

It is urgent that the EU should follow up on UN Resolution 1701 and the deployment of member states' troops to Lebanon with a strategic-diplomatic initiative aimed at the fundamental problem, namely the lack of an agreed resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The reasons for this are a mix of old and new; reasons which are rooted in the international, European and Middle Eastern domains.

The unresolved conflict remains poison for the international relations of the region and the world. The Palestinian cause did not create Osama bin Laden and Al Qaeda, but the persistence of the conflict, coupled with the escalating Middle Eastern crises in Lebanon, Iraq and Iran have had a threefold detrimental effect on the aim to eradicate terrorism. They have helped al-Qaeda ideologues lump together different sets of fundamentally unconnected crises, in their quest to forge a global *ummah* in pursuit of a global *jihad*. They have been a prime recruitment motivation of Islamic terrorists in Europe. They have also acted as a key factor in the escalating degradation of relations between Islam and the West.

The EU and its member states could now take the initiative diplomatically, both because it has a reasonably balanced position between the adversaries and because of its deepening involvement the Middle East conflict in terms of financial resources and manpower. The EU tried to get the peace process going in 2002 with the US, Russia and UN in the 'Quartet'. Under the Danish Presidency at the time it drafted a first version of the 'Roadmap' as a means to engage the Bush administration in the moribund peace process, and so to integrate the newfound US and Israeli concerns over Palestinian governance in a comprehen-

What should the European Union do next in the Middle East?

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sive framework, leading eventually to a two-state solution. But in addition to Israel's reservations to the Roadmap, the US took over the agenda of the Quartet, which in practice sought sound democratic governance (and the removal of then president Arafat) in the Palestinian Territories as a precondition for negotiations over statehood or the final map. The EU went along with this out of deference to the US and the strong European perception that a peace process, to have any chance of success, required American leadership. In practice the Roadmap was stillborn, although at the declaratory level it remained part of the official and public discourse up until the summer of 2006.

Despite stalemate in the Roadmap, the EU nonetheless continued to pour time, effort and resources into reviving the peace process. Between 2002 and 2005, it devoted increasing financial and technical resources to the Palestinian Authority and its reform process, with some discernible successes in the fiscal and judicial domains in particular. In 2004 and 2005, coupled with the work of the Quartet's Special Envoy for Disengagement, it attempted to mitigate the detrimental effects of the Gaza disengagement, took an active role in Gaza's border management (through the EU mission in Rafah), and unsuccessfully tried to mould Sharon's unilateralism into a revived Roadmap process. In 2006, while having sanctioned the elected Hamas-led PA, the EU contributed to pulling the Palestinian Authority back from the brink, elaborating an International

Temporary Mechanism in order to channel funds to the collapsing Authority. Yet despite these efforts, today the Roadmap is dead and there is no peace plan or process in sight.

However, the Lebanon war and the European peacekeeping efforts there have heightened EU stakes in Middle East peace. The EU is obliged now to take the initiative on the political front, since it has its soldiers exposed to the hazards of crossfire between the Israeli army and Hezbollah. Italy is in the lead with 3,000 troops. Prime Minister Prodi has acted swiftly and impressively. Also as regards the southern Palestinian front, Foreign Minister D'Alema has hinted at a possible peacekeeping involvement in the Gaza Strip, which would be decided on the basis of experience on the Lebanese front with the strengthened UNIFIL mission.

Yet peacekeeping alone in Lebanon and more so in the Gaza Strip runs the risk of enmeshing European forces into an endless 'mission impossible'. Peacekeeping, with any chance of success, must be accompanied by strategic diplomatic action aimed at establishing legitimate and recognized borders to be protected, to the north, south, and eventually to the east. Having taken the lead on the Lebanese front, Italy, with the EU, needs now to act strategically to protect its own people and pursue a solution to the Middle East conflict which has become an ever more pressing European interest.

A further reason for serious European diplomatic action is the state of Israeli policy itself. Israel's strategy is now in tatters. Sharon's disengagement plan emerged from the need to find an alternative to a negotiated two-state agreement. Citing as excuses Arafat's ambivalence, followed by Abbas' impotence and finally Hamas' radicalism, the Israeli authorities forcefully argued – backed by the majority of the public – that unilateralism was the only game in town. Sharon's Gaza disengagement was conducted smoothly and peacefully. It gave birth to a new centrist party – Kadima – which reflected the mainstream goal of the Zionist left and right to reconcile the competing claims of territorial expansion and demographic control.

Kadima, taken over by Ehud Olmert, ran and won the March 2006 elections on a bid to 'do Gaza in the West Bank'. Together with the tightening grip over East Jerusalem and the West Bank, the cordoning-off of the Jordan valley, and the construction of the euphemistically-dubbed 'separation barrier', 'convergence' was the word on everyone's lips in the spring of 2006. Kadima's convergence plan was to rationalize its occupation of the West Bank through a realignment of its presence and control. Doing so could raise the chances of international recognition of Israel's annexation of large swathes of occupied territory, while concomitantly avoiding to absorb large number of Palestinians with it. In the absence of a state on 'their side' of the wall, Palestinians would be governed through a mix of local self-government and heavy international civilian and possibly military presence.

The events of the summer of 2006 shattered the plan. Qassam rockets fired from Gaza into Israel and the war that Israel unleashed on the Strip shelved the hope that disengagement would end occupation and propel the region into relative stability. The Lebanon war proved that military means alone, cannot provide Israel with the security it justifiably yearns for. The previously invincible IDF was unable to destroy Hezbollah, which on the contrary bolstered its reputation in the Arab world. Likewise, the IDF has failed to eradicate Hamas or the Palestinian public's support for it, despite its

military actions, assassinations and widespread arrests. The Israeli public has visibly backed away from its support for unilateral disengagements. A recent poll published in Yediot Ahrnot (25 August) revealed that a mere 9% of the Israeli public still backs Olmert's convergence plan. Those who want peace have to find a different way. Sharon's unilateralism, inherited by Olmert, is not working.

What should the EU do? It should convene a conference of the parties and its Quartet partners, and table as primary working documents the March 2002 Arab League Peace Initiative and the October 2003 Geneva Accords. The Arab peace plan for the first time offered a comprehensive peace with Israel in return for the establishment of a Palestinian state on the 1967 borders, a just and agreed solution to the refugee problem as well as Israel's withdrawal from Syrian and Lebanese territory. Providing substantive detail on the Israeli-Palestinian dossier, the Geneva Accord of 19 October 2003, is the most well-prepared and detailed peace plan that exists, and was signed by a distinguished group of about 70 Israeli and Palestinian independent individuals.

The document treats the issues of statehood, the map (the pre-1967 map subject to agreed reciprocal land swaps on a 1:1 basis), a guaranteed land corridor between the West Bank and Gaza, Jerusalem's holy sites, the security regime and the refugees (with multiple options, but leaving Israel the sovereign right to determine the number that it would accept back). Some parts of the wall would have to be dismantled, which is what the Israeli government has always claimed could be the case. Most obviously are those parts of the wall, especially in East Jerusalem, that separate Palestinians from Palestinians, leaving many on the 'wrong side' of the barrier. As in the Arab Peace Initiative, the details of the Lebanese-Syrian parts of the conflict with Israel should of course be added to the content of the Geneva Accord. Israel would withdraw from the Golan Heights and Sheba farms as part of the complete and final settlement.

The EU could propose that the parties agree in the first instance to put to referenda the following question: "Do you agree that the Arab Peace Initiative

and the Geneva Accord should be the basis for negotiations for a permanent and complete settlement of the conflict?" One can speculate that today, or tomorrow after some debate, both parties would deliver majorities in favour. The negotiators would then have entirely new terms of reference for finishing off quickly the details of land swaps, refugee arrangements and security provisions.

The Sharon and Olmert governments cold-shouldered the Geneva Accord. But now Israel faces a new situation, in which the Sharon/Olmert policies are seen to have been disastrous. Several Israeli politicians, including Defence Minister Amir Perez and Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni have expressed support for renewed negotiations. The Geneva Initiative has re-launched a new campaign to sensitize and rally support for its cause. Israel is a democracy, and should accept the verdict of the consultative referendum. Would the Palestinians accept shelving various elements of old rhetoric concerning the objective of destroying the state of Israel?

All signals suggest that they would. The prisoners' document, which endorsed the notion of a two-state solution, was signed by a senior member of Hamas (as well as by representatives of Fatah and other minor factions). The document could serve as a basis for a much-needed national reconciliation, which could herald the establishment of a national unity government that would also normalize its relations with the international community.

Would the US once again mount such a set of pre-conditions that the process would stall, just like the Roadmap? The US knows that its Middle East policies have been a set of serial disasters, all of them from Israel-Palestine to Iraq and Iran. The EU should proceed with resolve and clarity, and collect the support of the Arab world and Russia as its Quartet partner. Perhaps the US would be heartily relieved to see the EU do this. If it sought to block it, it would do so at its own risk, in opposing alone the rest of world, which is not something it would want to do at this time.