

Europe and the Middle East

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What lies behind the European position on the Middle East? It is important to remember that the European Union has no unifying foreign policy, and at most, enjoys coordination between its members. Thus nation states such as Germany, France, and Great Britain do not necessarily heed the EU's authority even when the EU seems to be speaking with one voice.

The basic rationale behind the EU's stance in the context of the Middle East is that because the region is adjacent to Europe, there are inter-dependencies between the security of the Middle East and Europe. Instability in the Middle East reflects on Europe. Therefore, the European desire has always been to achieve stability, i.e., to attain a comprehensive solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict. The conflict is seen as a primary focus of instability that reflects on the entire region, and therefore a solution is of the highest order of priority. An additional element in Europe's conduct in our context relates to the colonial past of some EU members, not to mention the dependency on energy and the economic interests.

These elements together serve as the basis for European activism in the Middle East context. This activism is expressed first and foremost on the declarative level. Lacking other significant tools, this is in fact the primary means by which the EU can exert any pressure. The Europeans are well aware of their limitations and weaknesses and do not see themselves as leading processes that would bring about a comprehensive settlement. They view their role as one of coordination and as complementary to the policy of the United States, which was not always willing to bring Europe into its inner circle vis-à-vis the regional processes. It is necessary to wait and see if during Obama's term in office we can expect closer coordination and a division of labor between Europe and the United States. Until peace

is achieved, Europe is actively attempting to help the Palestinians improve their quality of life and construct institutions for the nation-in-the-making.

I would like to stress two age-old elements characteristic of Europe's conduct. First, on a number of essential issues, Europe is ahead of its time, not to mention ahead of Israel's stance. It would seem that European processes of ripening are quicker than our own. For example, in 1975 Germany spoke in favor of the Palestinians' right to self-determination from the podium of the UN General Assembly; at the time, this became the source of a serious disagreement between Germany and Israel. The Venice Declaration in June 1980 went back and restated the European community's position in favor of the Palestinians' right to self-determination. In 1999, the EU expressed support for negotiations that would lead to Palestinian statehood. In this declaration, as well as in the most recent declaration of December 2009, willingness was also expressed to recognize, at the appropriate time, a Palestinian state, because the EU is convinced that the establishment of such a state is a better guarantee of Israel's security. In the most recent declaration the EU also expressed willingness to recognize East Jerusalem as the capital of the future Palestinian state, achieved as part of true peace and through negotiations. I think that this recognition of East Jerusalem will result in a European recognition of West Jerusalem as the capital of the State of Israel, a step that to this day has not been taken.

The second element of Europe's conduct towards Israel relates to a pattern of reward and punishment that has become ingrained ever since the EU formulated its positions on the conflict in the Middle East. Israel receives bonuses for good behavior when it does what Europe expects it to do. When Israel fails to deliver the goods, it is punished by having some of its requests rejected, whether this entails the rejection of upgrading the political dialogue or denying the ratification of association agreements between Israel and the EU. It is doubtful whether this pattern of behavior is likely to change in the near future.

Israel's position with regard to the EU is ambivalent. On the one hand, Israel aims to forge as close a relationship as possible and thus be part of the West. On the other hand, Israel views the official European position as problematic, if not downright hostile. Europe does not conduct an even-handed policy, rather one that from a variety of reasons tends to be closer to the Arab-Palestinian position. There are those who see the European

stance as being colored by anti-Semitism, though I do not think that every position critical of Israel should automatically be labeled as anti-Semitic. As for the source of the dispute, I think that the roots of the disagreement between us and Europe are manifold (historical, political, cultural). This leads to mistrust.

Part of the dispute between us and Europe relates to the traumatic historical lessons of World War II. These lessons led Europe, under the American defense umbrella during the years of the Cold War, to take a stance sanctifying the principles at the base of Europe's foreign policy: multilateralism, trust in international institutions and international law, denial of the use of force as a means for political transformation, and empathy for the victim. Since 1967, Israel no longer conforms to the victim category, and therefore sympathy tends to the weaker side, now identified with the Palestinians. Nor has Israel's conduct in these years necessarily conformed to these principles, and thus problems arise.

Although we are, at least seemingly, conducting a dialogue with the Europeans, this dialogue greatly resembles a conversation of the deaf. Israel's status in European public opinion is eroding steadily and rapidly. Given the demographic shift in the continent and the rise of the Muslim component, we should expect additional difficulties as the Muslims become a minority with political clout striving to affect the political conduct of the continent.

On the Iranian issue, the EU has come a long way in the last five years in terms of understanding the Iranian threat. At the beginning of the millennium, the common European understanding was that it was an Israeli problem. Now, however, we are seeing the development of an understanding that it is not only an Israeli problem and not only a regional problem, but a global problem, and therefore it is necessary that Europe pay attention to it. We owe the beginning of this process largely to the Bush administration's failed policies in its conduct toward Iran.

The understanding of the EU as a bloc is that crisis management must take place with the UN by means of Security Council resolutions, with preference given to diplomacy, when at least on the declarative level not all options are on the table from the European perspective. The use of sanctions is seen as a last resort in the absence of other means. The recent radicalization of the Iranian positions has caused even the EU to recognize

that it is impossible to avoid imposing severe sanctions, with the preference, of course, that they be administered in a Security Council framework. Should a Security Council resolution be stymied because of Russia and China, my assessment is that the EU will agree to join in the sanctions, led by the United States, even without a Security Council resolution. Should the United States decide on the military option, the European nations will obviously abstain from participating but will also not condemn the move.