

Europe, Israel and Palestine: endgame?

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The Palestinian crisis is steadily worsening as Israel and its Western backers continue to exclude and marginalise HAMAS from the political process. Little can be expected from the Annapolis initiative in November 2007 for no positive steps towards constructing a viable peace by the end of 2008 have taken place since then. Instead the Gaza Strip has been isolated and the West Bank has been fragmented by settlements, "settler roads", road blocks and the Separation Wall. In these circumstances, moderates in the region and elsewhere seek an alternative interlocutor to revive the peace process and the European Union has frequently been mentioned in this regard. Europe, however, appears to have disqualified itself by abandoning its cherished principles of normative power and constructive engagement in favour of a securitised foreign policy that apes its American counterpart, even though the Union continues to supply emergency aid. The roots for this policy choice seem to lie in Europe's own adoption of America's rejection of engagement with opponents it designates as "terrorist" and in European fears of the loss of America's security umbrella, should it challenge the assumptions behind the trans-Atlantic relationship by a more independent approach to the problems of the Middle East.

The situation in the West Bank and Gaza today, just over two years since the Palestinian legislative elections on January 25, 2006, has never looked so bleak. HAMAS, the party that won the election, has been isolated by the international community because of its refusal to formally recognise Israel, renounce violence and accept all previous agreements between the Palestinian Authority and Israel. The hope of a national unity government, nurtured by the Mecca agreement just a year ago, collapsed in a welter of violence last June when HAMAS forced Fatah out of the Gaza Strip, a breach which seems unlikely to be healed by the recent negotiations in Yemen.

The international arena offers little hope of progress. Despite American claims and much diplomatic bustling, the Roadmap is effectively dead, even if President Bush defiantly insists that a Palestinian state will be in being by 2009. The Annapolis Conference at the end of November turned out to generate nothing more than empty rhetoric, not least because the participants - including the European Union, despite its belief in "constructive engagement" - insisted on refusing to recognise the reality of HAMAS. Since then, regular meetings between Ehud Olmert, the Israeli premier, and his Palestinian interlocutor, Mahmoud Abbas, have produced nothing of substance and Israel persists in expanding settlements in the West Bank.

The situation on the ground

Now Israeli settlements, roads and other infrastructure take up at least 39 percent of the land area of the West Bank.¹ Worse than that, the region is already fragmented into enclaves by around 550 obstacles and barriers. Access from the West Bank to Jerusalem is virtually impossible, even though the city has traditionally been the nexus of the region's roads. The infamous 721 km barrier, which will annex a further 10 per cent of the West Bank, is by now almost two-thirds complete.²

Security is, of course, the justification for these developments, now that Israel has disengaged from the Gaza Strip. Yet, on 7 March 2008, a Palestinian who lived in East Jerusalem attacked a yeshiva in the city, considered to be the intellectual centre for the settlers, and gunned down eight of the students before he himself was killed. He had been provoked, his family said, by the deaths of over 120 Palestinians in Gaza as a consequence of Israeli attacks, themselves a response to Palestinian rockets fired at Sderot and Ashkelon - and that, in turn of course, was a response to the blockade around the Gaza Strip and the continual persecution of HAMAS and other radical groups in Gaza.

In the flare-up in violence between February 27 and March 2, 107 Palestinians died and 250 were injured whilst three Israelis died and another 25 were injured.³ Yet none of this has persuaded HAMAS to acquiesce to Israeli and Western demands. President Mahmoud Abbas, despite his detestation for HAMAS, has been forced to call a halt to his desultory negotiations with Israel in protest at the deaths, despite demands by United States Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice to re-engage in order to preserve the Annapolis Process. Not even Tony Blair's recent appointment as the economic envoy for the Quartet has given any impetus to the initiative either.

The ultimate victims, of course, are the Palestinians themselves, particularly in Gaza. Just as the attack in Jerusalem occurred, a group of eight British non-governmental organisations, led by OXFAM, issued a report on the economic state of the Gaza Strip which it described as the worst since Israel occupied the region in 1967.⁴ The situation in the West Bank is not quite so severe for there is no blockade in operation. Even so, the region is suffering from economic stagnation as the barrier achieves virtually the same effect. Yet the recent donor conference which pledged \$7.4 billion - less than the \$8.7 billion the World Bank believes is needed - has encouraged the private sector which reported 10 percent growth last year.

In the Gaza Strip, staple food prices rose at between 20 and 34 per cent in one month in mid-2007, so that families spend 62 percent of their income on food, compared with 37 percent in 2004. By March 2008 only 45 of the 250 trucks needed to bring provisions to the Strip actually entered it each day, 80 percent of the population relied on aid, compared with 63 percent in 2006, when the current blockade began, and unemployment was approaching 50 percent as only 195 out of Gaza's 3,900 factories still operated. The rest had closed down whilst 40,000 agricultural workers had also been thrown out of work because agricultural produce could no longer be exported.

Given the situation as described above, it is difficult to appreciate how improvements leading towards a negotiated peace and the construction of an independent state could occur. It seems evident that HAMAS will not - indeed, cannot - make the concessions demanded of it for it to

¹ United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (2007), "The humanitarian impact on Palestinians of Israel's settlements and other infrastructure in the West Bank" (July 2007), Jerusalem. There were 539 obstacles on July 11, 2007, a 43 per cent increase since the Israeli disengagement from Gaza in July 2005 (376 obstacles) but below the 710 obstacles in July 2004. www.ochaopt.org

² United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (2007), "The humanitarian impact of the West Bank Barrier on Palestinian communities" (June 2007), Jerusalem; page 14.

³ United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, "Gaza humanitarian situation report: escalation in violence 27 Feb-3 March 2008", Jerusalem.

⁴ OXFAM et al. (2008), "The Gaza Strip: a humanitarian implosion", Oxford and London.

become a partner in any negotiating process. Moreover, its offer of an extended truce (hudna) and what would amount to de facto recognition of the Israeli state through the very act of negotiating with it will not be adequate, either for Israel or for the international community. Nor can Fatah easily compound with it so that, at least, a united Palestinian front could be created for future negotiation.

Equally, Israel, even with international support, cannot meaningfully negotiate with half the Palestinian community and ignore the other half, especially as HAMAS is not losing support amongst Palestinians, despite the deprivations they suffer, even if its popularity has been undermined, precisely because they, too, resent Israeli behaviour so intensely. Nor does it help for Israel to attribute HAMAS intransigence to Iran or to Hezbollah. Both may have served as examples of successful resistance to the wishes of the international community but neither can set the HAMAS agenda or control its activities inside the West Bank and Gaza. The irony is that even a majority of Israelis recognise that HAMAS cannot be excluded indefinitely but official Israeli and American opinion is unyielding - there cannot be and will not be any contact with "terrorists"!

At the same time, the constant and unrelenting pressure on Palestinians under occupation is bound to have its effects. The preliminary figures for the 2007 census of Palestinians in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip have demonstrated that the rate of population growth has slowed from 3.7 percent per year to around 2.7 percent per year. The causes, it appears, are both a decline in fertility, no doubt because of the unending insecurity and violence, and heavy emigration since 2000, when the current intifada erupted and was followed by economic slump.⁵ Indeed, the Palestinian population in East Jerusalem appears to have fallen to 208,000, below even the 1997 level of 210,000 and far below the conventional estimate of 256,000.

Outcomes

These figures raise the spectre of displacement; the gradual emptying-out of the West Bank and Gaza of its Palestinian population. Whilst the Israeli right wing and the settler movement might welcome this, Israeli politicians know that the creation of Eretz Israel in such a way would be disastrous for the international reputation of the Israeli state. Indeed, even given the immense sense of disappointment felt amongst Israelis over the current security situation and the way in which the peace process has evolved, a majority - 80 percent according to a poll carried out by Tel Aviv University in 2007 - want peace and 62 percent believe the Palestinians are entitled to their own state.⁶

It is clear that any effective peace process will now require massive support from outside the region and there has been no shortage of good advice to Israeli and Palestinian leaders who are still the major players.⁷ Quite apart from the United States, the obvious interlocutor both in its own eyes and in those of the international community, moderate Arab states and the European Union have been encouraged, by those involved, particularly the Palestinians, to take individual initiatives, with Russia and the United Nations bobbing in their wake. And they have taken initiatives repeatedly over recent years but none - including the tardy and ill-considered Quartet's Roadmap⁸ - have had much effect, mainly because they refuse to recognise realities on the ground.

⁵ The Portland Trust (2008), *Palestinian Economic Bulletin*, March 2008, London, Ramallah, Tel Aviv.

⁶ Yaar E. and Hermann T. (2007), *Peace index November 2007*, Tel Aviv University and Tami Steinmetz Center for Peace Research (Tel Aviv) <http://www.tau.ac.il/peace>

⁷ See, for example, the recent reports of the International Crisis Group: "Palestinians, Israel and the Quartet: pulling back from the brink" (June 13, 2006); "After Mecca: engaging with HAMAS" (February 28, 2007); and "After Gaza" (August 2, 2007). <http://www.crisisgroup.org>

⁸ See Alvaro de Soto's "End-of-Mission Report" May 2007, (United Nations) for a considered and damning indictment of the Quartet's efforts, particularly the United Nations extreme sensitivity towards American and Israeli criticism.

The problem is that political initiative is always dogged by past action, so that what may appear obvious to the observer may be impossible for a participant, whether directly involved or simply trying to influence outcomes, to undertake. Initiatives, furthermore, can easily be impeded by the unwillingness of those directly engaged to be coerced – Lilliputian states and even non-state actors can exert negative power out of all proportion to their size! Nor is it simply a question of past history and present alliances; often, a large part of the inhibitions resides in the participant's perceptions of the conflict and in its conceptualisation of it. This has proved, sadly enough, to be particularly true of Brussels and of most major European states.

All these factors have constantly and consistently operated to negate initiatives designed to resolve the sixty-year-old conflict which has been unfolding since 1967, if not before as well. Since the advent of the current decade and the events of September 11, 2001, their influence has been reinforced by Western obsessions over trans-national violence and security, coupled with the growing fragmentation of the Arab world so that the political and diplomatic stagnation in the Levant seems to be virtually impossible to disrupt. Indeed, it has given even greater leverage to those directly involved to hinder progress towards compromise and an eventual solution.

In such circumstances, it is worth reconsidering whether or not those involved in the dispute can make any meaningful input into resolving it and what the conditions would be that might enable them to do so. In addition, this would seem to be a particularly apposite moment to consider such possibilities as a new administration in Washington approaches, allowing for the malevolent consequences of the Bush administration can be set aside. Unfortunately, nothing is so simple for many of the attitudes towards Israel and the Palestinians have survived unharmed the unpopularity associated with the policies of the Bush administration.⁹

One of the lessons of the presidential primaries throughout 2008 has been that there are certain basic assumptions about Israel, the situation in the Middle East and trans-national violence within the American domestic political realm which seem to pre-empt the possibility of an innovative approach to the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians after the presidential elections in November 2008.¹⁰ This means that the absolute priority given to Israeli security precludes the use of sanctions of any kind to encourage the Israeli government to compromise on its demands for Palestinian concessions before it will respond constructively. In view of the experiences of American foreign policy in the recent past, the occupation of Iraq chief amongst them, this extreme reluctance to pressure Israel is interpreted in the Middle East as evidence of such partiality and bias that the United States is not seen as an impartial arbiter in its attempts towards peace-building in the region.

⁹ Gallup polls have consistently found a majority of Americans more sympathetic towards Israel. In February 2008, the proportion in Israel's favour was 71 per cent. Support for the Palestinians hovers around 12-to-14 per cent. See: www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org

¹⁰ See, for example, Mearscheimer J and Walt S (2007), *The Israeli lobby and US foreign policy*, Farrer, Straus and Giroux (New York) or the criticism levelled at Barack Obama for his links to Pastor Joseph Wright See: http://www.americanthinker.com/2008/01/barack_obama_and_israel.htm

Europe's role

Since moderate states in the Arab world carry little credibility with Israel as an interlocutor, this means that the only other potential mediator would be the European Union. No European state individually (unless, perhaps, it came from Scandinavia)¹¹ would have enough weight to operate alone in such circumstances and many of them are still tainted by their colonial pasts in the region. The European Union, however, projects itself as a normative power in the wider world, as a "force for good".¹²

Europe, moreover, also has specific policies in being, within the context of its Common Foreign and Security Policy, that are designed to improve regional security, not least the Barcelona Process, more correctly known as the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership. The Euro-Mediterranean Partnership, negotiated in Barcelona in 1995, of which both Israel and the Palestinian Authority are members, was designed to bring an era of shared peace, prosperity and stability into the Mediterranean region including the Levant. More recently, since 2004 the bilateral arrangements under the European Neighbourhood Policy - to which the Palestinian Authority has adhered - seek similar goals through economic and political cooperation.¹³

Both policies are designed to achieve collective and cooperative security for the littoral states of the Mediterranean because it is in their individual and collective interests to do so. Indeed, the European Union itself would be the major beneficiary for the Mediterranean is part of its own security periphery, as is the situation amongst South Mediterranean states. In other words, the European Union has its own interests vested in such policies, quite apart from its own self-image as a disinterested "force for good". Its own border agencies, such as FRONTEX for example, are now engaged with some countries in the South Mediterranean in trying to stem migrant flows northwards from Africa into Europe.

Against such a background, Europe's utility as a facilitator and arbiter in achieving peace between Palestinian and Israeli would appear self-evident, especially if the United States is compromised in such a role, despite its normatively hegemonic stature in the Middle East. That is certainly a widely-expressed view amongst moderates in the Arab world which have been impatiently trying to galvanise the Union into action throughout the Bush administration's period in office.¹⁴ Yet the evidence has been that, ever since the beginning of the Peace Process in 1993, the European Union has yielded to the United States over matters relating to it and to Israel. It has never challenged American policy decisions over the conflict or supported its own policy options against American preferences. It seems very unlikely that this is going to change in the near future, despite the damage wreaked by the behaviour of the Bush administration over the past eight years.

In theory, of course, Europe could be galvanised into independent action if there were to be a radical and sudden deterioration in the Middle Eastern situation, for it could be directly affected as a result. Indeed, that concern informed Europe's role in the reinforced UNIFIL forces which police Southern Lebanon in the wake of the August 2006 Israeli attacks on Hezbollah and Lebanon.¹⁵ Yet, in practice, it is extremely difficult to imagine the European Commission or the Council taking a line independent of and not concerted with the United States. It is a matter

¹¹ Both Sweden and Norway have successfully espoused secret contacts between Israel and the Palestinian Liberation Organisation. Norway, indeed, was able to bring the Oslo Process into being by such means in 1993. Its success, however, was predicated in part on its absolute neutrality in enabling the negotiations.

¹² Manners I. (2004), "Normative power reconsidered", CIDEL Workshop: *From civilian to military power; the European Union reconsidered* (Oslo)(22-23.10.2004).

¹³ Barbé E. and Johansson-Nogué E. and Johansson-Nogués E. (2008), "The EU as a modest "force for good": the European Neighbourhood Policy", *International Affairs*, 84, 1 (2008); 81-96.

¹⁴ See Prince El-Hassan bin-Talal, "How Europe could be a force for good in the Middle East", *Europe's World* (March 31, 2008) See: www.europesworld.org

¹⁵ French Italian and Spanish troops made up the bulk of the reinforcements for the Ghanaian and Indian troops already there, bringing the force up to 15,000 men. See: <http://www.un.org/Depts/dpko/missions/unifil/background.html>

that deserves explanation, especially in view of Arab hopes and the worsening situation on the ground. And the answer, of course, is that Europe has now come to prize the prolongation of the American security umbrella above all of its anxieties about the growing unrest along its southern periphery. The trans-Atlantic relationship is still the touchstone for Europe's global security approach, given its own perceptions of its military weakness.

It is a truism, of course, that Europe is not a military power; indeed, it is not a power at all in any conventional sense for it cannot, in and of itself, project military power. Nor is it likely to be able to do so, despite attempts to use NATO as, in effect, a European military arm. Instead, it has always relied upon engagement and cooperation in achieving its foreign policy goals, together with the rare application of collective sanctions. This immediately puts it at a disadvantage in dealing with a realist state such as Israel which, moreover, distrusts European states and the European construct, both because of the legacy of the Holocaust and because of its conviction that anti-Semitism still colours European views. In short, for Israel, quite apart from atavistic distrust, constructive engagement sits ill with the principles of the "Iron Wall".¹⁶

Yet more important, perhaps, than Europe's lack of military force, is the fact that there is no unanimity between European states as to what should European policy be over the situation in the Middle East. Britain, Germany, Holland and Denmark have traditionally tended to pay more attention to Israeli concerns. Germany's position is hardly surprising for, as Angela Merkel said to the Knesset in mid-March, the country's history sixty years ago still "fills Germans with shame". Other states, such as Greece, Romania and, until very recently, France have taken more nuanced positions. The result is that Europe's preference for economic engagement has been reinforced to the detriment of any independent diplomatic initiative. And, again, because of its conviction of its dependence on American goodwill for its own security, it has never been willing to use its undoubted economic leverage to achieve diplomatic or political change in Israeli policy

Europe has, therefore, been at the forefront of initiatives providing economic aid to the Palestinians, irrespective of the diplomatic situation since this is something upon which member-states can agree. Yet, up to 1993, the Union had only provided funding to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA).¹⁷ Then, in 1993, as the Oslo Process began, the Commission proposed to the European Council a funding package to support the new initiative of €500 million for the period between 1994 and 1998. After the Palestinian Authority signed its interim Association Agreement under the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership in mid-1997, the Commission added in funding from the MEDA (Mesures d'Ajustement) programme as well.

Then, in 2000, the European Union began budgetary support as a result of Israeli action in freezing the taxes it had collected on behalf of the Palestinian Authority. Between 1995 and 1999, the Union is estimated to have provided a total of €3.4 billion. The Union was not alone in providing budgetary support, however, which, according to World Bank sources, totalled \$929 million in 2001, \$891 million in 2003 and \$1.1 billion in 2005 - equivalent to 53 per cent of the Palestine Authority's budget. In 2003 the United States provided \$224 million, the European Union \$187 million, the Arab League \$124 million, Norway \$63 million, the World Bank \$50 million, Britain \$43 million and Italy \$40 million, with the balance of \$170 million coming from a variety of sources.

¹⁶ The policy of the "Iron Wall", proposed by Ze'ev Jabotinski, anticipated that Israel would have to be capable of confronting the Arab world militarily until Arab states recognised that formal acceptance of the state would be the only way of ensuring regional stability. See Jabotinsky V. (1937), "The Iron Wall", *The Jewish Herald* (South Africa) (November 26, 1937) and Jabotinsky V. (1941), "The ethnics of the Iron Wall", *The Jewish Standard* (London) (September 5, 1941). Both articles were originally published in Russian in *Rassvyet* on November 4 and 11, 1923.

¹⁷ The UNRWA organisation (United Nations Relief and Works Agency) provides "education, health and relief and social services to 3.8 million registered Palestinian refugees in Jordan, Lebanon, the Syrian Arab Republic, the West Bank and the Gaza Strip". (<http://www.un.org/unrwa/about/qa.html>).

All of this stopped in April 2006, however, to be replaced by a series of mechanisms designed to circumvent the HAMAS-dominated government and provide aid directly to the population and its social institutions instead. These “temporary international mechanisms” and other funding lines provided €340 million in 2006 and €320 million in 2007, mainly to the West Bank government. From February 2008, however, the Union introduced a new funding mechanism, the “Mechanisme Palestino-Euroéen de Gestion et d’Aide Socio-Economique” (PEGASE), to which it pledged €300 million in March 2008, €66 million of it for UNRWA.¹⁸ HAMAS and the Gaza Strip, however, still find themselves financially isolated as part of the international policy of excluding it because of its policies.

This policy of isolating HAMAS in order to coerce a change in its policies seems to be one of desperation and runs directly counter to the European Union’s belief in “constructive engagement” despite the belief of Xavier Solana, Europe’s foreign policy head, as expressed in January 2006, that the European taxpayer could not be expected to finance terrorism. HAMAS, after all, had won power in a democratic election and should thus, by rights, have been engaged in terms of the policies it intended to espouse. Even if this would have been inappropriate in January 2006, just after the elections, it surely should have been the object of European policy after the Mecca Agreement which brought HAMAS and Fatah together. That might have helped to avoid the calamitous clash in Gaza in June 2007, itself largely the result of an American-inspired initiative to allow Fatah to seize power.¹⁹

It does reflect, however, the general conviction in the European Commission and amongst member states that Europe, as the junior partner in the trans-Atlantic relationship because its inability to fully engage as a single state, should defer to American strategic preoccupations. It also underlines European belief that, as was the case during the Cold War, it is the trans-Atlantic relationship that forms and must form the bedrock of the Union’s global strategy. In other words, Europe recognises its limitations as a regional power and its dependence on American power instead.

Yet it could also be argued that Europe’s adoption of the politics of exclusion as far as HAMAS is concerned is a logical consequence of the policies it has adopted since 2001. In essence, the external policy of the Union and of its member-states has been securitised with migration and the Union’s internal security becoming its primary concerns.²⁰ Issues such as the problems of the Middle East have, in consequence, been subordinated to the same security paradigm and, necessarily, this has meant adopting the Israeli and American agendas over such issues as they, too, are dominated by security concerns.

Such approaches to external policy have also been internalised, however, as Europeans have gradually begun to adopt the divisive assumptions of the “Long War” and its reification of Samuel Huntington’s vision of the clash of civilisations, a vision of systemic, inevitable violence as a product of cultural difference. Thus, as demotic assumptions over the distinctions between self and other, Occident and Orient, harden it becomes less and less possible for an innovative independent policy over the problems of the Middle East to emerge, particularly over the crisis between the Palestinians and Israel. Europe, therefore, is condemned by its cultural assumptions and security priorities to follow the United States, whether or not this perpetuates and worsens the security threat it really fears.

¹⁸ See: <http://europa.eu/rapid/>

¹⁹ Anon (2007), *Elliot Abrams uncivil war*, Conflicts Forum. See: <http://www.conflictsforum.org/2007/elliott-abrams-uncivil-war/>

²⁰ Joffé G. (2008), “The European Union, democracy and counter-terrorism”, *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 46, 1 (January 2008); p. 147-173.

Could that ever change? Given the subjugation of European security interests to the trans-Atlantic relationship and the normative assumptions within Europe that this is the essential security and cultural link that will preserve the European ideal of democratic secularism and “unity within diversity”, it seems unlikely. Yet, as the situation in the Middle East and North Africa worsens, poisoned by this festering and unresolved conflict, with its manifest injustices so at odds with Europe’s normative ideals, there is a faint possibility that popular disgust might force the hands of Europe’s leaders who refuse today to recognise the disastrous implications of what they have (or have not) done. But, then again, pigs might fly!

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