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Beyond peace: Israel, the Arab world, and Europe

By [Volker Perthes](#),

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The desperate condition of people in the Gaza strip and the continuing violence across its border with Israel, the unsettled political condition of Lebanon, and the internal divisions among Palestinians and Israelis, all highlight the gulf between current realities in the middle east in the first weeks of 2008 and the achievement of a peace settlement that could transform them. But these events too are only part of a more varied [1] picture, and it may be timely to explore the realistic steps that could be taken in this - perhaps decisive - year to achieve such a settlement.

Volker Perthes heads [2] the *Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik* (German Institute for International and Security Affairs [3] / SWP) in Berlin.

He has published widely on Iraq and the middle east This article is based on a talk Volker Perthes delivered to the *Redebeitrag beim Symposium der Zeit-Stiftung* in Hamburg, on 15 January 2008 Also by Volker Perthes in **openDemocracy**:

"Iraq in 2012: four scenarios [3]" (11 September 2007)

In mapping a possible way forward that includes all relevant actors - Israel, the Arab countries (especially the eastern, Mashreq states, Europe, and of course the United States - consider the following situation: a US president, one year before the end his term (and with a certain eye on his legacy) makes an eleventh-hour effort to mediate peace between Israel and the Palestinians, eventually attempting to use his personal charm in common meetings with the key players in order to bridge gaps on the "final-status issues".

The description could be of George W Bush since the Annapolis conference [3] of 27 November 2007 and his tour [4] of the region on 8-16 January 2008; but it equally applies to the last year of the Bill Clinton presidency. This, it is true, can be an argument for scepticism about the prospects of the current Israeli-Palestinian peace process: both in 2000 and today, the aims (two states living peacefully side by side), the problems (the knotty final-status issues), and the solutions (the "Clinton parameters [5]" of December 2000, and ensuing Taba accord) are all the same (see Fred Halliday, "Palestinians and Israelis: a political impasse [5]", 5 June 2007).

It is also striking that President Bush - who so long avoided a hands-on approach to the Israel-Palestine-conflict and even denied its relevance - now, after seven years in office, tries to broker a deal. There must be fears (reinforced by the landmark speech [6] of his tour, in Abu Dhabi on 13 January) that Bush may be engaging for the "wrong" reasons - that he may see the Israeli-Palestinian peace efforts as part of a process of alliance-building against Iran. If this is indeed the president's logic, it would be a misreading of the situation in the middle east: in the sense that it underrates both how much regional actors (even in Palestine) are driven by their own local agendas and interests, and how relevant a resolution of the Palestine conflict is for the Arab world - particularly (again) for the Mashreq countries and Saudi Arabia.

The end of unilateralism

If some scepticism is appropriate, then, this should not mean resignation. For a lot has changed in the years between Clinton's and Bush's last years. True, 2000-08 has been a wasted period that has inflicted enormous costs in terms of human suffering on the Palestinians, the Israelis and the Lebanese (to name only those) as well as high opportunity costs - chances for progress not exploited - on the entire region. It seems, however, that key policy-makers have learned some lessons. The acknowledgment of Israel's prime minister Ehud Olmert that Jerusalem [6] will eventually have to be divided, for example, may not be new; but the fact that an Israeli prime minister has stated it publicly is important. It could become a confidence-building measure towards the Palestinians - if it wasn't undermined by new settlement [7] projects in the occupied part of the city.

Moreover, the president and prime minister of the Palestinian Authority - Mahmoud Abbas [8] and Salam Fayyad have started very serious efforts to establish the monopoly of force in their quasi-state, even under the very unfavourable conditions of occupation. Even Hamas, at least its governing faction in Gaza, was again - before the upsurge in violence and the humanitarian [9] crisis of mid-January 2008 - talking about a truce and negotiations with Israel. (The seriousness of such endeavours will be judged against the willingness of Hamas to stop its rocket-attacks on the towns of Sderot [10] and Ashkelon in southern Israel.) Moreover, the Arab states are much more supportive with regard to the peace process than they were at the time of Camp David in 2000; the support of Saudi Arabia [10] in particular is enormously important both for the Israeli and the Palestinian leadership.

On a more general level, the most important aspect 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, there has been no peace process in the middle east. Instead, there has been only a series of unilateral measures - some of them admittedly 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 even such measures did not make up for the absence of negotiations. Arguably, the dominant unilateral mode brought Israel back to southern Lebanon and Gaza in summer 2006; it also created an *idée fixe* that Israel had no partner on the other side (Yasser Arafat [10] was too much in cahoot with terrorists, Hamas would not recognise Israel, Abbas was too weak...). But over the years, it has become clearer that your counterparts in the conflict are never the ones you wish for: it may be easier to act unilaterally, but you have to engage with who is available (including your outright enemies) if you want to resolve the conflict - you will even have to help them to become partners.

True, even if this process is begun, success is not guaranteed. Many commentators have pointed out the weakness of key actors in Israel and Palestine. Ehud Olmert is barely surviving in a coalition government which remains stable only as long as he does not fulfil Israel's obligation under the "roadmap [11]" of June 2003 and does not make compromises which he knows are necessary; Mahmoud Abbas and the Palestinian Authority [12] are not even in control of the West Bank and are unable to move people or goods from one part of the Palestinian territories to others, or to provide basic public facilities in the Gaza strip.

This weakness is a problem, but it is a reason to continue and deepen new negotiations rather than to abandon them. For one of the most important elements of negotiation is precisely to strengthen the different sides by engaging them in a serious process which improves the situation on the ground and brings closer a resolution of the conflict. This applies to both

sides, but its relevance is especially clear to the Palestinian leadership [13] and institutions - the more there is delay, the more the chance of a renewed unilateralism and even greater corroding of Palestinian institutions.

Europe at the centre

But the two sides - again, as in 2000 - cannot do it alone. Where is Europe in all this, and where in particular is the trilateral relationship between Europe, Israel, and the Mashreq Arab countries? From a European perspective, the response to this question is sobering.

It is undeniable that European involvement [14] in the region has increased over the last years, something that can be measured in regard to economic aid and political engagement. The efforts during Germany's presidency of the European Union in the first half of 2007 to revive the Quartet [15] (the United States, European Union, United Nations and Russia) and to get Syria into the process, are notable here. There has even been involvement in the security field; the EU runs two European security and defence policy (ESDP [16]) missions in Palestine, and there is a strong European participation in the United Nations peacekeeping forces in Lebanon (Unifil), including - quite important for Germany - the first military contribution of the Bundeswehr [17] 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 realise, that before the Annapolis conference the issue of whether the Saudi foreign minister or a Syrian delegate would participate [18] was far more important than whether the German or the French foreign minister (or indeed the high representative of the European Union would attend). This, partly the consequence of the EU's recurrent inability to act as a single body in the middle east, results in Europe's damaging loss of leverage over important actors; in Palestine, the refusal to talk to elected representatives after the legislative elections [19] of January 2006, and the failure to clearly support the short-lived Palestinian unity government of 2007, are two examples.

The Quartet principles [20] agreed in 2003 - which demand that the Palestinian government refrains from violence, honours agreements, and acknowledges Israel's right to exist - are legitimate, and continue to express what Europe rightly expects. However, turning them into conditions even to talk is quite unusual, and not what Europe practices in relation to many states in the region. Moreover, 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 [21] to the peace process and the Palestinian territories. This has been underlined by the Paris donor conference [22] on 17 December 2007. Europe is also the most important trade partner to all Mashreq countries; it runs important project [23]s in Palestine and its Arab neighbours, and it tries to further regional cooperation through the Barcelona process (see Fred Halliday, "The 'Barcelona process': ten years on [23]", 11 November 2005)

At the same time, the EU action plan for the middle east peace process, initiated by Germany [24] and launched in October 2007 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 more lamenting about Europe being a "payer, but not a player"; nor any mention of any other diplomatic role except the support of American efforts through the Quartet. Some of these instruments in the EU's toolbox will indeed become more important once a point "beyond peace" is reached. But a more active diplomatic role is also needed.

Six questions

What might this look like? One way to approach this is - starting from the instruments and institutions the European Union has at hand - to pose six questions and remarks regarding the EU's practical involvement in the region.

First, can (and *how* can) Europe use its network of relationships with the Mashreq countries - established under the Barcelona process and the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership [25] (EMP) - to catalyse regional and sub-regional 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.

Second, can Europe develop its EMP so as to offer Israel, still Europe's closest regional partner in economic and political terms, a prospect beyond its association agreement - one that might allow it to participate in some EU institutions such as the European Economic Area [26] (EEA), like Norway and Switzerland? The idea, of course, cannot be to integrate Israel into Europe and thereby isolate it from its middle-eastern neighbourhood. In that case, it would be essential also to help make Arab states - Palestine, Syria and others - fit both for trade and for competition with Israel; this would reduce asymmetries which are an obstacle to cooperation and in the 1990s limited the willingness of Arab states to fully engage in projects aiming to create a "new middle east". In the political and diplomatic field, even before peace, there may be responsibilities here for European actors.

Third, will Europe be able to carry peace negotiations forward over the United States's period of transition [26] to a new president - if no final deal is struck by the end of the Bush presidency, or if a basic agreement is reached but needs further deliberation on details? A new Washington administration takes a long time to get started, and one result could be the stalling of a positive dynamic in the middle east. Can Europe enter this gap, and fill it without letting the US escape from its responsibilities?

Fourth, can Europe assume a monitoring and management support role in the implementation phase of any agreement? And can it take the fire, if that also implies becoming tough with parties that fail to live up to their commitments?

Fifth, will Europe prove capable of becoming 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 that Europe has more of that leverage than Russia, which has announced that it will bring Israel-Syria talks back on track).

Sixth, will Europe be able to bring moderate Islamists not only into negotiations, but eventually into the institutions that will support peace? If we want an eventual peace to be stable and alive, Europe cannot afford to let actors whose worldview may be very different but who have a real constituency remain outside the process. 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 element of Arab societies, Europe's own "soft power" in the region will be increased - to everyone's benefit.

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