

“Beyond peace”: Israel, Europe, and the Mashreq

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To explore the prospects of the Middle East “beyond peace” in a realistic way, we will still have to give some thought on how to get there. And even with a focus on Israel, the Arab Mashreq countries, and Europe, we cannot leave the US outside the picture.

Consider therefore this situation: A US president, one year before the end his term, making an 11th hour effort to mediate peace between Israel and the Palestinians eventually attempting to use his personal charm in common meetings with the key players and to help bridge gaps on the “final status issues” – not without an eye on his legacy. You might wonder whether I was just describing what actually happens or remembering scenes from the last year of the Clinton presidency. Indeed, there is too much déjà-vu for not being sceptical with regard to the prospects of the current Israeli-Palestinian peace process. The aims – two states living peacefully side by side –, the problems – the so-called final status issues – as well as the solutions – the Clinton parameters or the Taba accord – are still the same. It is certainly an irony that President Bush who wanted to avoid a hands on approach to the Israel-Palestine-conflict, who even denied its relevance, now after seven years, tries to broker a deal. I also fear that Bush may engage for the wrong reasons, that he may see the Israeli-Palestinian peace efforts as part of alliance-building against Iran. This would be another misreading of the situation in the Middle East: underrating both how much local actors even in Palestine are driven by their own local agendas and interests, as well as how relevant a resolution of the Palestine conflict is for the Arab world, particularly for the Mashreq countries and Saudi Arabia.

Scepticism is in place, but this should not mean resignation. We also have to ask what has changed. Certainly, the last seven years have been wasted, inflicting enormous costs in

terms of human suffering, particularly on the Palestinians, the Israelis and the Lebanese as well as high opportunity costs – chances not exploited – on the entire region. It seems, however, that key policy makers have learned. The insight of Prime Minister Olmert that Jerusalem will eventually have to be divided, may not be new. But the fact that an Israeli Prime Minister states it publicly is important, and it could become a confident building measure towards the Palestinians if it wasn't undermined by new settlement projects in the occupied part of the city. President Abbas and Prime Minister Fayad have started very serious efforts to establish the monopoly of force in their quasi-state, even though the conditions to do so under occupation are anything but favourable. Even Hamas, at least its governing faction in Gaza, is again talking about a truce and negotiations with Israel. The seriousness of such endeavours will be judged against the willingness of Hamas to stop Katjusha attacks. And the Arab states are much more supportive with regard to the peace process than they were at the time of Camp David 2000. The support of Saudi Arabia in particular is enormously important both for the Israeli and the Palestinian leadership.

On a more general level, the most important facet of current Israeli-Palestinian and Israeli-Arab dynamics could be called: the end of unilateralism. Since 2000, when the Camp David talks between Israelis and Palestinians as well as the Israeli-Syrian talks broke down, we did not have a peace process in the Middle East. There was only a series of unilateral measures – some of them meant to be constructive such as Israel's withdrawals from Lebanon and from the Gaza Strip, or the unilateral ceasefire which Hamas maintained for almost one year. But such measures did not make up for the absence of negotiations. Arguably, the unilateral mode brought Israel back to South Lebanon and Gaza in the summer of 2006. And it created an *idée fixe* that they had no partner on the other side: Arafat was too much in cahoot with the terrorists, it was said, Hamas would not recognize Israel, Abbas was too weak, etc. Over the years, it has become clearer that counterparts in the conflict never are the ones you wish they were. And while it is easier to act unilaterally, you have to engage the counterparts that

are available, your enemies as it were, if you want to resolve the conflict; and you will even have to help them to become partners.

Of course, success is not guaranteed. Many commentators have recently pointed out the weakness of key actors in Israel and Palestine: Olmert is surviving in a coalition government, which is stable only as long as he does not fulfil Israel's obligation under the road map and does not make compromises which he knows are necessary; Abbas and the Palestinian Authority are not even in control of the West Bank, they are unable to move people and goods from one part of the Palestinian territories to others, or to provide basic public goods in the Gaza Strip. I have often been asked recently whether with key actor so weak the whole idea of launching new negotiation wasn't futile. My response is, to turn that question around: Yes, the Palestinian leadership and institutions, and the Israeli Prime Minister are weak. But one of the most important means to strengthen them, probably even to keep them afloat, is to engage them in a serious process which improves the situation on the ground and brings a resolution to the conflict closer. Arguably, this applies both to Israel and Palestine. But there is no doubt that it applies to the Palestinian leadership. Waiting until Abbas or Fayad get stronger or are replaced by stronger leaders would only lead to renewed unilateralism and weaken Palestinian institutions even more.

Where is Europe in all that, and where is the trilateral relationship between Europe, Israel, and the Arab Mashreq countries? From a European perspective, the response here is rather sobering. It is undeniable that European involvement in the region has increased over the last years. This is so regarding economic aid, particularly for Palestine and the Mashreq countries, or for political engagement. Consider not least the efforts under the German EU-Presidency to revive the Quartet and to get Syria into the process rather than leaving it outside, to use its de facto veto power. It even pertains to the security field. The EU runs two ESDP missions in Palestine, and there is a strong European participation in UNIFIL, the UN peacekeeping forces in Lebanon, with – quite important for Germany – the first military

contribution of the Bundeswehr to peacekeeping in the Arab-Israeli conflict area. At the same time, Europe's ability to influence events on the ground seems rather limited. It hurts to say, but it may be healthy to realize that at the Annapolis Conference the question whether the Saudi Foreign Minister would show up or whether Syria would participate was far more important than whether the German or the French Foreign Minister or the High Representative of the EU would attend. Partly, of course, this is the consequence of the EU still not always acting as a union in the Middle East, partly also it results from the EU itself giving up leverage over actors, particularly in Palestine by choosing not to talk to elected representatives after the 2006 legislative elections, and by also failing to clearly support the short-lived Palestinian Unity Government of 2007. The "Quartet Principles", demanding that the Palestinian government refrain from violence, honour agreements, and acknowledge Israel's right to exist, are legitimate, and express what we rightly expect. However, turning them into conditions even to talk is quite unusual, and not what we do in relation to many states in the region. And the withdrawal of support from pre-state institutions which we have actively helped to establish, has no doubt contributed to their breakdown.

The EU continues to be the most important donor to the peace process and the Palestinian territories. This has been underlined by the recent Paris donor conference. Europe is also the most important trade partner to all Mashreq countries; it runs important projects in Palestine and other Mashreq countries, and it tries to further regional cooperation through the Barcelona process. At the same time, the recent EU action plan for the Middle East peace process, which was initiated by Germany, is strikingly unambitious, or perhaps realistic. The proposed action focuses on support for Palestinian businesses and universities, and on strengthening the Palestinian police, political parties, and other institutions. There is no lamenting anymore, as used to be the case, about Europe being a payer, and not a player. And there is no mentioning of any diplomatic role except of the support of American efforts through the Quartet. Some of the instruments of the EU's toolbox will indeed become more

important once we reach “beyond peace”. I don’t think, however, that a diplomatic role can be avoided altogether.

Let me close with six questions and remarks regarding the EU’s practical involvement.

Starting from the instruments and institutions at hand in the EU toolbox, we have to ask:

1. Can Europe – and how can it – use its network of relationships with the Mashreq countries, that have been established under the Barcelona process and the ENP to catalyse regional and subregional cooperation in the economic, political, educational, and security fields? This is necessary not only to support the peace process, but even more so to strengthen a peace, which, if achieved, will probably lack societal support and be fragile for some time to come.
2. Can Europe develop its ENP so as to give Israel, which still is the economically and politically closest Middle Eastern partner of Europe, a prospective beyond its association agreement, probably allowing to participate in some EU institutions such as the common market – like Norway and Switzerland? The idea, of course, cannot be to integrate Israel into Europe and thereby isolate it from its Middle Eastern neighbourhood. We will therefore also have to make Arab states – Palestine, Syria and others – fit not only for trade, but also for competition with Israel, thereby reducing asymmetries which are an obstacle to cooperation and have limited the willingness of Arab states to fully engage in projects aiming at a “New Middle East” in the 1990s.

In the political and diplomatic field, even before peace, there may be responsibilities for European actors, too.

3. Will Europe be able to carry peace negotiations forward over a transition period in the US, if no final deal is struck at the end of the Bush presidency, or if a basic agreement needs further deliberations on details? We know how long it takes for a new administration to get started, and a positive dynamic in the Middle East could then easily

get stalled. Can Europe jump in, and can it do so without letting the US escape from its responsibilities?

4. Can Europe assume a monitoring and management support role in the implementation phase of an agreement? And will it be able to take the fire, if that also implies to become tough with parties who fail to live up to their commitments?
5. Will Europe be able to become a catalyst of talks between Syria and Israel, and probably between Syria and Lebanon, using its leverage with Damascus, Tel Aviv and Beirut? I assume we have actually more of that leverage than Russia, which has now announced that it will bring Israel-Syria talks back on track.
6. Finally: Will Europe be able to bring moderate Islamists into not only negotiations, but eventually the institutions that will support peace? We cannot afford that actors whose worldview may be far from ours, but who have a real constituency, remain outside if we want an eventual peace to be stable and alive. Europe's credibility here is an asset. I am convinced that by constructively using our strong political and societal links with Israel, and by opening channels to this part of Arab societies, we will also increase Europe's own soft power in the region.