana, is pursuing a clear position and line of negotiation with Iran, the first fruits of which include, despite its failure, the Paris Agreement, signed by Teheran in November 2004. Moreover, on the basis of the UN Security Council's Resolution 1701, the Europeans have become a central pillar of the UNIFIL-PLUS mission in Lebanon. Since February 2007 the commander of UNIFIL has been an Italian, and Germany sent soldiers to the Middle East for the first time in its history.

Middle East among the priorities of the presidency

The Middle East, and especially the Arab-Israeli conflict, was ranking high on the agenda of Germany's EU/G8 presidency – despite a multitude of other major topics like the unsolved issue of the Constitutional Treaty, the G8 summit in Heiligendamm and the tense relationship with Russia. In the official program for its presidency, which was embedded in the eighteen-month program of Germany and the succeeding presidencies of Portugal and Slovenia, the German government formulated the following emphases for Middle East policy²:

- Stabilization of the situation in Lebanon;
- Increased involvement in the Middle East Quartet, in order “to combat the conflict in the Middle East with a comprehensive peaceful solution;”
- Efforts for a peaceful resolution to the conflict surrounding the Iranian atomic program, and
- Support for reconstruction in Iraq.

Added to this was the deepening of economic cooperation with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), an especially important subject for the European Commission, which was supposed to conclude years of negotiations with the GCC about a Free Trade Agreement in the first half of 2007, and once again failed to do so.

Chancellor Merkel on tour

Chancellor Angela Merkel traveled to the U.S. right away in January, to win President George W. Bush's support for reactivating the Middle East Quartet. During her presidency Merkel was also present in the Middle East region. In February 2007 she visited Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Kuwait; in April 2007, Jordan, Israel, the Palestinian territories, and Lebanon. In the first half of 2007 the Middle

East Quartet convened a total of five times on the level of the “principals” (these are the foreign ministers of Russia and the United States, the Secretary General of the UN, and the EU Troika, consisting of the foreign minister of the country holding the EU Presidency, the Commissioner for Foreign Relations and the High Representative). The German presidency also emphasized the need to support the role of Arab states in the peace process on the basis of the rejuvenated Arab Peace Initiative (“Beirut Declaration”) of the Arab League from the year 2002.

The resolution of the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians, or between Israel and its Arab neighbors, is regarded by the majority of experts as the central step toward *détente* in the entire region. This is why the conflict has been at the focus of European Middle East policy for decades as well. In keeping with this tradition, in the context of its EU presidency the German government, too, directed its efforts toward strengthening the Middle East Quartet. In April 2003 the Quartet had submitted a “road map to peace”³ between Israel and the Palestinians, which was recognized by all of the parties at the time, but never implemented. A number of responsible factors can be identified, among them the Quartet’s restricting its focus to the route of negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians. This constriction reduces the prospects for a peace that ultimately can only be secured in a package that also contains a solution to the Israeli-Syrian and the Israeli-Lebanese tracks. It is questionable that the Quartet can continue to act as a successful mediator at all without correcting its agenda. Here Germany’s presidency could have won points by pushing the cause of a holistic approach.

Reanimation of the
Middle East Quartet

But in spring 2006 the European Union had maneuvered itself into a poor negotiating position in any case, when it reacted to the electoral victory of Hamas, which is categorized as a terrorist organization by the EU, the U.S. and Israel, by cutting off all contact to the new government around Ismail Haniyeh. Thus one of the parties to the conflict was denied the capacity to negotiate, and the room for maneuver of the European Union and the Quartet was significantly reduced.

With the agreement to form a national unity government of Fatah and Hamas, negotiated thanks to the mediation of Saudi Arabia in February 2007, for a time there was occasion for cautious optimism. Within the European Union there were considerations to resume contacts, at least with the independent ministers and the Fatah members of the new government. Important ministry posts – like those of the Foreign, Finance and Interior Ministers – deliberately had been occupied with independent, internationally recognized personalities. A reactivation of the road map and the resumption of negotiations appeared to have moved back into the realm of the possible, especially since the moderate Arab neighbors also declared their will to support a new initiative and committed themselves expressly to the Beirut Declaration.

Integrating the moderate
Arab states

One outcome of Germany’s presidency that must be regarded as successful was its role as EU representative in the Quartet, where it insisted on the integration of the Arab neighbors. For the first time the Arab League and the Israeli foreign minister were invited to a meeting of the Council of EU Foreign Ministers to discuss the Arab peace initiative.⁴ Because the weakness of Olmert’s government and the Hamas government’s boycott, the Israeli-Palestinian negotiations track left hardly any room for maneuver. It made sense to concentrate on the Arab neighbors, above all Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Jordan. Unless it is recognized by neighboring Arab countries, no negotiated result has any chance for enduring implementation. At the same time, an

“Israel/Palestine and the (initially moderate) Arab neighbors” format could be a step toward more intraregional cooperation on security issues. To date the region lacks a security architecture of its own, which is increasingly problematic in the face of the constantly emerging new potential for crisis and conflict, and the simultaneous loss of respect for the U.S. due to the intervention in Iraq. For a time there was even discussion about pursuing the Israeli-Syrian track. While a peace with Syria would be extremely difficult to implement politically as long as the U.S. maintains its hard line, it is considered to be relatively easy to negotiate and would have great symbolic impact. Germany’s Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier had visited Damascus in December 2006, just before the beginning of the German presidency, but Chancellor Merkel, out of consideration for her transatlantic partner, proved more reserved on the question of rapprochement with Syria. Even so the High Representative Solana traveled to Damascus in March in order to discuss the situation with President Bashar al-Assad.

The end of the
Palestinian unity government

With the escalation of violence between Fatah and Hamas supporters, Hamas’ takeover of the Gaza Strip, and the end of the Palestinian unity government, all hopes for movement in the peace process were decimated in June 2007. For the European Union the deterioration of the autonomous areas into a West Bank dominated by Fatah and a Gaza Strip controlled by Hamas is a setback for its policy, for in recent years it had argued especially for the need to stabilize the Palestinian institutions. With its recognition of Fatah and President Mahmoud Abbas as the still legitimate representative of the Palestinians, the European Union is now reinforcing the division of the Palestinian territories, for maintaining its boycott against Hamas should amount to an effective barrier against any EU access to Gaza. In this case, again, the EU will pay the consequences for its policy toward Hamas. Considering the new situation in the Palestinian territories, under Portugal’s presidency the European Union must come to a fundamental agreement in the stand to be taken against radical political Islam, to avoid cutting off all routes for communication. For Hamas is no isolated phenomenon; the Hezbollah in Lebanon is no less a potential candidate for boycott, and the U.S. is currently pressing the European Union to classify it as a terrorist organization as well.

Tensions between
the EU and the U.S.

This, too, reveals what many observers regard as a problem with the Quartet format, which is supposed to guarantee the greatest possible inclusion and legitimacy. The U.S. so dominates the Middle East Quartet that the Europeans’ room for maneuver is restricted. The most recent example for this is the appointment of former British Premier Tony Blair as a representative of the Middle East Quartet. He was nominated by the U.S., apparently without consultation with the European Union and against Russia’s will. Berlin, as representative of the EU in the Middle East Quartet, reacted to this unilateral act with irritation, which revealed once more London’s reluctance to coordinate with other European capitals on foreign policy issues. Under these circumstances, and in view of the as yet vague delimitation of his mandate, there are grounds for skepticism that Blair will succeed in setting positive accents. It is also worth asking how long the U.S. government’s involvement in the Middle East Conflict will last. The current priorities of the Bush government lie in Iraq, and strategically speaking, primarily in Iran. But with regard to Iran, too, the position of the Europeans diverges from that of the U.S. The EU is working toward a negotiated solution with Teheran, which the U.S. continues to reject, despite cautious rapprochement in recent weeks. Inversely, the U.S. expects from the European Union an intensified commitment to the stabilization and reconstruction of Iraq. The strengths of the Europeans lie above all in their support for the erection of political

institutions and administrative structures. Yet the Europeans are hesitating, or even planning to pull out – those member states that have troops on the ground – since in view of the chaotic situation in Iraq it is increasingly difficult to rally domestic support for such a presence.⁵

In the regional perspective, the ousting of the Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein led to geopolitical shifts in the Middle East. Iran's position as a regional power was strengthened, so that in January Iran itself outlined its national vision of becoming the Central Asian power, politically, economically and culturally by the year 2025. With its nuclear program, Iran has become a new hub and hinge for the dynamics of the region. This is also leading to changes in the constellations of various levels in the Israeli-Arab conflict, the permutations of which can hardly be imagined. In terms of a new mapping of the Middle East, no new strategic impetus emerged from the German presidency.

Even though it was hardly perceived in the public, the stabilization of the situation in Lebanon constituted a special challenge for the German EU Presidency. Not only are European soldiers making an important contribution to the UN peacekeeping forces in the south of the country, but for the first time in the history of the Federal Republic, around 800 German marines were sent to the Middle East. Since fall 2006 these soldiers have been the largest contingent of the maritime column of the UNIFIL-PLUS mission on the Israeli-Lebanese border, which is supposed to secure the truce between Israel and Lebanon and prevent shipments of weapons to Hezbollah. In terms of both domestic and foreign policy – especially in the relationship to Israel – such a deployment is nothing short of dynamite for a German government.

No political initiative
on Lebanon

The military presence in Lebanon – the original mandate of UNIFIL-PLUS runs out on 31 August 2007 – should have prompted the Europeans to ask “What is next?” in formulating a political initiative. To date, no such initiative has emerged. As if in response, just a few days before the close of the German presidency, the first bombing of UNIFIL forces took place, presumably perpetrated by the radical Islamic Fatah al-Islam, in which six Spanish soldiers were killed. Should such attacks be repeated, extending the UNIFIL mandate in summer 2007 will be a difficult undertaking, especially if the presence of troops is not accompanied by ways to facilitate Lebanon's political stabilization. A key to this could lie in discussions with Syria, which, despite the end of formal occupation, continues to exert considerable influence on the situation in the country. Yet the Europeans' actions will remain extremely limited as long as the U.S. continues to reject the path of negotiations with Damascus.

In setting the foreign policy priorities for its EU presidency in the second half of 2007, Lisbon proved reserved on the subject of Middle East policy. Its focus of interest is directed instead to the African continent and to Brazil. Considering the tense situation in the Middle East, it is easy to understand why. A small country like Portugal might find itself fighting above its weight by trying to take on the current situation in the Middle East. However, it is problematic that this timidity should arise during a phase in which a fundamental agreement is urgently required on a whole number of issues. This is true above all for the intra-Palestinian conflict and the de facto division of the Palestinian territories. The Europeans must find a common position on this, and very soon. The departing German presidency is called upon to continue practicing the “team presidency” even after passing the baton to its successor. It can do this above all by supporting a dialog among the EU member states about how to deal with Hamas and the Gaza Strip, and by fighting to arm the new

Portuguese perspectives

representative of the Middle East Quartet with such powers that Tony Blair actually receives the *political negotiating power* necessary to fulfill his role. A strong Blair could strengthen the European role in the Quartet – a weak one could weaken the EU in the Middle East. This could undermine recent signs of a more active role of the European Union in the region.

Endnotes

1) On this see also Möller, Almut, 2007: "The EU has to become a mature actor in its neighborhood," paper for the online journal *bitterlemons-international*, accessible at <http://www.cap-lmu.de/aktuell/positionen/2007/eu.php>.

2) The German government's program and the eighteen-month program of the Council are available at http://www.eu2007.de/de/The_Council_Presidency/Priorities_Programmes/index.html

3) The text of the road map can be accessed at <http://www.un.org/apps/news/infocusRel.asp?infocusID=70&Body=Palestin&Body1=>.

4) Press Release of the German Government taking stock of its EU Presidency, accessible at http://www.eu2007.de/en/News/Press_Releases/June/0627AABilanz.html.

5) "Recommendations of Action for the European Union", in Hanelt, Christian-Peter/ Almut Möller, 2007: "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", discussion paper, accessible at <http://www.cap-lmu.de/publikationen/2007/golf-sicherheit.php>.

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