

Europe and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

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In a new initiative, ORG is publishing a series of occasional briefing papers from key international commentators and experts. The first of these, by Avi Shlaim, contains an important new contribution to thinking about the resolution of the Israeli-Palestine conflict.

The crisis

The Palestine problem presents Europe with a crisis of supreme magnitude. The situation on the ground is dismal, dire, and getting worse by the day. The Oslo peace process broke down four years ago and the return to violence has already claimed the lives of 973 Israelis and 3,747 Palestinians. Israeli forces have injured 27,484 Palestinians, confiscated 224,415 dunums of Palestinian land, razed 72,951 dunums, and are estimated to have uprooted 1,167,913 trees. The road map to peace, launched by the Quartet with so much fanfare on 2 June 2003, is in tatters. A voluntary agreement between the parties is out of the question because of the acute asymmetry of power between them: Israel is too strong and the Palestinians are too weak.

One of the most disturbing aspects of the current situation is that the policies of Ariel Sharon's government are creating realities on the ground that are going to be extremely difficult, if not impossible to change. The government continues to expand the Jewish settlements on the West Bank, to construct more housing units, and to build more roads and by-pass roads to link the settlements to Israel proper. Moreover, in the face of fierce international opposition, the government is pressing ahead with the construction of the "security barrier" or wall that involves the expropriation of Palestinian land and creates unbearable conditions for the civilian population. This wall entails the de facto annexation of large chunks of the West Bank to Israel. It is unlikely, to say the least, that this wall will ever be dismantled or that the land on which it is built will be returned to its owners. In the meantime, the long-suffering civilian population has to contend with no less than 736 Israeli army checkpoints on what remains of its rapidly shrinking patrimony.

The road map envisaged an independent Palestinian state alongside the State of Israel by the end of 2005. But the Likud's policies of creeping annexation are steadily undermining the basis for a two-state solution. Israel's presence in the occupied territories is already so extensive and well entrenched as to cast doubt about the viability of a future Palestinian state. To be viable such a state requires territorial contiguity whereas the end-result of Israeli policies is to cut up the West Bank into a patchwork of isolated enclaves. Continuing Israeli expansion thus strikes at the very heart of a two- state solution.

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The United States and Great Britain

The Bush administration has made matters worse by supporting the expansionist policies of the present Israeli government. It endorsed Ariel Sharon's plan for a unilateral disengagement from the Gaza Strip although the plan entails the annexation of the major West Bank settlement blocks to Israel. Sharon's plan was presented as a contribution to the road map but it is nothing of the sort. The road map calls for negotiations between the two sides on the border between them and on the other "permanent status" issues such as Jerusalem and the right of return of the 1948 refugees; Sharon wants to re-draw the border between Israel and Palestine by unilateral action. He is the unilateralist *par excellence*. His idea of a Palestinian state is a small, weak, emasculated entity, consisting of a series of heavily populated enclaves with Israel controlling all the border crossings, air space, and water resources. The guiding principle behind Sharon's idea of a Palestinian state is the largest possible population on the minimum amount of land and the incorporation of the rest of the West Bank into Greater Israel.

George Bush famously described Ariel Sharon as "a man of peace." To most people Sharon is better known as a man of war. His plan is a recipe for never-ending conflict, turmoil, terror, and counter-terror in the Middle East. By endorsing Sharon's plan, President Bush abruptly reversed his country's traditional policy towards the conflict which was grounded in UN resolution 242 of 22 November 1967 and the view that Jewish settlements on occupied territory are illegal and "an obstacle to peace". The plan itself is seriously at odds with the Geneva conventions, the UN Charter, a whole raft of UN resolutions, and the recent ruling of the International Court of Justice in the Hague.

For reasons best known to himself, Tony Blair chose to associate himself with the Bush-Sharon pact. Blair's public statement in support of this infamous pact is all the more puzzling given the role he had played in persuading George Bush of the need for an international initiative to resolve the Palestine problem in the lead-up to the invasion of Iraq. Bush was not genuinely committed to the road map; he went along with it partly as a reward to Tony Blair for his support over Iraq. Despite the defection of Bush and Blair, the road map continues to represent the broadest possible measure of international consensus on the way forward on the Israel-Palestine front. All the other members of the Quartet – Russia, the UN, and European Union - remain fully committed to it. By lining up behind Bush in his blind support for Sharon, Blair dealt a serious blow to the hopes of a negotiated settlement. He also abandoned the Palestinians to the tender mercies of General Sharon. This was the second greatest betrayal by Britain of the Palestinian people since the Balfour Declaration of 1917 and there have been many others in between.

European Union

European Union cannot put Western policy towards the Israeli-Palestinian conflict back on track but it should do what it can to limit the damaging effects of Anglo-American folly. EU is the only international actor capable of balancing the sole surviving superpower in the Middle East. It has the right and the duty, in its capacity as a member of the Quartet and one of the authors of the road map, to distance itself from the latest twist in US foreign policy. US support for Sharon's unilateral disengagement plan amounts to an undeclared abandonment of

the road map. This change of course took place without consultation with America's allies, with the exception of Britain. The least that EU can do is to publicly reaffirm its support for the road map and the two-state solution that it embodies.

EU is an important actor in the Arab-Israeli conflict for historical, political, and economic reasons. It is Israel's largest trading partner and the biggest provider of foreign aid to the Palestinians. America, by contrast, is not a major trading partner to Israel and its aid to the Palestinian Authority is negligible. For this reason alone, EU views on the appropriate mode of conflict resolution ought to carry some weight. EU can choose to remain, in Willy Brandt's phrase, "an economic giant and a political dwarf" but it is not mandatory to do so!

As a military power Europe is simply not in the same league as the United States. One can therefore easily apply Stalin's jibe about the Vatican to Europe – How many divisions does the Pope have? But military power has its limits as America's experience in Iraq has painfully demonstrated. Europe, precisely because it does not rely to the same extent as America on military power to bring about political change, enjoys more credibility as an actor on the international stage. It also enjoys greater legitimacy because of its respect for international law and international institutions, its values of cooperation and conflict resolution, and its record in promoting democracy and human rights.

Domestic constraints and international standards

America's whole approach to the Middle East is vitiated by its adherence to a double-standard – one towards Israel and one towards the Arabs. Europe has one common standard to Arabs and Israelis but it needs to apply it more assertively. Nor should it shy away from using its economic leverage against any party that falls short of this standard for international behaviour. Israel, for example, has recently pressed foreign donors to finance the construction of a web of roads through the occupied territories – made necessary by the construction of the wall and the roads that are for the exclusive use of the settlers. Europe needs to tell Israel loud and clear that it is not in the business of financing apartheid. A European role is not only possible but crucial for realising the vision of a two-state solution, for striking the right balance between security for Israel and justice for the Palestinians.

American bias in favour of Israel is not a fleeting feature of the Bush administration but the result of the peculiarities of the American electoral system. Henry Kissinger used to say, with good reason, that Israel has no foreign policy, only domestic politics. The same may be said about America, at least in relation to the Middle East. Due to structural reasons, no American Congress is ever likely to support a policy deemed adverse to Israel's interests. Settlements in the occupied territories are a case in point. America supports Israel to the tune of \$3 billion dollars a year but this aid is rarely made conditional on desisting from policies that harm the prospects for peace such as the building of new settlements. America changed the regime in Baghdad in three weeks. But it failed to compel Israel to dismantle a single settlement in 37 years.

EU does not labour under the same debilitating constraints. Its approach to the Middle East is much more enlightened and even-handed. It is unreservedly committed to Israel's security within its legal borders and it has a trade association agreement that carries very substantial

benefits for the Jewish state. This commitment to Israel is balanced by support for the Palestinian right to self-determination in the territories occupied by Israel in 1967. EU has a much more consistent record than America of upholding international law and abiding by UN resolutions relating to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The view that EU should follow America because only America can deliver Israel is simply wrong. America cannot and will not push Israel into a settlement. It follows that EU must pursue an independent policy if it is to contribute to a resolution of the conflict.

Leadership

If the enlarged EU is to play a more effective role in the diplomacy surrounding the Israel-Palestinian dispute, one of its key members will have to take the lead. Britain is no longer fit to take the lead because the part it played in the illegal invasion of Iraq has all but destroyed its reputation on the continent and in the Arab world. France would not command broad support as a leader because it is widely perceived to be too antagonistic towards Israel and too soft on the Arabs for commercial reasons. Germany would probably rule itself out for a leadership role on account of its continuing guilt feelings towards the Jewish people arising out of the Holocaust. But all the signs suggest that Germany would lend its weight to an independent European initiative if another major power took the lead.

Spain has the best credentials for taking the lead in a new European initiative to promote a peaceful settlement to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. This is not the result of a process of elimination but of a long list of positive virtues. First, Spain has a long historic association with the Jewish people and close ties with the Muslim countries of North Africa, especially Morocco. Second, ever since the end of the dictatorship, Spain has displayed a commendable commitment to international law and international order. Third, Spain successfully hosted the Madrid peace conference in 1991 and the Barcelona conference of 1995. Fourth, the Socialist government that came to power in April 2004 is eminently well-qualified to serve as an honest broker between Israelis and Palestinians. It began life by breaking away from its predecessor's unpopular legacy of support for the American war in Iraq and quickly set about resuming Spain's traditional role as a loyal member of the European community of nations.

Senior members of the government have deep knowledge and extensive first-hand experience of the problems of the Middle East. Miguel Angel Moratinos, the foreign minister, was the EU special envoy to the Middle East peace process and he won the respect of both sides by his impartiality and fair-mindedness. His deputy, Bernardino Leon, is a career diplomat who specialised in Middle Eastern affairs and later served as director of the Foundation of the Three Cultures of the Mediterranean in Seville. In Seville he hosted the West-Eastern Divan, the unique and brilliantly successful orchestra for young Israeli and Arab musicians that Daniel Barenboim and the late Edward Said established in 1999. Leon convened several conferences and workshops on Israeli-Palestinian relations. He also translated into Spanish the present writer's book *The Iron Wall: Israel and the Arab World*. In short, there is an important European leadership role waiting for an actor and Socialist Spain is able and willing to play this role.

It is a mistake to think, as nearly all Israelis do, that a European role in regulating the regional conflict would necessarily be at their country's expense. Whether they like it or not, Israelis

and Palestinians are destined to live side by side on the same small piece of land. Israel's supreme interest lies in a negotiated settlement of the dispute with its immediate neighbours. The policies of the Sharon government over the last four years have produced neither peace nor security. They have also inflicted serious damage to the Israeli economy and to living standards in the Palestinian territories. There is nothing Israelis want more than peace and security and they are prepared to pay the territorial price for it. Surveys show that the majority of Israelis support a two-state solution with only minor border modifications. The politicians of the Right are much more opposed to the idea of an independent Palestinian state than the Israeli public.

On the Palestinian side, both the government and the public would warmly welcome a more forceful European intervention in the conflict. The PA accepted with alacrity the Quartet's road map and started implementing it even before it was officially launched. But it was too weak to prevent the suicide bombings by Islamic militants that were used by Israel to justify its abandonment of the road map. Among the public at large there is much greater degree of support for internal reform and for an end to violence than is commonly recognised in the West. A survey carried out by Dr Khalil Shikaki in the autumn of 2004 revealed that 92 per cent of respondents support fundamental political reform in the PA; that 79 per cent support the mutual cessation of violence with Israel; and that 72 per cent support reconciliation between the two peoples.

Yasser Arafat was a controversial figure. Although he was the indisputable symbol of the Palestinian cause, he led his people to a dead end. In the West Arafat was widely perceived in as a problem because of his resistance to reform, because he was inept and incompetent, and because he was unwilling or unable to prevent violent attacks on Israeli civilians. But for all his faults, Arafat was a democratically-elected leader who continued to represent a broad national consensus in favour of a two-state solution. In any case, Arafat's death, on 11 November 2004, marked the end of an era in Palestinian politics. The departure of the patriarch from the political scene opened up an opportunity for a new beginning with new people and new ideas.

The first order of business was to elect a new president to succeed Yasser Arafat. The presidential elections held on 9 January 2005 were a test for Palestinian democracy and the Palestinians passed the test with flying colours. A team of some 800 international observers reported very favourably on the conduct of the elections. There were six candidates, lively debates, and a genuine contest. The winner was Mahmoud Abbas, popularly known as Abu Mazen, the mainstream Fatah candidate, who received 62 per cent of the votes cast. The runner up, with 19 per cent of the votes, was Dr Mustafa Barghouthi, a well respected physician and the leader of a democratic political party called "Al Mubadara".

The 69 year-old Abu Mazen has excellent credentials to lead the Palestinians in the post-Arafat era. He is a moderate who was deeply involved in the Oslo peace process and the co-author with Yossi Beilin of what became known in 1995 as the Beilin-Abu Mazen plan. Following the collapse of the Oslo process and the outbreak of the Al-Aqsa intifada in 2000, Abu Mazen repeatedly warned that the resort to force would hurt the Palestinians more than it would hurt the Israelis. Within a week of his inauguration, Abu Mazen went to Gaza and persuaded Hamas and Islamic Jihad to suspend their attacks on Israel in return for a tacit

Israeli agreement to a cease-fire. His aim is not to crush but to co-opt the militant organisations, to initiate an internal peace process between the different Palestinian factions that would enable him to press for the renewal of the peace process with Israel. Abu Mazen's agenda is the EU's agenda: to bring about a cease-fire, to carry out political and financial reforms, to reorganise the security forces, to assert the rule of law, and to revive the negotiations with Israel on a two-state solution.

Conclusion

The case for an active EU role in promoting a genuine two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is thus overwhelmingly strong today from every conceivable angle. It would serve Israel's best long-term interest by ending its occupation of another people and by enabling it to channel its energies towards more constructive ends. It would assist the Palestinians in realising their long-denied aspirations to independence and statehood. It would help the moderate Arab states, all of whom have been destabilised by the violence of the second intifada. Last but not least, it would remove one of the main sources of Muslim rage against the West and thus help the West in the conduct of the global campaign against terror. In all these different ways, a European initiative would not be a selfish act but a desperately needed contribution to the resolution of one of the most protracted and bitter conflicts of modern times, to regional stability, and to international order.

If ever there was a time for Europe to stand firm, it is now; and if ever there was a cause on which to stand firm, it is this one.