

## France and the Middle East Crises

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*On the eve of the hard-fought presidential elections in France, speculation grows as to the impact external actors will have, especially the European Union, on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. A group of French experts in foreign policy have offered their opinions to FRIDE on what role Europe, France, the United States, and other actors in the region may now play.<sup>1</sup>*

Six years after the Oslo peace process, negotiations over the Israeli-Palestinian conflict have come to a complete halt. Washington is losing its role as the key broker as there are some contradictory indications that some level of negotiation is possible but a revival of a peace process is still a far target. There is an informal consensus that every conflict needs its own solution but that all of them, from Afghanistan to Syria have a connection. In this complex regional political framework, the role of external actors, as well as the interactions among them, could be decisive. Could Europe play an active and different role from the one it has in the last decade as a fundraiser and secondary political actor? And, may France be a generator of the process?

Intense diplomatic activities were going on during the Arab Summit which started on 28 March in Riyadh and which positioned Saudi Arabia as the key mediator for the region. In those past months, the Saudi royal family seems to have taken it upon themselves to lead a reconciliation between Fatah and Hamas via a government of national unity through the so-called Mecca agreements of 8 February 2007. This initiative paved the way for a new start and a credible peace process, and it could mean the end of the diplomatic isolation of the Palestinians as well.

The French government welcomed the Saudi initiative of the Mecca agreements. French president Jacques Chirac declared, after the visit to Paris on 25 February of Mahmoud Abbas, president of the Palestinian Authority, that he was in favour of this reconciliation, considering it 'a first step towards the full application of the conditions of the Quartet'. The Quartet (US, Russia, UN and the EU) decided to impose an embargo on the Palestinian government because Hamas — considered a terrorist group by Israel and the US — won the elections in the Occupied Territories in January 2006. The governments of the Quartet demanded the explicit recognition of the state of Israel, as well as the former peace agreements, and the renouncement of violence as conditions for the re-establishment of direct aid and diplomatic contacts.

France — which has long supported the Palestinians — has been one of the most important states of the European Union to propose an end to the embargo and to re-establish direct aid to the Palestinians after the Mecca agreements. Norway went even further, becoming the first European state to lift the embargo just after the formation of the new government of national unity between Hamas and Fatah.

In that complicated diplomatic game France could play a key role vis-à-vis an American superpower that has lost its credibility in the Arab world. With its long-standing diplomatic ties in the Middle East, and as a leading state of the European Union, France is an important player in the region and could contribute to a political

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<sup>1</sup> The interviews took place in Paris on 19 February 2007.

solution. Friends with both Israel and the Arab world, France has also shown in the past that it can raise its voice against its US ally; besides, it does not have the same guilt complex Germany has with Israel because of the Holocaust. More importantly, France refused to become involved in the Iraq conflict and has shown a critical distance towards the United States before the second Gulf War of 2003. This was internationally recognised as a courageous gesture.

Great Britain could also become an important partner because of its past history in the area. But in contrast to London, Paris has kept a certain healthy distance from Washington and does not have to face the same burden as the British with regards to Palestine.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, both countries are now going through a delicate internal political period in view of the upcoming elections. Blair's term as Prime Minister comes to an end in June, and French presidential elections are around the corner, scheduled to be held on 22 April.

Despite all those arguments in favour of France, Paris is not beyond reproach as its attitude has reflected a certain hesitation. It did not go unnoticed that the French government had a difficult time taking any sort of initiative. This lack of vision may be linked to the end of Chirac's term, as Alain Gresh, editor-in-chief of the monthly *Le Monde Diplomatique* speculates.

On the eve of the French presidential elections, an important question arises: Would the next elected candidate change the direction of French foreign policy? Some fear that a new candidate could drastically alter the direction of the country's policy in the Middle East. But as Thierry De Montbrial, director of the French research centre Institut Français des Relations Internationales (IFRI), emphasises: 'It is a field where constants prevail over variables'.

French foreign policy has been marked by a long tradition going back to Charles De Gaulle and it has resisted the different political convictions of several presidents. From interviews in Paris with French decision makers, journalists, and researchers, it seems that radical change is quite unlikely given France's consistent political stance over the past decades. Besides, the creation of a common foreign policy in the EU means that Paris' actions have to be coordinated with its members. 'France can launch the initiative but it cannot and should not lead the battle alone', stresses Didier Billion, co-director of the French research centre Institut des Relations Internationales et Stratégiques in Paris (IRIS).

## **1. How can France Activate the European Union to Take the Initiative in the Peace Process?**

Didier Billion supports having a small group of European states undertake peace mediation. He believes that such an initiative could act as an engine and help other EU members join in later.

### **a. A Divided European Union**

"If we wait for us to be 27 countries in order to make decisions and take initiatives, we will never do anything", he remarks. Denis Bauchard, a French senior research fellow, specialised in North African and Middle Eastern affairs at IFRI, sees a possible alliance with France's southern European counterparts. He sees four different groups of countries. He sees the first group, which would include the Eastern European countries, as 'quite indifferent'. For example, Gresh says that at

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<sup>2</sup> During the San Remo conference in 1920, the League of Nations assigned to Great Britain a mandate over Palestine. This conference established the division of the former Ottoman Empire: Iraq and Palestine went to Great Britain, and Syria and Lebanon to France.

some point representatives of the Czech Republic in the European Union had even defended US and pro-Israeli positions. Bauchard includes the Netherlands in the group of pro-Israeli countries. He classifies Germany as a special case and thinks that it shares France's opinion. However, because of the Holocaust, Germany is not able to take decisive steps because they could be interpreted as hostile to the Israelis. Then in the last category, he includes Great Britain, who agrees in principle with France but cannot displease the United States. He believes most of the southern European countries —France, Italy, Spain, Portugal and Greece — want a more active policy from the European Union.

But despite its divisions and its blind conformity with US positions, Gresh underlines that the EU is more sensitive to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict due to the fact that public opinion in Europe is more critical than in the US.

In France for example, this conflict has become a problem of internal policy due to the presence of four million Muslims as well as a large Jewish community. This is one of the reasons why France (and also most European states) considers the Middle East part of its frontier: an explosion in the region, Gresh reckons, would have direct consequences for the European Union, but less so for the United States.

In that sense, the position of France and the European Union is quite different from that of the United States, which, according to Gresh who is doubtful about the willingness of the United States and Israel to settle this conflict, 'aims at the total elimination of Hamas since its victory last year'. In his opinion, it is quite obvious that the Iraq conflict has a higher priority on Washington's political agenda. He also believes that the United States is more interested in 'creating a strategic alliance with moderate Arab countries and Israel', with an eye to an eventual military intervention against Iran.

The director of IFRI interprets this recent involvement as a 'classical phenomenon' of American foreign policy: 'At the end of his second term Bush finds there might be something to do after all'. According to Jean Felix Paganon, head of the North African and Middle Eastern Department in the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, nobody really knows about Washington's re-engagement: 'There are a lot of good words, but in practice, nothing really changes'.

Washington has had a long record of backing Israel and a change of policy would seem unthinkable. It is no secret to anybody anymore that Washington has always given Tel Aviv strong demonstrations of support in its settlement policy and remained silent even when Israel repeatedly violated UN resolutions. It was Washington that decided last year to impose financial sanctions after the victory of Hamas, a decision which was 'sadly' followed the same day by the Europeans, according to Billion.

Nevertheless, France has tried several times to get around those restrictions and insisted that the EU should continue indirectly to help the Palestinians by bypassing standard governmental procedures. According to *Le Monde*, the French Foreign Ministry is now pledging to restore direct financial assistance to the Palestinian government, but in the meantime it is in favour of prolonging indirect aid for a period of three more months. At stake is the restoration of the EU's direct financial assistance of 760 million Euros to the Palestinian government, which is absolutely essential for its survival.

Based on the argument that the Palestinians have not abided by the Quartet's conditions, the United States and Israel are still rejecting the new government and are opposed to the restoration of any financial aid, even if Olmert released the sum

of 100 million dollars during his December meeting with Mahmoud Abbas. Palestinian financial problems are mainly related to Israel's refusal to 'give back to the Palestinian government the custom taxes that Israel is collecting, around 50 million dollars a month', according to Bauchard.

## **b. France's Role as the Engine of the Peace Process**

The French researcher of the IFRI centre points out that the European Union is now gaining a more important role in the Middle East because Washington 'has lost its credibility in the Arab world due to its unconditional support of Israel and the intervention in Iraq. France, on the other hand, is known to have a more balanced policy towards the Arab world'.

Increasingly worried about the incapacity of their US allies to deal with the regional crisis and about Washington's loss of credibility in the Middle East, the Saudis decided to try and find a solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict which was considered 'marginal' for a long time by Washington, says De Montbrial. 'The US never listened to the Saudis. It's been one year now since they started asking some questions', he remarks.

The Saudis worried about the harsh policies of the US that led to an escalation of violence in the name of a 'regional, global war against terrorism'. 'The Saudis are trying to defuse tension in the region', says Gresh. Countries like Spain and France, especially under the influence of Spanish foreign minister Miguel Angel Moratinos,<sup>3</sup> are trying to do the same. Southern European states are now considered to be better peace mediators.

As a consequence, most experts advise cooperation between different European states to create a peace initiative which could convince other European states to rally later on.

Experts agree with France's ability to launch a peace conference as France has very important cards to play. Billion even suggests that such an initiative could include some previous mediation. First, France has a very good diplomatic network in the region due to its colonial past. At Israel's request, France even increased its presence since the Lebanon war in 2006, leading the main UN peacekeeping force, the UNIFIL.<sup>4</sup> It also has very good knowledge of the main actors in the region and is fairly sensitive to regional problems, according to Montbrial. Moreover, France also has strong economic interests and links in this area.

France has the advantage of having quite good relationships with both sides, says Pierre Moscovici, vice-president of the European Parliament and representative of the French socialist party. According to Moscovici, even if France does not have the same influence as the US in Israel, it maintains strong bonds with the Jewish state as well as traditional ties with the Arab world, and has recognised — especially since Mitterrand's speech at the Knesset in 1982 — the necessity of a Palestinian state.

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<sup>3</sup> Spanish Foreign Minister Miguel Moratinos launched in November 2006 during the Franco-Spanish summit in Gerona (Spain) a Middle East peace initiative in cooperation with France and Italy. This initiative has been fiercely criticized by the Germans for not having consulted them before.

<sup>4</sup> United Nations approved resolution 1701 in August 2006 and named France to head the reinforced United Nations Interim Forces in Lebanon (UNIFIL) which increased UN forces from 2,000 to 15,000. The UNIFIL was implemented the first time in 1978 with resolution 425 to guarantee the withdrawal of Israeli soldiers from southern Lebanon. Alain Pelligrini is the actual French commandant of the reinforced UNIFIL.

Billion believes that France still has the capacity to make useful suggestions for a peace conference within the European Union. He suggests that Paris should even organise some intermediary stages of peace discussions. He insists on the fact that the top priority is to lift the political blockade. France 'could take initiatives the same way as it did four years ago during the Iraq crisis. We saw how France quickly found some important allies in the European Union, especially Germany, and also all over the world', says Billion.

## 2. French Foreign Policy in the Middle East

### a. Chirac's Term

Chirac won some sympathy worldwide as the only political leader who dared oppose the US intervention in Iraq in 2003. The French president positioned himself in cooperation with Germany as defender of international legitimacy and multilateralism. By rejecting American unilateralism, he briefly revived French ambitions for an independent French policy in the Middle East.

But the second most important diplomatic network of the world, that of France, is now weakened, especially because of a reduced budget. Therefore, the highest priority of French diplomacy is to act within the European Union; this is the *conditio sine qua non* in De Montbrial's opinion, for France to keep some influence in the area. But he insists that this action must be developed in cooperation and not in competition with Washington. 'We cannot have an independent European policy if it goes against the United States. If we confront the US we'll have no chance of success', he insists.

After the confrontation between Paris and Washington over Iraq in 2003, the French government, accordingly to De Montbrial, has tried to avoid frictions with the United States. The new French diplomatic policy consists now in being less openly critical in order to win more influence. This search for a more balanced policy might explain why Dominique de Villepin, during a conference at Harvard, urged the US to organise a Middle East peace conference. In his position as foreign minister, de Villepin was the one who officially declared France's opposition to a military intervention in Iraq during his famous and explosive speech held on February 2003, at the UN Security Council.<sup>5</sup> Paris tries now to be more pragmatic in its decisions, which may create the impression that France is not as active as before on the international scene. But French diplomats are becoming aware that France cannot act as a 'lonely rider' anymore because it lacks the means to do it; it has to abandon its preference for creating bilateral links to include itself in a wider European space and to use its old connections for the sake of the EU.

This weakening of French diplomacy appears to be even more obvious lately due to the fact that Chirac's term is coming to an end. In Gresh's view, the lack of vision of French policy in the Middle East since 2004 may be linked to this. He also explains that this date coincides with the reassignment of one of Chirac's closest and most influential allies, Bernard Emié, from the Foreign Ministry to the French embassy in Lebanon.

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<sup>5</sup> 'Villepin va présenter à Harvard un plan de paix pour le Moyen Orient', *Associated Press*, 12 March 2007.

## b. New Direction after the Elections?

The impression of a stammering Paris may be heightened by the fact that France is on the verge of its presidential elections. But most experts agree that they do not expect much change in French foreign policy in the Middle East even after the elections.<sup>6</sup> Bauchard, for example, cites the continuity of French foreign policy in the Middle East for more than 20 years.

If Sarkozy wins the elections, Billion feels that despite his reputation of being pro-American and pro-Israel, he will be subject to strong restraints, referring to the political counterweight that the French Foreign Ministry can exercise. 'Even if Sarkozy wished it, there could be no drastic change in French foreign policy'.

Ségolène Royal's critics point out her ambiguous, and sometimes clumsy, rhetoric regarding international politics. Bernard Cassen points out in his latest article, published in the April edition of *Le Monde Diplomatique*, that 'she seemed to have been in favour of the construction of the wall'.<sup>7</sup> He also criticised Royal's lack of precision when explaining her plan for the Middle East, which consists of 'launching, in cooperation with European states, an initiative for an international conference of peace and security in the Middle East'.<sup>8</sup>

But Billion explains that in Royal's party, there are 'men and women who have totally opposing attitudes concerning Middle East issues'. For example, Julien Dray, 'who is known for his political and ideological proximity to the Israeli state' is opposed to people like Arnaud De Montebourg or Jean-Louis Bianco, 'who are defending more the strict application of international Law and UN resolutions'.

But the general impression is that on the eve of the French presidential elections, both presidential candidates are ill prepared in matters pertaining to international politics. Bernard Cassen worries that even this deficiency is not taken seriously in an electoral campaign which has not emphasised foreign policy. He wonders why the candidates are talking so little about questions of foreign policy, which they would have to implement right after their election.

## c. Continuity of French Foreign Policy

This lack of experience in international affairs was also true of the last French presidents, says De Montbrial. He remarks that Giscard for example was an economist and had been minister of Finance, and hence saw international affairs from that viewpoint; Mitterrand did not even speak any foreign language.

All experts agree that despite the political differences of the former presidents in power they all ultimately followed the traditional pro-Arab line of foreign policy established by De Gaulle, 'which can be dated back precisely to 1962, at the end of the Algerian War', says De Montbrial. From that moment on, the main lines of French policy relied on a will to be independent from the two superpowers, the Soviet Union and, especially the United States. The new orientation of French policy, trying to balance Washington's and Moscow's influence, motivated De Gaulle to increase France's presence in its former sphere of influence: Africa and the Middle East. While France was close to Israel in the 1950s, De Gaulle introduced a

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<sup>6</sup> Bernard Cassen, 'Presidential election, distant from the world', *Le monde diplomatique*, April 2007, pp. 16-17.

<sup>7</sup> A wall, whose construction began in 2002, separated Israel from the Occupied Territories. It is 703 kilometres long.

<sup>8</sup> Pierre Moscovici, written interview dated 27 February 2007.

complete turnabout in French policy, favouring the Arab nations instead of Israel. In 1967, the rupture with the Jewish state became obvious after France severely criticised Israel for its actions during the Six-Day War.

This so called "Gaullism" has still continued, whichever French president. To illustrate the phenomenon, De Monbrial explains that when Valéry Giscard d'Estaing was elected in 1974, he was considered to be pro-NATO. But at the end of his term, he signed the Venice Declaration,<sup>9</sup> which marked the starting point of the new Israeli-Palestinian policy of France which included the recognition of the need for a Palestinian state. Mitterrand, on the other hand, wished to correct the excessive drift of France towards the Arab world and re-establish a balance more favourable to relations with Israel. But in the end Mitterrand's policy again turned back to the traditional line of French foreign policy in the Middle East. For that reason, De Montbrial is quite sure that 'if Sarkozy — pro-NATO and pro-Israeli — is elected, there will nevertheless be a swing back to the more traditional line'.

The basic principles of French Arab policy rely on two main pillars: the recognition of the state of Israel and its need for security, and the Palestinians' right to self-determination. Billion remarks that for him, 'there is no special French Arab policy but the defence of the main principles to which France is attached, such as the application of international law and UN resolutions'. This orientation has been a constant of French foreign policy, especially with De Gaulle's insistence on maintaining independence from Washington. It was also former French foreign minister Hubert Védrine's leitmotiv, when summarising the French position: "friends, allies, but not aligned".<sup>10</sup> But as the latest developments in the Lebanon crisis have shown, France can also make common cause with the US when needed.<sup>11</sup>

### 3. France's Relationships with the States of the Middle East

#### a. Relations with Israel

Due to its pro-Arab policy, France's ties with Israel have deteriorated despite a promising start in the 1950s. Then, France slowly developed good relations with the newly created state, to the point that France became one of Israel's most important diplomatic and military allies. This special relationship changed as De Gaulle in 1958 put emphasis on relations with Arab countries for economic and energy-related reasons. Nevertheless, France helped Israel develop its nuclear programme and was its main arms provider. But the increasing importance of oil in the French industry was decisive in maintaining good diplomatic and economic relations with all the Arab countries. Nevertheless, the Six-Day War in 1967 and Israel's attack in Lebanon in 1968 created a rupture between Paris and Tel Aviv. As a consequence, Israel found support from the United States, its most powerful ally until now.

As the third biggest arms exporting country in the world during the 1970s, France signed several armament contracts with different Arab countries. The sale of 100 Mirage war planes and 200 tanks to Libya in 1970 further contributed to damaging relations with Israel.

With the energy crisis of 1973, France strove to strengthen relations with oil-rich countries like Saudi Arabia and Iraq. It even helped Iraq build a nuclear plant in

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<sup>9</sup> The Venice Declaration was adopted by the Council of Ministers of the European Community in 1980 and called for recognition of a Palestinian state.

<sup>10</sup> See Hubert Védrine, *Continuer l'histoire*, Fayard, Paris, 2007.

<sup>11</sup> Following the US's lead, France urged support for resolution 1559 during the Lebanon crisis.

Tamuz in 1975. French-Israeli relations became quite tense; at this time France started to talk about the necessity of a Palestinian state and even voted in the UN in favour of the recognition of the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO). In 1975, Giscard even agreed to let the PLO open an office in Paris. Those gestures signalled that the PLO was on its way to becoming a legitimate partner in the peace negotiations.

But in the past few years, there has been a growing concern for France to improve its relationships with the United States, especially after the big clash over Iraq. For Gresh, this preoccupation has led France to re-establish relations with the American Jewish community. During this time, France has been increasingly accused of anti-Semitism due to an upsurge of anti-Semitic attacks against synagogues and Jews in France in the autumn of 2000, just at the outbreak of the second Intifada. Those incidents were used by Sharon's government to accuse France of anti-Semitism. Things went so far that Jean Kahn, chairman of the France Central Jewish Committee was talking of a new Kristallnacht,<sup>12</sup> a very dark reference to what happened to the Jews living in Germany just before the Second World War. Sharon made a connection between those incidents and France's critical position over Israel. This campaign became so feverish that Chirac saw himself compelled to go and visit several important Jewish-American associations and convince them of the contrary. In 2003, he also sent a new ambassador who would make the re-establishment of good relations between Israel and France his highest priority. The French government is hence trying, on the one hand, to restore the deteriorated relationships with Israel and the United States without betraying its long-standing good relations with the Arab world on the other.

## **b. Relations with the Palestinians**

In Gresh's opinion, current French foreign policy in the region is peculiarly linked to Chirac's personality. Chirac 'made very symbolic gestures which have marked the French position: the visit to Jerusalem in 1996, the refusal of a war with Iraq, the reception of Yasser Arafat in Paris just as France and Israel were coming nearer, his treatment in a French hospital, and giving him a military funeral. These are very symbolic things, yet very important in the Arab world'.

France's pro-Arab policy is closely related to the presence of an important Arab population in French society, as Jean Felix Paganon points out. He refers to French links to the Maghreb in North Africa, comprising Morocco, Tunisia, and Algeria as well as, in recent times, Mauritania, Western Sahara and Libya. The Maghreb, with a population of 90 million, is an enormous challenge for French society and French political life. Paganon points out that the Maghreb is an 'absolute priority of French diplomacy. We cannot ignore the huge mass of people coming from the Maghreb to live in our country; for a long time there was no connection between policies towards the Maghreb and those for the Middle East, but because of the current state of the conflict there is now a stronger mobilisation of the Jewish community in France, and a Muslim community, increasingly aware of its growing solidarity with the Arab world. This is a new phenomenon'.

France's strong links with the Arab world make Billion think that even if France considerably improves relations with Israel, there will still be 'distrust from the Israelis, who view France as too pro-Arab'.

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<sup>12</sup> During the Kristallnacht in 1938, German Nazis destroyed Jewish synagogues, shops and private property, and killed Jews.



### c. Relations with Neighbours like Syria and Iran

The strong personalisation of French foreign policy in the Middle East since Chirac's presidency is especially reflected in French relations with Syria. It is no secret now that the relationship between Chirac and the late Lebanese Prime Minister Hariri has strongly influenced the official relations between Damascus and Paris, especially after Hariri's assassination on 14 February 2005.<sup>13</sup> Chirac, and most experts agree, suspects Syria of being responsible for Hariri's death in an explosion in the centre of Beirut (Lebanon).

Both Syria and France have special bonds with Lebanon which was originally a Syrian province. With its large Christian population, Lebanon became separate from Syria but still remained under the French mandate until its declaration of independence in 1943. After its independence, Lebanon helped the Palestinians during the 1948 Arab-Israeli War.

As the Lebanese civil war broke out in 1975, Lebanon was invaded several times by Israel, in 1978 and 1982. The Lebanese government asked Damascus for assistance and Syria sent a peacekeeping force to Lebanon mainly to protect the Christian community. Israel kept control of the southern part of the country until 2000, while Syrian troops stayed until 2005. After the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafic Hariri, a personal friend of Chirac's, France contributed to the departure of the Syrian forces. In cooperation with Washington, UN resolution 1559 was adopted and an investigation into Hariri's death began. Suspecting Damascus of having participated in this assassination, France's relations with Syria deteriorated but France's position helped promote a French-American reconciliation as they collaborated closely on that matter.

The Israeli-Palestinian peace process requires the involvement of such important neighbours as Syria, who lost its Golan border during the 1967 war. It also seeks to improve relations with the Syrian president, Bachar el Assad, the Lion's son.<sup>14</sup> Damascus is still demanding that Israel return the Golan Heights. Most experts agree that involving Syria and Iran in the peace process is a necessary step. Citing former French foreign minister Hubert Védrine, De Montbrial says: 'talking to your friends is easy; in international politics you must also talk to your enemies'.

He thinks that refusing to talk to Syria and Iran would be 'a great mistake'. Even the Baker Hamilton report, referring to the US's occupation of Iraq, recommended negotiations with Syria and Iran.<sup>15</sup> 'It was one of the main conclusions of the Baker-Hamilton report', noticed Gresh. But the Bush administration has so far refused to talk with either country or agree to their participation in such negotiations.<sup>16</sup>

Gresh stressed that 'Syria had made several overtures towards the US and the Israelis. There has even been a secret negotiation between Israel and Syria which led to the following agreement: should Israel leave the Golan Heights, there would be peace with Syria'.

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<sup>13</sup> Former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri, 60, was killed in a massive explosion that rocked central Beirut. Hariri was appointed 5 times Prime Minister, especially in the aftermath of the long destructive Lebanon war.

<sup>14</sup> Nickname of Hafez el Assad, former Syrian president and father of Bachar el Assad.

<sup>15</sup> Mariano Aguirre, 'Middle East Diplomacy: Between war and negotiation', Comment, FRIDE, Madrid, January 2007, p.3.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

As for Iran, since the first sanctions adopted by the Security Council in 2006, tensions between Washington and Teheran are increasing.

De Monbrial points out that the imposition of more sanctions actually plays into the hands of the Iranians at the moment. 'Washington has broken the balance of power in the Middle East in favour of Iran. A military intervention would be very risky and would have very serious consequences, not only for the Middle East but for the entire world', adds Bauchard. In his opinion, France is particularly interested in finding a political and diplomatic solution for very pragmatic reasons. Countries like France, Germany and Italy have strong economic interests in Iran and one should not forget that it is a great power situated in a very important geostrategic zone, at the junction where Central Asia, the Middle East and the Indian subcontinent meet. 'The more we orient ourselves towards a policy of sanctions and military interventions, the more we empower the hardliners', he says.

#### **d. Relations with Hamas**

Refusing to talk with Hamas would actually strengthen them in their extremism, according to De Montbrial. Experts agree that dialogue with Hamas could be possible if the international community appeals to the more conciliatory and reformist forces within Hamas.

To avoid extremist positions in the ranks of Hamas, it will be necessary to demonstrate that the pressures are going to diminish, according to Paganon. To deal with the new Palestinian government of national unity 'is the only means of avoiding an inter-Palestinian civil war', he says. He suggests a first step, such as contacting people close to Hamas but not approaching official members of Hamas, and asks whether Hamas would perhaps offer a formal recognition of Israel in order to make the Israeli government yield. One of the reasons for this behaviour may be linked to the fact that 'after the recognition of Israel by the PLO, the Palestinians did not get any commitments from Israel, even stopping the settlement policy'. As it has led to nothing in the past, most Palestinians think that recognising Israel is not that useful. The question of recognition is quite murky because Israel is asking for the recognition of the legitimacy of Zionism, the state of Israel and the settlements in Palestine. However, no Palestinian could ever recognise Zionism or the settlement policy. According to Gresh, 'what Hamas can recognise is the state of Israel as it exists now. And if you read the discourse of Hamas carefully, there is actually the acceptance and recognition of the creation of a Palestinian state within 1967 borders'.

Mariano Aguirre, director of peace and security of the Spanish think-tank FRIDE, wrote that Fatah has actually already recognised Israel in the past: 'Marwan Barghouti, a Fatah leader who has been jailed for life, sent a letter in prison signed by Hamas and Fatah prisoners, stating that the Palestinian Liberation Movement would accept the Arab League's 2002 initiative, and that the acceptance of the pre-1967 borders entailed the implicit recognition of Israel'.<sup>17</sup>

Bauchard insists that it is a mistake to isolate Hamas and he is against the application of financial sanctions. He thinks that 'France is one of those countries

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<sup>17</sup> Mariano Aguirre, January 2007, *op. cit.*, p.5

within the European Union that have tried to maintain the funds to the Palestinians at a high level. This aid is not given to the Palestinian government but is given to the president of the Palestinian Authority, or to a series of NGOs or directly to the accounts of some officials'. Richard Youngs, director of democratisation at FRIDE even suggests that, 'The EU should use the formation of a National Unity Government to look for ways of re-engaging'.<sup>18</sup>

In December 2006, the Israeli president Olmert gave back 100 million dollars. But during the last meeting between Olmert and Abbas on 11 March in Jerusalem, Olmert refused to transfer the remaining 500 million dollars. Olmert replied that they will in no way recognise the future Palestinian government and have relations with their ministers even if they do not belong to Hamas.

#### 4. Conclusion

Most experts agree that the European Union should apply some pressure on Israel, as it constantly violates international resolutions and human rights, and continues with the policy of settlements. For Gresh, it is quite clear that 'to make some progress in the resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict entails putting pressure on the Israeli government'. But everybody fears the United States' reaction. Billion proposes, for example, forcing Israel to respect some resolutions decided on by the European Parliament regarding the rules for the partnership between Israel and the EU.<sup>19</sup> 'But we don't apply them because of fear and division' within the EU. He remarks that it is important to denounce the violations of international law and human rights by Israel lest impunity prevail.

Youngs warns of that danger too: Many reports through the years have urged the EU 'to get tough with Israel'.<sup>20</sup> He explains that even some sceptical states argued that 'punitive sanctions against Israel would be counter-productive for the EU's own influence and that such measures would not win the support of a number of states'. By acting like that, the European Union has lost credibility in the Arab world.

Regarding pressure and sanctions, Gresh advises 'imposing the conditions of the Quartet as long as they are met on both sides: recognition of the state of Israel in exchange for recognition of a Palestinian state along the pre-1967 borders; a halt to the violence from Palestinians in exchange for an end to Israeli incursions and targeted murders'. He says that the international community does have all the means to enforce a solution, yet it cannot because American policy is one of strategic alliance with Israel.

Europe is divided and the Arab countries are too dependent on the United States. Gresh suggests, for example, the Middle Eastern countries' use of oil as a weapon as they did in 1973. Even the Europeans — Israel's main business partners — could use economic pressure against Israel to force a peaceful solution.

Billion thinks that given the difficulties that the European Union has in creating a common foreign policy, the well-known Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP),<sup>21</sup> states will tend to develop bilateral relationships.

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<sup>18</sup> For a more detailed account of EU policies in the Middle East, see Richard Youngs, 'EU and the Middle East peace process: Re-engagement?', , Comment, FRIDE, March 2007, p.2.

<sup>19</sup> Agreement signed between the European Union and Israel.

<sup>20</sup> Youngs, Richard: "European Union and peace process in the Middle East: towards a new compromise?", p.2.

<sup>21</sup> Common Foreign and Security Policy

In this complicated diplomatic game, the French government could thus play a decisive role, with help from its southern European counterparts like Spain or Italy. Yet Gresh believes it is not the right moment because on the eve of the French elections, 'we cannot expect very important initiatives coming from France'. After the elections, there will be a reevaluation of this policy. Reaching a consensus in a situation like this will not be an easy matter. As Billion explains, even in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs many diplomats considered it a big mistake to have taken part in the embargo against the Palestinian government.

As for the Syrian situation, the Spanish foreign minister Moratinos — who is known for his good relations with Assad — could also try to persuade France to reconcile with the Syrian government. Gresh even estimates, that after the election, 'the personal dimension of French engagement in Lebanon due to Chirac's friendship with Hariri will disappear'. It is quite obvious that reconciliation between Paris and Damascus would be one of the main conditions for introducing the idea of a general peace process, involving the most important neighbouring countries.

Those kinds of initiatives would not only influence European countries to join in to keep a close check on the potential escalation of violence in the region; it could also show moderate Arab countries that the European Union is a serious and credible alternative to the US as a peace mediator. This would perhaps spur Washington to lift the sanctions on the Palestinian government and be firmer with its Israeli ally, and thus reactivate a totally frozen peace process.

The EU must, in particular, convey to the Bush administration that a blind war against terrorism increases the risk of instability in the region as a whole. Policies leading to an escalation of violence could set the whole region on fire and have dramatic human consequences. From an economic point of view as well, the oil-thirsty US should not want to see the oil-rich Middle East plagued with instability and terrorist attacks. The war against terrorism has even led to its biggest contradiction: instead of eliminating its roots, it has actually encouraged more fanaticism. The approaches to the Syrian government of some Republican US Congressmen and Nancy Pelosi, leader of the Democratic Party in the US House of Representatives, may perhaps influence the hardliners in Washington and succeed in launching a global peace process for the whole region.

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