

UN Resolution 1701, UNIFIL-2 and the “New Greater Middle East Project” - A German Perspective¹

Published in: The Cultural Movement – Antelias/Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, „UN Resolution 1701: Horizons and Challenges (National Conference, held January 13th, 2007)”, Lebanon, March 2007, pp. 69-74

Muriel Asseburg²

After the summer war of 2006, Germany has been strongly engaged in reconstruction and development efforts in Lebanon, and, for the first time and in the framework of the enlarged and newly mandated UNIFIL forces, it has sent troops to the Middle East. In this contribution I would like to focus on three main questions: Why has Germany supported SC Res. 1701 and why does it participate in UNIFIL-2? Is there a link between Res. 1701 and what has been termed here the “new Greater Middle East project”? What is the German approach to conflict settlement in the Middle East and what are its ambitions in this regard during the EU Presidency?

German Support for SC Res. 1701 and German Participation in UNIFIL-2

SC Res. 1701 has been strongly endorsed by the German government mainly for two reasons: First, it has been seen as the instrument in bringing about a cease fire between Israel and Lebanon and thereby stopping the bloodletting and violence of the summer of 2006. Second, it has been considered as a first and necessary step towards conflict settlement in the region. The assessment was that without a cease fire and a cooling-down period steps towards conflict settlement could not be taken. A substantially enlarged UNIFIL with a more robust mandate and a large European contingent should secure the cease fire and support the extension of Lebanese sovereignty to all of the state’s territory. At the same time, the German government (and public) have been well aware that the Security Council resolution and the UNIFIL-2 forces by themselves are not sufficient to stabilise the situation. Sustainable stabilisation depends on a political process that addresses the legitimate interests of all actors in the region - a process that does not only tackle the symptoms but addresses the root causes of the conflict that erupted once more into open war in July and August 2006.

SC Res. 1701 for sure is not an even handed resolution. In particular, it does not relate to Israeli violations of international law and international humanitarian law and it asks Israel to only halt its offensive military operations while it demands from Hizbullah the complete stop of any armed operations.³ Still, it seemed that this was a compromise text that the international community, the Lebanese and the Israeli government could agree on so that the war could finally be brought to an end.⁴ And indeed, even though Germany was not one of the main players in bringing the resolution about, it was a major German

concern to get a clear backing by the two states involved as well as by Hizbullah (which as part of the Cabinet had backed the Seven-Point-Plan put forward by Fouad Seniora) rather than imposing a resolution. The main reason for this is that the experience of peace keeping missions in the Middle East - as elsewhere - has clearly demonstrated that such missions are only successful if all parties to a conflict accept the cease fire conditions and are willing to stick to them. Along the same lines Germany also made it clear that it would only participate in UNIFIL when asked by both governments to do so.

German engagement in the reconstruction of Lebanon was no point of contention in Germany. It was undisputed that Germany would render humanitarian aid to the Lebanese population, increase its development assistance substantially and assist in controlling Lebanon's borders with customs and police officers at Beirut airport⁵. However, there was quite a controversial debate among the public as well as in the Bundestag (the German Parliament) about a German military involvement. In order to understand this debate it is essential to know that German policies towards the Middle East in general are guided by four main interests - all four of them spoke in favour of being part of UNIFIL and contributing actively to preventing a renewed escalation: First, Germany has a general interest in peace and stability in the neighbouring region - not least to avoid the spill-over of conflicts to Europe in the form of illegal migration and terrorism. Second, Germany feels a special historical responsibility for Israel's existence and security. This responsibility does not translate into unequivocal support for Israeli policies. Rather, the German position is in line with the European stance that peace and stability in the region can only be achieved on the basis of the relevant Security Council resolutions and in direct negotiations between the conflicting parties. This implies the end of occupation of Arab lands, a two-state settlement to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as well as the right of all states in the region to live in secure borders. Third, Germany supports the strengthening of multilateral processes and institutions such as the United Nations as well as the prevalence of international law. Fourth, Germany has a strong interest in stable and good relations with the Arab world, not least due to its resource dependency and the interest in increasing trade and capital flows with the region.

At the same time, there exists quite a controversial if subdued debate in Germany about the interpretation of the "historical responsibility" for Israel and how it should translate into German policies. In this context, two main arguments were made against sending German soldiers to the Middle East: The main concern among many was that German soldiers might be put in a situation where they would have to confront Israeli soldiers in the battlefield - a situation which people in Germany, across party lines, definitely would like to avoid as such a confrontation is considered incompatible with Germany's past.⁶ The second argument was that Germany lacked the necessary neutrality in order to fulfil the task of securing the implementation of the resolution: "If one commits troops on behalf of the UN, one has to be neutral with regards to the conflict. One has to have the same credibility towards both sides. The [German] federal government is not neutral and does not want to be so."⁷ In the end, the ones arguing in favour of a participation in UNIFIL won the debate and it was decided by a large

parliamentary majority to send up to 1,500 troops to the region.⁸ Germany has since taken the lead of the maritime force off the Lebanese coast, the main task of which is to prevent arms smuggling via the sea.

UN Resolution 1701 and the “New Greater Middle East Project”

Germany as well as the other European states joined the US in the Broader Middle East and North Africa initiative (BMENA initiative) in the summer of 2004 because, on top of objectives related to the transatlantic relationship, they shared in the aims of modernisation and reform towards more representative, transparent and efficient government in the region. However, important differences between Germans (and Europeans in general) on the one hand and the US on the other remained concerning approaches towards the region. Most important, Europeans have rejected regime change through military means as well as the US approach of what has been termed “constructive deconstruction,” i.e., externally imposed and sudden regime change in order to allow for the democratisation of countries and a new regional order. Change is a long-term process that must - at least that is what Europeans believe in - be generated in the region and it can then be supported from the outside in a relation of partnership. Also, Europeans are convinced that the settlement of conflicts in the region, above all the Arab-Israeli conflict, cannot wait until after reforms have taken root, but must be pursued in parallel.⁹

In the end, Western actors have not been successful with regards to any of their objectives in the region - democratic reform, the struggle against terrorism and conflict resolution. European efforts at conflict settlement have been largely dormant since the early demise of the road map; European support for reform in the region, above all exerted in the framework of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership, has largely been ineffective. The US has returned to a course of stabilisation and traditional power politics aiming at rolling back Iran and its allies, after the war on Iraq turned out to be much less a first domino that would set in motion a process of liberalisation in the Middle East, and much more a trigger that spread conflict in the region, furthered terrorism and strengthened US adversaries such as Iran.

US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice has termed the 2006 summer war the “birth pangs of a new Middle East” and declared that “whatever we do we have to be certain that we are pushing forward to the new Middle East not going back to the old one.” She has explained that this means that “it is unacceptable to have a situation where the decision of a terrorist group can drag an entire country, even an entire region, into violence.”¹⁰ Apart from the cynical and inhumane comparison and the one-sidedness of Rice’s statement, the Secretary stresses one important point: the international community should not go back to an approach of conflict management but engage actively in a process of conflict resolution.

Conflict settlement in the Middle East - German ambitions and prospects

The German government has made one of the two top priorities for the EU Presidency that it has assumed on 1 January 2007 progress towards conflict settlement in the Middle East. It is aware, of course, of the short time period available: in half a years time, more than kick-starting the process cannot realistically be expected. It also knows that it cannot act on its own; in order to achieve progress it not only depends on the good will of the parties in the region to engage constructively in such a process, but also on a commitment by the European partners and the US administration to help move things forward. In the months leading up to the EU Presidency, German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier started intensive travel diplomacy to the region trying to find out if the conflicting parties were ready to engage in a renewed peace process. German Chancellor Angela Merkel started canvassing support to re-energise the Quartet as main facilitator in such a process. So far, the German government has concentrated on eliciting positions and on getting the process going again. Seeing itself in a facilitator rather than a power broker role, it has been cautious, however, not to put forward a vision or detailed plan of how to proceed in order not to lose any of the partners early in the process.¹¹

Keeping all partners on board the Quartet might prove difficult though as interests, positions and priorities vary quite considerably - above all on how to deal with Syria, Hizbullah and Hamas. Views not only diverge between the German Chancellory and the Foreign Ministry, but also among Europeans and between the EU, Russia and the US administration. While Germany's foreign office is in favour of having a dialogue with Syria and addressing its legitimate interests (i.e., the recuperation of the Golan Heights), France under Jacques Chirac as well as the Bush government reject engaging Syria and favour its isolation. While the Europeans have softened their stance towards Hamas and are willing to work with a legitimate Palestinian government the platform of which "reflects the Quartet conditions", the US insists on a recognition of the three conditions posed by the Quartet. While Hizbullah is listed as a terrorist organisation in the US, in the EU it is not. Russia favours including all the regional actors in a renewed process. Thus, even though all Quartet members have a strong interested in moving forward, these differences make it unlikely that the international community will act united and take energetic steps towards regional conflict settlement.

This lack of unity has been aggravated by the crises of government in Israel and, much more threatening in the sense of stability and internecine violence, in Lebanon and in Palestine that make it even less likely that progress will be achieved any time soon. In these crises, Western actors have unfortunately not played a very constructive role but rather supported those forces that they consider pro-Western - the Siniora government and the Palestinian President Mahmud Abbas - against substantial parts of the population in both countries rather than working towards inclusive politics.

FOOTNOTES:

- 1 I would like to thank Asia Afaneh for her kind assistance in preparing this text.
- 2 Dr. Muriel Asseburg is the head of the Middle East and Africa Department of the Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP), the German Institute for International and Security Affairs in Berlin.
- 3 For a detailed critique of the resolution see the contribution of Shaiq al-Masri in this volume as well as Richard Falk/Asli Ü. Bâli: "International Law at the Vanishing Point", in: *Middle East Report* (Winter 2006) 241, pp. 34-48.
- 4 A first draft resolution put forward on 5 August 2006 was even less balanced; it had, amongst other things, allowed Israeli troops to remain on Lebanese territory. It was therefore rejected by the Lebanese government.
- 5 For German assistance to Lebanon see different press releases on the Website of the German Ministry for Cooperation and Development, <<http://www.bmz.de/en/press/>>; for an overview see also the Foreign Office Website, <<http://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/diplo/en/Laender/Lebanon.html>>.
- 6 According to a representative poll, 58 per cent of the respondents were principally against a German participation in UNIFIL, 26 per cent would agree to a German participation if it were guaranteed that German soldiers would not have to confront Israeli soldiers in the battlefield, only 13 per cent were supportive of an unrestricted German participation. See "Libanon-Einsatz. Deutsche laut Umfrage gegen Beteiligung", in: *Die Welt*, 19 August 2006, <<http://www.welt.de/data/2006/08/19/1002496.html>>. See also "Parteien streiten über Nahost-Einsatz", in: *Frankfurter Rundschau*, 14 August 2006; "Wir sind in Nahost nicht neutral. Warum FDP-Generalsekretär Niebel gegen deutsche Soldaten im Libanon ist", in: *Der Tagesspiegel*, 14 September 2006.
- 7 Gregor Gysi, head of the faction "Die Linke", in the parliamentary debate on the participation of German troops in UNIFIL, in: Deutscher Bundestag: *Stenografischer Bericht, Berlin*, 19 September 2006 (49. Sitzung), p. 4805, <<http://dip.bundestag.de/btp/16/16049.pdf>> (translated by the author).
- 8 442 of the 614 members of the Bundestag voted in favour, 152 voted against, 5 abstained. There was opposition to a German participation in all the factions: the whole of the Left faction voted against, the majority of the FDP (only 8 deputies voted in favour), 12 deputies of the CDU/CSU, 32 of the SPD and 6 of Bündnis90/Die Grünen. See Alexander Weinlein, „Marsch in die historische Mission“, in: *Das Parlament*, 25 September 2006, <<http://www.bundestag.de/dasparlament/2006/39/titel-seite/001.html>>.
- 9 See Muriel Asseburg: "Demokratieförderung in der arabischen Welt - hat der partnerschaftliche Ansatz der Europäer versagt?", in: *Orient*, 46 (2005) 2, p. 272-290; Volker Perthes: *America's, Greater Middle East' and Europe. Key Issues for the Transatlantic Dialogue*, Berlin, Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, February 2004 (SWP Comment), <<http://www.swp-berlin.org>>.
- 10 US Department of State: "Secretary Condoleezza Rice. Special Briefing on Travel to the Middle East and Europe", Washington DC, 21 July 2006, <<http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2006/69331.htm>>.
- 11 For elements of a conflict settlement see for example Muriel Asseburg: *An International Force for Lebanon? No Sustainable Stabilisation Without a Political Conflict Settlement*, Berlin, August 2006, <http://www.swp-berlin.org>.