

The European Union and the Middle East Peace Process

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EUROPEAN INTERESTS IN THE MIDDLE EAST

Europe, both in terms of the individual states, and collectively through the 15 member European Union, seeks to play an active role in the Middle East peace process. There are many reasons for this -- substantive, political, and symbolic.

In the first category, Europe has major economic interests in the region, both as a consumer of Middle Eastern petroleum and gas, and as a producer of industrial goods, weapons and related military technology for which the Middle East constitutes a lucrative market. At the same time, the Southern European states (France, Spain, Italy and Portugal), are concerned about the impact of instability in the area, and in North Africa, in particular, and the possibility that political unrest and economic failure could lead to massive emigration across the Mediterranean. In addition, some members of the European Union (i.e., France) have an ambition of playing a major role on the international stage, supporting, "balancing", or in some cases, challenging what is often seen as American hegemony in the post-Cold War era. Events in the Middle East and the Arab-Israeli peace process are central factors in the international arena, and a major role in this activity would symbolize or reflect the "arrival" of Europe as a major power broker.

These interests, as well as a response to the eastward expansion of the EU, are reflected in the European-Mediterranean Project, which was formally initiated in Barcelona in November 1995. Participants include Algeria, Cyprus, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Malta, Morocco, Syria, Tunisia, Turkey, and the Palestinian Authority. Following the Helsinki-CSCE model, three baskets or areas of activity were created: 1) political and security issues, 2) economical and financial cooperation, and 3) the "social and human dimensions".

The EU Union has invested a great deal of resources in the EuroMed program, in the hopes of realizing these objectives. In addition to relatively large levels of economic assistance, primarily for North Africa, and negotiation of special trade agreements with the EU, the Barcelona process has also been closely (albeit informally) linked to the Arab-Israeli peace process. This is the only multilateral framework in which Syria is active (the Syrians refused to participate in the multilateral working groups created

at the Madrid conference in 1991), and in this sense, may have a certain potential advantage over other multilateral frameworks.

Formally, the Euromed project is not focused on the Arab-Israeli peace process, and, the Europeans claim to recognize and avoid competing with the unique role of the U.S. in the negotiations. Efforts, particularly by Syria, to use this framework to isolate and pressure Israel in peace-process related issues gained some support among members of the EU. (The formal EU role in the peace process, based on the 1991 Madrid Conference, has been based on chairing the Regional Economic Development Working Group (REDWG). Unfortunately, the activities of REDWG, like the other multilateral working groups, have been quite dormant for a number of years.)

However, in the past year, there have been signs of increasing European and EU involvement in the negotiations, both between Israel and the Palestinian Authority, and between Israel and Syria. Miguel Moratinos was appointed to the position of special envoy, and he and members of his office have been actively shuttling throughout the region. The EU, during the German presidency, played a visible role between January and May of 1999, with respect to Palestinian threats to issue a unilateral declaration of independence (UDI). The EU's Berlin Declaration in March 1999, which included a commitment to support the creation of a Palestinian state in the context of permanent status talks with Israel, was part of a package of measures (apparently developed in coordination with U.S. government) designed to compensate the PA, and Yassir Arafat in return for delaying UDI. The EU has provided substantial funds to the Palestinians, and appointed a special coordinator to assist the PA in the area of security. With respect to Syria and Lebanon, the French government has been particularly active, sending officials to the region, and inviting major figures to Paris.

As a result, following the election of Ehud Barak as Israeli Prime Minister, many European officials and analysts have indicated an expectation of rapid progress in the peace process, assisted or accompanied by greater EU involvement. In 2000, under the French Presidency (beginning in July), there are plans to increase the EU's involvement in the region significantly. Efforts to reach agreement on a Charter for Peace and Stability in the Mediterranean Region are particularly ambitious, and plans have begun for a summit meeting of heads of state in the Barcelona Process to mark the completion of this effort. If the EU is able to bring Syrian President Assad and Israeli Prime Minister Barak to the same event, they will have succeeded in going far beyond the American government. Thus, the Middle East appears to be an area of primary interest and involvement in the first stages of the development of the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP).

Before Europe gets overly involved in the Middle East peace process or creates unrealistic expectations, it is important to take a step back and assess the potential contributions as well as limitations for the EU in these areas.

THE DICHOTOMY OF GOALS

The EuroMed program attempts to address the Mediterranean as a single region in terms of economics and security. Although there are important links between them, the (North Africa) Maghreb and the Middle East (Mashreq) pose different challenges for Europe. For North Africa, the major issues are primarily in the spheres of economic development and civil society, while in the classical Middle East, politics and the Arab-Israeli peace process are primary for the parties and for Europe. Attempting to deal with both issues (economics in North Africa and Arab-Israeli peace) in the same framework is doomed to failure.

Given this dichotomy, the techniques and instruments that are available to Europe and are appropriate to each area must be defined and used carefully. With respect to the Middle East peace process, in the absence of a detailed understanding of the situation as seen by each of the parties, mistakes can be made which will have a negative impact. The assumptions, "conventional wisdom", and expert opinion that often characterize European approaches to the Middle East must be questioned and examined repeatedly in order to avoid mistakes.

In dealing with Israel, Europe's difficulties are multiplied by a perceived pro-Palestinian and anti-Israeli bias. European intellectuals, journalists, and some politicians have a strong affinity for the Israeli Left, and they draw much of their information from these contacts, leading to distortions in analyses of Israeli political trends. Many Israelis see Europeans as too ready to accept Palestinian versions of history and conceptions of "justice", particularly when they (Europeans intellectuals) justify these biases by repeating the Arab claim (rejected by Israel) that the support for the creation of the State of Israel was a European effort to atone for the sins of the Holocaust. Europe's current policies are often viewed as designed to compensate for the allegedly pro-Israel biases of the 1940s and 1950s, and also in response to a view of the Palestinians as victims (and Israel as aggressor). In contrast, in the eyes of many Israelis, Europe tends to take a tolerant view of Palestinian and Islamic terrorism and the incitement to hatred and violence. During the Israeli elections, European actions and statements were viewed as awkward and not particularly helpful. Both Barak and Netanyahu were critical with the degree of support for Palestinian objectives expressed in the Berlin declaration. The Netanyahu government condemned European support for the resolution passed by the UN Human Rights Commission in Geneva, calling for Palestinian self-determination on the basis of the UN partition resolution of 1947 (181) and for the "right of return" for refugees (UNR

194). The EU's statement on Jerusalem, invoking the 1947 United Nations Partition Resolution (181) was particularly damaging, and reduced the already limited support for an increased European role in the political process.

In the post-election period, European policy was also based on the overly optimistic assumption of a Palestinian-Israeli permanent status agreement to be reached within two years, at the most. Many European analysts and policy makers expected that after the election, the policies of the Rabin-Peres period which were halted in 1996, following the suicide bombings and election of Mr. Netanyahu, would now be resumed. The roles of Shimon Peres, Yossi Beilin, and Uri Savir were magnified in European analyses. In October 1999, the head of the European Commission's Middle East and Southern Mediterranean Directorate led a mission to Israel, which met with two ministers - Beilin and Peres. European analysts failed to understand that Barak was successful, in part, because he was able to distance himself from Peres, Beilin and Savir, and that their role in policy making would be (and is) minimal.

While the change in the Israeli government led to renewed movement as evidenced in the Sharm el-Shiek Agreement and the opening of the "safe passage", the probability of a permanent status agreement in the next year or two remains relatively low. The differences between Israel and the Palestinians, on both principles and substance, remain very significant. The question of a Palestinian state is no longer an issue, having been accepted by the Israeli consensus, but its borders, procedures for verification of demilitarization, the status of Jerusalem, and refugees remain in dispute. More importantly, the gap in historical perspectives and perceptions of the conflict and the peace process is undiminished. As a result, there is a very real possibility that the Palestinian-Israeli dialogue will deteriorate and return to the deep zero-sum conflict and the different conceptions of history that characterized the impasse of the 1950s and 1960s.

In this context, the EU, through its various mechanisms and initiatives, can help Israelis and Palestinians avoid escalating the rhetoric (and the violence it causes), and to focus on pragmatic policies that promote each of the parties primary interests. However, the EU must recognize that its ability to influence the policies of the parties is limited, and no combination of "carrots and sticks" will lead either Israel or the Palestinians to change fundamental and strongly held positions. (France held up the ratification of the trade agreement between Israel and the EU for a long period in the effort to influence political and security decisions.) Europe should also avoid creating the impression that it is prepared to intervene on one side or the other, and should continue to emphasize the need for the parties to reach an agreement directly. The EU can also encourage the creation of an environment conducive to agreement by working in this direction with the other countries in the region. Egypt and Jordan, as well as the North African and Gulf States can help reassure Israel, which fears that the

underlying basis for the conflict will continue, even if agreements are reached with the Palestinians and Syria. Normalization and confidence building in the entire region remain central to reducing the perceived risks of the process for Israelis, and for creating a "positive sum" (in contrast to zero-sum) environment. CBMs and cooperation would reduce these fears, and allow for a bolder and more generous Israeli policy with respect to the Palestinians. The EU can also help to reassure the Palestinians with respect to the readiness of the Israeli consensus to accept a Palestinian state, and to dismantle settlements, in the context of an end to terrorism and a permanent status agreement.

In concrete terms, Europe should be ready to support agreements reached by the parties, for example in providing technical assistance in developing agreed security procedures for operating the port in Gaza and the safe passages. In other areas, promotion of CBMs, , widespread people-to-people contacts, educational dialogues, joint research papers, economic cooperation etc. are vital in order to make progress, and not as a reward for "good behavior". With respect to long-term issues, Europe should be ready to assist overcoming major problems that require a regional approach, such as the limited water supply, refugee resettlement, and environmental issues.

Beyond these general guidelines, the European Union and its individual members should also consider the following concrete measures in formulating its Middle East policy:

· PREPARE FOR ALTERNATIVE SCENARIOS AND FALL-BACK OPTIONS

While providing support for the negotiations, the EU policy in the Middle East should be prepared for alternative scenarios, and for implementing crisis management and conflict prevention measures. In the event of sharp disagreement and the end of the Oslo process, it is important to prepare a safety net to preserve the gains that have been achieved, and will also prevent violent conflict and escalation, which would be damaging for all the parties.

If the permanent status talks reach an impasse, the EU should be prepared to assist the United States in developing stabilizing alternatives. This most realistic of the alternatives is based on a long-term interim agreement or mechanism, providing for the establishment of a Palestinian State, with the agreement of Israel.

The consistent maintenance of Israeli security over a long period will be an important test for the Palestinian State. This state would be demilitarized, by agreement, and the terms verified by a multilateral observer force. Cooperative security arrangements will be very important in building mutual confidence, allowing for additional transfer of territory to the Palestinians. With regard to water, it is possible to develop technical

solutions, including desalination, in order to increase the supply and prevent conflict over this issue. The EU, with the agreement of the parties, including Israel, can play an instrumental role in the development of security cooperation and in water resource development. Under these conditions, the negotiations towards a resolution of the central historical/emotional issues, such as refugees and Jerusalem, can continue. The confidence building that is necessary to develop workable and realistic compromises will take many years, and efforts to force the pace are likely to be counter-productive. During this time, it is also important to prevent outside forces and states, with an interest in creating instability, from triggering conflict. In this sense, the multilateral frameworks for the Middle East, including the Barcelona process, can play a critical role.

· COORDINATE WITH THE US

Despite the emotional desire to return to great power status and compete with the U.S., it is important that the EU avoid succumbing to this temptation in the Middle East. Competition between Washington and Brussels (or Paris) leads to a situation in which Europe is used to "balance" and block the American role. (In contrast to the U.S., which provides weapons and billions of dollars military assistance to Israel to offset the security risks of Israeli redeployments and withdrawals, Europe has generally provided little or nothing.)

When it is in their interest, the Palestinians have looked to Europe to provide alternatives to American proposals. In such situations, Israel finds that agreements made in the context of American mediated negotiations with the Palestinians are then subject to renegotiation in a European channel. In this process, Israel often faces additional pressures (sometimes economic) from the EU or some of its members, and demands for concessions, which are deemed unacceptable, but are an additional source of friction between Europe and Israel. This causes unnecessary disruption in the process, and does not contribute to progress. Looking towards the future, the EU should define those areas in which it can make a significant contribution, and focus on those activities.

· AVOID INSTITUTION BUILDING

The Middle East is already overwhelmed by a plethora of official institutions designed to develop cooperation and increase dialogue. In many cases, the same officials meet each other frequently, to discuss identical issues, in the different institutional frameworks. In addition to the EU's Barcelona Project, other Euro-Atlantic institutions, such as NATO, and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) all have ongoing Mediterranean Dialogues, cooperation programs,

etc. The goals of each of these programs are often quite vague, and they overlap in terms of activities, participants, and at times, with respect to calendars.

Thus, the EU should be careful in proposing or creating new frameworks, and should avoid institutional overload. In particular, the ambitious Charter for Peace and Stability in the Mediterranean Region exercise should be viewed with caution. Any substantive contributions to the Mediterranean should be defined clearly, to avoid the perception that the Charter is designed primarily in order to advance European political interests. If, as in the past, Egypt, or any other participant, seeks to exploit the Charter process to isolate Israel, this must be rejected forthwith by the EU.

· HARD AND SOFT SECURITY

Efforts to negotiate regional security frameworks and arms control agreements have reached an impasse, and this situation is unlikely to change in the next five to ten years. The multilateral arms control and regional security (ACRS) talks halted when Egypt insisted that any progress, including CBMs, be linked to an Israeli agreement to accept the NPT (Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty), while Israel has refused to alter its deterrent policy. These positions are strongly held and there is no indication that they will change in the short term. Therefore, efforts such as ACRS, or discussions of hard-security in the Barcelona framework, will merely provide another venue for conflict between Egypt and Israel. In contrast, the promotion of "soft" security, in terms of economic development, cooperation, and interdependence, would be a useful contribution to the process of building regional security. In terms of "soft security", links between the two regions of the Barcelona process (North Africa and the core Middle East), as well as the Gulf States, would be useful. Other areas for cooperation include environmental issues, personal security, cooperation in development of educational material, etc. The meetings towards a "Euro-Med System of Prevention, Mitigation and Management of Natural and Man-made Disasters" are an important step in this direction (although Syria did not send a representative to the first meeting in 1998, held in Rome.) Similarly, the Malta Training seminars for diplomats in the Barcelona process are also useful exercises in this realm. Europe can also play a role in enhancing the low level of people-to-people contact in the region. Journalists, educators, professional groups, and other elite opinion leaders should be invited and encouraged to meet each other frequently, to develop networks and contacts that go beyond the limited official levels. The major differences in perceptions, maps, and history that are major impediments to Arab-Israeli reconciliation require frequent in-depth contacts at all levels of society. The EU can make a major contribution to this process, while also assisting in the development of civil society, particularly in the Palestinian Authority and Syria.

· THE EU AND IRAQ

The credibility of the EU regarding hard security issues in the Middle East is hampered by the absence of a single and credible policy on Iraq. (This is particularly true in relations with Israel, but also has an impact with respect to the Gulf states, Jordan, and perhaps Egypt.) Security in the region is closely interconnected, and weakness in one area is reflected in other sectors.

With respect to Israel, the absence of a coherent policy on Iraq has damaged the EU's credibility regarding Israeli security concerns in the context of the negotiations with the Palestinians or Syria. (In October 1998, the US was able to gain Israeli agreement in the Wye summit in part due the linkage between the US-led military attack on Iraq that was planned, and the need to provide some progress in the peace process to gain Arab cooperation.)

In order to address the Iraq issue, and with respect to the lifting of sanctions, the EU must also indicate whether it is prepared to respond with force in a timely manner if Iraq continues to defy the terms of UNSCR 687 or a successor regime. Efforts of the past 8 years have clearly demonstrated that Saddam Hussein will not allow United Nations arms inspectors to make any significant revelations regarding the weapons of mass destruction capabilities in his arsenal, and there is no basis to assume that this will change. Arrangements supported by France (with the support of Russia and China) will create the illusion of inspection, while lifting sanctions and allowing Iraq to accelerate its missile and WMD acquisition. Policies that end sanctions while the threat from Iraq remains will be seen by Israel as expedient and irresponsible, and further damage European credibility in this important area.

BENCHMARKS NEEDED TO MEASURE SUCCESS OR FAILURE

Barcelona statement is a major document. In addition to the need for clear and realistic goals, Europe should also define criteria by which to assess its activities in the region, in order to determine whether its policies are contributing to success or failure. While the EU trumpets the meetings of Foreign Ministers from the participants in the Barcelona process as major diplomatic triumphs (Barcelona in 1995, followed by Malta in 1997, Palermo in 1998, and Stuttgart in 1999), it is difficult to discern significant substantive contributions. The statements published at the end of the meetings did not mark major breakthroughs. More importantly, preparation for each of these meetings was accompanied by friction resulting from the efforts of some of the Arab states to use these forums to pressure or isolate Israel. This process is not cost-free and the down-side must also be considered. In terms of the Arab-Israeli peace process, the goals for Europe, as stated above, should be modest. The obstacles to an agreement are formidable, and the evidence indicates that unless the involvement of outside parties is requested by all sides, including Israel, it is not conducive to agreement and can be counterproductive. The key to success in the

Middle East peace process is the direct negotiation of the parties, as has been repeatedly demonstrated. If outside mediation is needed to break an impasse, the U.S. will continue to play this role most effectively, and Europe should be careful not to interfere. By appearing to be ready to support the Palestinians or Syria, Europe can contribute to unrealistic expectations of the potential to pressure Israel into making concessions that it is not prepared to make, thereby complicating the negotiations. Similarly, the measure of success of European activities in this context should be the degree to which they contribute to direct interactions between the parties. Cooperative economic, environmental, security, or other programs would be important achievements.

When measured against these criteria, the European Union's efforts, whether through the activities of the Special Envoy (Ambassador Moratinos) and the Barcelona process, have not achieved much in the past four years. Europe might claim some role in dissuading Arafat from a unilateral declaration of independence, but others might argue that the EU paid too high a price (in the Berlin declaration) to convince Arafat to do what he would have done anyway. Statements, meetings, and vague declarations that avoid the key issues are not, in themselves, evidence of success. Europe cannot point to much in the way of increased understanding between peoples resulting from its efforts. The incitement and statements of hatred, from all levels of Palestinian society (including Suha Arafat), in the Egyptian press, and from the other familiar sources, continue. New Palestinian textbooks dealing with the Arab-Israeli conflict contain the same myths and hostility. The European Union has not even been successful in promoting a joint framework examine this issue.

None of these questions are designed to suggest that Europe should disengage from the Middle East. The links between Europe and the region continue to be of central importance to both, and a framework for cooperation is vital.

However, with respect to the Arab-Israeli peace process, the European Union might do well to reexamine its goals and resources. To be a major player, Europe will have to match the U.S. in resources and in understanding of the region, including Israel, and this is highly unlikely.

Instead, Europe should focus its energies and resources on areas where it can provide an important service, primarily with respect to confidence building, people-to-people, and the neutralizing the cultural basis for the continuation of the Arab-Israeli conflict.