

spotlight europe

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A Time to Take Action: Europe's Responsibility in the Middle East

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The European Union has the diplomatic resources, the credibility and the civil power to facilitate conflict resolution. These capabilities should now be utilized in the Middle East. The Middle East conference in Washington in November will provide a window of opportunity for peace-making, and in this context Europe can no longer hide behind the United States.

The Arab-Israeli conflict has been the predominant conflict in the Middle East for decades. Today there are an increasing number of crises, conflicts and wars in the region. Whereas it is true that the U.S. intervention in Iraq put an end to Saddam Hussein's dictatorship, it has led to the destabilization of the country and an outbreak of sectarian violence that threatens to spread throughout the region and has displaced millions of Iraqis. Iran's regional ambitions have increased now that its former rival Iraq has been weakened, and its nuclear ambitions are a cause for concern in Israel, in the Arab countries of the Middle East and the Gulf, and throughout the international community. The situation in Lebanon has become more tense both in domestic and regional terms as a result of the war between Hezbollah and Israel in the summer of 2006. Bearing all this in mind, it is clear that the resolution of the

Arab-Israeli conflict would not only de-escalate the security situation between Israel, the Palestinians and their neighbours, but would also have a positive impact on the region as a whole.

Thus Europe should play a more prominent role. There is an urgent need for a third party committed to the negotiations and, in a medium-term perspective, to the implementation of a peace agreement between Israel and its Arab neighbours. It is doubtful whether the U.S. would be able to assume such a role, or indeed whether it has sufficient resources. Despite plans for a stage-by-stage withdrawal, substantial U.S. resources will be tied down in Iraq for months and years to come. From a strategic point of view the U.S. is even more concerned about what will happen in Iran. At the same time, doubts have been voiced about the stabilization of Iraq, and the

reputation of the U.S. in the region is at a low ebb. With the threat of heightened tension and criticism about its activities in the region, the Bush administration would certainly like to see positive signals emanating from the Middle East. President Bush has demonstrated his commitment to finding a solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict by convening a Middle East conference in Washington in November 2007. In the run-up to the conference the European Union should lend support to its transatlantic partners in order to ensure that it turns out to be a success. Here the EU needs to do two things:

- First, it should try to convince its transatlantic partners to adopt a regional approach to conflict resolution, and to include the Israeli-Lebanese and Israeli-Syrian conflicts.
- Second, the European Union should develop a common approach on how to integrate Islamist movements in general and Hamas in particular, and should try to persuade the U.S. to put this issue on the conference agenda.

The regional approach and the integration of Hamas are of crucial importance for the success of the conference.

Europe's Changing Role

The European Union has for many years supported the peace process between Israel and its Arab neighbours. Until the late 1990s its role was limited and hardly ventured beyond the occasional declaration. However, as European Foreign, Security and Defence Policy began to make some progress in terms of institutionalized structures at the turn of the millennium, the EU's involvement in the Middle East peace process slowly but surely began to gather momentum. Javier Solana, the EU's High Representative for Foreign and Security Policy, has made the Arab-Israeli conflict one of his priorities. The European

Union is an accepted and active member of the Middle East Quartet, which also includes the United Nations, the U.S. and Russia. Furthermore, it is a significant and visible economic actor on the ground. Thus the EU and its member states are the most important donors of financial assistance to the Palestinians. Until the Hamas coup in June 2007, European customs officers seconded to the Palestinian territories helped to supervise the movement of goods passing through the Rafah crossing point between Gaza and Egypt, and stay in the area despite the borders being closed. European Blue Helmets form the largest detachment of the UNIFIL force which was deployed to secure the border between Israel and Lebanon and to monitor the ceasefire after the 2006 war.

“Integration of Hamas is of crucial importance.”

Since the beginning of 2007 (and after a period of stalemate) there have been some positive developments within the Middle East Quartet. In April 2002 the EU initiated the Quartet under the Spanish EU Presidency, and also played a major role in its revival. Early in 2007, at the very beginning of the German EU Presidency, Chancellor Angela Merkel travelled to the U.S. in order to persuade President Bush to revive the Quartet and its central document, the [Road Map](#). The Quartet met for consultations for the first time in five months at the beginning of February 2007. There was a second meeting in Berlin at the end of the month and another one at the end of May. At the same time the European Union devoted its energies to securing the support of those Arab states which are willing to co-operate on the basis of the [Arab Peace Initiative](#). Since the situation had deteriorated in the aftermath of the war in Lebanon in 2006, with a weakened Israeli Prime Minister and the intra-Palestinian conflict, the European Union under the German Presidency believed that it would be a more promising strategy to try to encourage the moderate Arab states to play a constructive role. An

attempt to restart the Israeli-Palestinian negotiations would have been doomed to failure, and by turning to the Arab states the Europeans confirmed their regional approach to peace.

The appointment of former British Prime Minister Tony Blair as Representative of the Middle East Quartet in June 2007 means that a high-profile European politician with strong ties to the U.S. administration has been given a mandate in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Even though Blair's brief is limited to strengthening the Palestinian economy, institution-building, and promoting the rule of law, his insight, experience and personal motivation suggest that he will also play a political role. If the other European members of the Quartet—the EU “troika” consists of the Commissioner for External Relations, the High Representative for Common Foreign and Security Policy, and the Foreign Minister of the acting EU Presidency—are willing to co-operate with Blair and his team, and Blair, on the other hand, is willing to play the European card, it will strengthen the European position in the Quartet and enable the EU to play a greater political and far more visible role in the coming months.

Nevertheless, the EU could make even more use of its diplomatic resources in order to bring the conflicting parties back to the negotiating table. The EU itself has to reconcile the interests of 27 member states with their different backgrounds on a daily basis. Its distinctive way of doing this means that it can be a skilful and credible partner in the Middle East peace process. The Arab-Israeli conflict can only be resolved by mediation, negotiations, and capacity building, and not by military intervention. Whereas the outcome is not in doubt, there is still the question of how it might be possible to organize the requisite level of support in the context of this multi-layered

dispute. At the very heart of the process is the establishment of a viable Palestinian state that is able to meet the needs of its citizens, and to live in peace with its neighbour, Israel. On a number of occasions in the recent past the European Union has demonstrated greater effectiveness with regard to mediation and state-

WHAT IS THE »ROAD MAP« ABOUT?



The document was adopted by the Middle East Quartet in 2003

building. Enlargement was a very successful instrument which supported the transformation processes in the countries of the former Soviet bloc. A major part of the accession process was devoted to strengthening democratic institutions, bureaucratic structures, and the rule of law. The European Union does not possess large military capabilities, but it does have experience with state-building. For this reason it should continue to support capacity building in the Palestinian administration and judiciary. This also implies an open ex-

amination of Fatah’s failures in the past. A viable Palestinian state cannot be created merely by establishing government structures and procedures. It also needs politicians who are willing to operate within this framework. And without a simultaneous political and regional solution, Palestinian state-building will once again have been in vain.

II

Resolving the Conflict Now

The Middle East conflict can be solved. Agreement has already been reached on the negotiated outcome, which is part of the Road Map - “land for peace”, a two-state solution with a sovereign Palestinian state that acknowledges Israel’s existence and security requirements. Since its adoption in 2003 the Road Map has been the point of reference for all the proposals made in the peace process. Even though it has not yet been implemented, and has even been declared to be defunct by some of its critics, it remains the only document to which all the parties have given their assent, and for this reason should not be dismissed out of hand. Together with the Arab “counterpart” of the Road Map, the Beirut Declaration (or [Arab Peace Initiative](#)) adopted in 2002 and restated in

2007, it provides common ground for Israel, the Palestinians and their Arab neighbours from which to embark on the implementation of the two-state solution.

At first sight the prospects for the two-state solution look rather bleak at the moment. Both parties seem too weak to negotiate peace. Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert is under domestic pressure as a result of the war in southern Lebanon in 2006. The Palestinians are divided, and President Mahmoud Abbas has always been politically weak. After several months of intra-Palestinian confrontation between Hamas and Fatah after the victory of Hamas in the 2006 elections, the seizure of the Gaza Strip by Hamas and the de facto separation of the Palestinian territories have added another layer to the conflict. However, although the current situation seems desperate, it is in fact conducive to a resumption of the negotiations. Forging ahead with the two-state solution now might well be a domestic survival

WHO IS INVOLVED IN THE MIDDLE EAST QUARTET ?

Principals of the Diplomatic Quartet			Envoys
 United Nations Ban Ki Moon UN-Secretary-General	 USA Condoleezza Rice US-Secretary of State	 Russia Sergei Lavrov Russian Foreign Minister	 United Nations N.N. Special Coordinator
 EU-Troika			 USA David Welch Assistant Secretary for Near Eastern Affairs
 Javier Solana High Representative	Benita Ferrero Waldner Commissioner for External Relations	Luis Amado (Portugal) Foreign Minister of the country holding EU Presidency	 Russia Sergey Yakovlev Special Envoy of the Foreign Minister
Representative of the Middle East Quartet			 EU Marc Otte Special Representative for the Middle East
 Tony Blair			
Blair will address the following issues:			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mobilize international assistance to the Palestinians • Help to secure appropriate international support in addressing the institutional governance needs of the Palestinian State • Develop plans to promote economic development 			

strategy for both Abbas and Olmert. For the sake of its security, Israel needs to do everything in its power to prevent a further radicalization of the Palestinian camp.

A return to the negotiating table would seem to be a rational choice for both parties. For the first time for many years the international community is jointly committed to resolving the conflict. Arab neighbours are showing a willingness to co-operate with Israel and the West. Saudi Arabia, a crucial player in the region, will probably be invited to take part in the Washington conference. The creation of an enduring peace in the Middle East is thus a distinct possibility.

When all the details have been finalized, the implementation of the two-state solution may turn out to be an even more challenging part of the process, especially in view of the split between the Palestinian territories. This process needs to be supported and monitored on a regular basis by a third party. In the past there was no ongoing support from the Quartet for the implementation of the Road Map. It did not

“Israeli-Lebanese and Israeli-Syrian reconciliation is crucial.”

sufficiently respond to the Arab Peace Initiative and failed to encourage the Arab states to become more active partners in the peace process. A lasting peace will only emerge if Arab countries in the region support it and develop a feeling that it is also their responsibility. This implies that what is now needed is conflict resolution, and not conflict management. A “step-by-step approach” which defers aspects of the problem (the status of Jerusalem, the return of the refugees) to a later date would give radical groups an opportunity to torpedo the peace process. In the eyes of many people in the Middle East, the Oslo process was a failure precisely on account of its timidity. Another solution of this kind would thus be unacceptable, and on this basis governments would find it difficult to gain the support of their electorates.

III

A Regional Approach and the Integration of Hamas

However, an enduring peace between Israel and the Palestinians cannot be attained without taking into account the regional dimensions of the conflict, that is, the Israeli-Lebanese and the Israeli-Syrian disputes, and without intra-Palestinian reconciliation. Both are crucial for the success of the peace process, and ought to be discussed at the Washington Middle East conference. In these two areas the European Union should play a greater role in shaping the agenda.

- First, the European Union should address the regional dimension of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The most serious problem facing this package deal approach will be the participation of Syria. The U.S. administration must be persuaded to invite Syria to attend the Washington conference, and Syria will have to be persuaded to accept the invitation. Israel is probably a less problematical factor, for there have been signs of a rapprochement between Jerusalem and Damascus. However, this has been accompanied by incidents such as the recent violation of Syrian airspace by Israel. These demonstrate that Israeli-Syrian relations are still highly volatile. However, with regard to the nature of the dispute, it would be far easier to deal with the Israeli-Syrian conflict than with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The Europeans should point out to Israel, Syria and the U.S. that peace would be beneficial for all sides. It would reduce the risk of war and give Syria the opportunity to become a regional partner for Israel and the West.

- Secondly, the EU should adopt a new policy on how to incorporate Hamas into the settlement of the conflict. If the European Union adheres to its practice of treating President Abbas and the government of Salam Fayyad as the only legitimate

representatives of the Palestinian cause and continues to exclude Hamas, it will run the risk of cementing the division of the Palestinian territories, of aggravating the humanitarian catastrophe in the Gaza Strip, and ultimately of failing to reach the two-state solution. If Hamas continues to feel marginalized, it might choose to obstruct any attempt to re-negotiate Palestinian statehood. For the moment Hamas seems willing to be co-operative. In order to re-unite the Palestinian territories and to establish a functioning Palestinian state, a major challenge will be to foster the process of reconciliation between Fatah and Hamas. The European Union should continue to encourage the moderate Arab states and Turkey to establish a dialogue between Fatah and Hamas. At the same time the EU should work towards the swift implementation of the two-state solution, which should happen as soon as possible after the end of the Washington conference. If a Palestinian state were to be established, at first only on the West Bank, it might have a positive influence on both Hamas and the Gaza Strip. Hamas can hardly object to the birth of a Palestinian state, and will probably try to be co-operative in order to avoid losing ground in its intra-Palestinian power struggle with Fatah.

Achieving a consensus within the European Union on how to engage Hamas and Syria will be difficult. But it will be even more difficult to obtain the support of the U.S. administration. In its war on terror Washington has adopted a specific approach to radical Islamist groups such as Hamas and Hezbollah, or to the Syrian regime, which it believes to be part of the “axis of evil.” This rhetoric has prevented a dialogue with moderate Islamist groups, which are represented in parliaments in the Middle East. The European Union

should adopt a more differentiated approach to Islamism in the Middle East. This means that it will have to demonstrate leadership and an ability to disagree with its transatlantic partners concerning the ways and the means of reaching a shared objective. In the past European unity has tended to crumble under the pressure of what was deemed to be a “transatlantic choice.” This was particularly apparent in the divisions caused by the war in Iraq. In the meantime the European Union has become more sophisticated, especially in its negotiations with Iran on the latter’s nuclear programme,

WHAT IS THE «ARAB PEACE INITIATIVE» ?

Israel

- Israel is guaranteed the right to exist **in peace with its neighbours** in exchange for a withdrawal to the 1967 borders
- Israel reconsiders its policies and declares a just **peace as its strategic option**
- A **Palestinian State** with East Jerusalem as its capital will be established
- Israel will provide **a solution to the Palestinian refugee problem**

Arab Countries

- The Arab countries consider the Arab-Israeli conflict as ended, join **a peace agreement with Israel**, and provide security for all the states of the region.
- They establish **normal relations** with Israel

Involvement of the International community

- The international community and all **countries** are invited to **support the initiative**

Declaration adopted by the Arab states during the Beirut summit in 2002

which it has continued to pursue. A persuasive European argument in favour of contacts with Hamas and Syria could be the impact that this might have on the region as a whole. Settling the dispute between Israel and its Arab neighbours will

defuse the tense situation in Lebanon and offer Damascus an alternative to cooperating with Tehran.

IV

The U.S. Middle East Conference

The Middle East conference convened by President Bush for the autumn of 2007 constitutes an opportunity for peace. In the weeks ahead the European Union should play an active part in the preparations for the conference, and should develop a common European position on the following issues:

- Putting the Israeli-Lebanese and Israeli-Syrian conflicts on the conference agenda (and persuading the U.S. to invite Syria to Washington);
- Specific steps leading to the implementation of the two-state solution at the earliest opportunity (starting with a provisional Palestinian state on the West Bank, but taking care to prevent a deeper rift between it and the Gaza Strip);
- Mechanisms designed to make implementation work;
- Keeping the moderate Arab countries on board (by discussing in detail how the vision of the Arab peace initiative can be implemented);

- Asking the moderate Arab states and Turkey to support intra-Palestinian reconciliation by integrating Hamas;

- Supporting Tony Blair and his team with regard to state building and restructuring the Palestinian economy;

- Continuing aid programmes to prevent a severe humanitarian disaster in the Gaza Strip;

- Differentiating between radical and moderate Islamist groups in the Middle East and starting a dialogue with the latter.

This agenda should be presented as a European contribution to a meeting of the Middle East Quartet Principals and their envoy, Tony Blair. At the same time the European Union and its member states should work to maintain the commitment of the moderate Arab states to the peace process, and to obtain the support of Syria.

In order to come up with a sustainable Arab-Israeli peace settlement, the U.S. conference needs a thoughtful agenda, ongoing communication with all the parties involved, and a commitment from a third party that it will monitor the implementation process for a considerable period of time after the end of the Washington conference in 2007. This is certainly an opportunity to broker a peace settlement in the region, but there is also the risk that the whole process will simply prove to be yet another failure.

Further Reading:

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