

# European Ideas Network

## Think Tank Task Force 5

### Europe and the Near and Middle East

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## I Introduction

### Definition

In this paper, the Near and Middle East is taken to refer to: Egypt, Jordan, Israel, the Palestinian Authority, Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, Iran and the Arab Gulf States. That is, Afghanistan and Turkey are not considered.

The latter two countries are not excluded because they are considered to be insufficiently relevant to a European perspective on the region. Rather, Afghanistan is excluded because the overwhelming challenge it poses – that of military security – is not the major focus of this paper; and it is currently difficult to think fruitfully beyond that challenge until it is resolved. Turkey is not included because it is a candidate country for membership of the European Union, and is therefore considered by another taskforce of the European Ideas Network. Naturally, however, Turkey should be recognised as a major actor in the region, one to be consulted as a potential partner in European regional initiatives and projects.

### Aims

A country-by-country survey of the region would show that most of them are in a state of crisis. The first aim of this paper is to sketch out the inter-related nature of these crises.

Despite the crosscutting problems, however, international approaches towards their resolution have tended to be fragmented. In Europe's case, the fragmentation is of more than one kind. First, when addressing the Middle East, the trans-Atlantic relationship is often fractured in practice. Second, within the Union itself, there often are important divergences. Such fragmentation is often a source of weakness in the EU's conduct of external relations; recent examples, where European unity was subordinated to national efforts in responding to regional crises, at some cost to the effectiveness of the European response, readily come to mind. So, although in certain cases the divergence may be actually desirable or just inevitable, it is worth exploring ways of constructing more integrated approaches.

A third kind of fragmentation is perhaps noted more often in the Middle East itself than in Europe: the Union has several instruments and strategies geared towards the region – the Euro-Med process (which is intended to be largely multilateral), the Neighbourhood Policy (intended to be bilateral) and the Middle East Strategy. These multiple approaches give a certain flexibility,

but the multiplicity has sometimes given rise to the perception, among Middle East diplomats, of insufficient coherence or clarity of intention. The perception may be mistaken, but where present it needs to be addressed.

So the second aim of this paper is to make proposals that would facilitate, where appropriate, a more integrated European policy towards the region's problems. The proposals take into account the respectively different roles that can be played by the Union and centre and centre-right decision-makers.

## **II Three arcs of crisis**

The following three arcs of crisis are identified for the sake of clarifying the inter-related nature of the region's problems. Saying that two or more particular societies are affected by the same arc of crisis does not necessarily mean that they are affected in the same way, and especially not with the same intensity. And, as will be evident, many societies, arguably all, are affected by more than one 'arc'.

### **The Israeli-Palestinian conflict**

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict of course spans beyond the disputed territory itself. The issue, in various and contradictory ways, sucks in most Arab States. For countries bordering Israel and/or the Palestinian Authority, the conflict is partly a matter of internal security, since popular feeling on the issue is strong and can react against a government that is perceived to be supporting the Palestinians too weakly. A significant proportion of the Jordanian population is Palestinian, or of Palestinian origin; there are Palestinian refugee camps in the Lebanon and Palestinian migrant workers across the region.

### **Democracy movements and civil rights**

Democracy movements, of various and varying strengths, are to be found in several States in the region, from Egypt to the Gulf. They are the cause of the frequent oscillation of regimes between concessions and crackdowns. They are also not always easy to read: some activists are evidently campaigning for a liberal parliamentary democracy; other activists are Islamists, some radical, some not, and their commitment to democracy is more difficult to appraise – even, sometimes, for their fellow citizens.

Besides the movement for general political enfranchisement, attention should be paid to three particular groups.

#### *Kurds*

At the ethnic level, there are the Kurdish movements (campaigning variously for a separate State, autonomy and cultural rights). They involve Turkey, Syria, Iraq and Iran, and what happens in one State is likely to trigger events, including possibly military confrontations, in the others.

#### *Christian communities*

At the religious level, there are the Christian communities to be found in several States, and whose collective life appears to be increasingly insecure: for example, in Egypt, due primarily to hostility from certain Islamist groups; in the Palestinian Authority and Israel, where the Christian

population is rapidly falling due to emigration; and in the Lebanon, where a recent opinion poll indicated that the majority of Lebanese Christians do not see a promising future for themselves in the country. It says something about the disempowerment of the Christian communities that they are not generally organised into political movements. They are mentioned here as an index of a regional crisis that threatens even a certain kind of pluralism that existed traditionally in the region.

### *Gender rights*

Finally, there are issues to do with gender rights, not only but especially to do with women's rights. It should be emphasised that on this issue there is considerable variation between societies in legal provision, social practice and degree of feminist organisation. While usually portrayed as an 'issue' and not as a 'crisis' (at least in the colloquial sense of 'grave trouble'), gender rights are critical in the sense of indicating an important crossroads for the region. Increasingly more women have access to higher education, as well as to relatively advanced Islamic education (which was traditionally reserved for men), indicating the possibility – in some cases, the actuality – of greater participation by women in both the formal economy and the public articulation of religious and cultural values. At the same time, however, in a regional context where the rate of unemployment is particularly high for young men, the control of women, within the family and public life, is often part of the platform on which Islamist groups campaign.

***A new emerging source of internal tension is the growing criticism against western values, practices and leadership in world affairs – the “West” being associated with materialism and egoism in social life, ethnocentrism and double standard approach in the international affairs. This critic against the West appeals to large segment of society, much beyond the traditional clientele of Islamist groups. Such criticism creates additional difficulties for western styled reforms and political cooperation with the US or European.***

***This anti-western feeling is carefully although discreetly instrumented by major international powers outside the region that challenges American leadership and European influence.***

### **Increasing tension between Sunnis and Shiites**

There are increasing tensions between Sunnis and Shiites – an arc that takes us from Iran, through Iraq (where tensions have been exacerbated deliberately by some Sunni terrorists) and into the Lebanon. (Up to the war with Israel this summer, the Shiite political-military group, Hizbollah, was said to receive, depending on the source, anything from \$300-500 million in aid from an increasingly belligerent Iran. Given the size of the financial aid that Hizbollah has offered families that are war victims, it is possible that Iranian aid will now be double those estimates.) Iran's nuclear programme is a source of apprehension for its neighbouring Gulf States, since it threatens both to upset the current balance of power and to create further tension between the (generally predominant) Sunni Muslims and the Shiites in the Gulf.

There are aspects of this 'arc of crisis' that could be fitted under either one or the other of the previous two 'arcs'; e.g., Iranian aid for the Hamas government; or the democratic concerns of the Shia majority in Bahrain. The reason it has been independently identified is to highlight a distinctive feature: we have here a crisis that is in a significant way fuelled by the actions of one State, Iran, in conjunction with a variety of non-State actors. Historically, at 'street-level', 'Sunni' and 'Shiite' identities often intertwined the confessional with the political-economic dimensions of identity, giving the meaning of Sunni and Shiite identities, and the relationships between them,

considerable regional variation. Iran's interventions threaten to iron out these differences in a way that widens the sectarian divide.

Having seen fit to highlight this religious sectarian tension, an important qualification needs to be made. It is evident that Iran's actions are motivated by its leaders' perception of *raison d'état*, so much so, that while in some cases Iran acts to exacerbate sectarian tensions, in the Palestinian case it has been offering help to (the Sunni Muslim group) Hamas using a pan-Islamic (as well as anti-Israel) rhetoric.

***This particular mix of international and internal tensions have created strong potential for increased international interference in domestic affairs. The Middle East is a region where large number of the local groups that challenge the statu quo rely on foreign support. Military occupation or presence of foreign troops is both a revelator of international involvement in domestic affairs and a source of increased tensions within societies. Interference is increasingly considered a threat in the GCC countries and a lasting handicap for stabilisation in Lebanon, Irak and the Palestinian territories.***

### **III A common European will: principles and hard questions**

The advocacy for an integrated European approach to the Near and Middle East is generally accompanied by an appeal for a truly 'common European will', which the Common Foreign and Security Policy currently lacks. But if the EU is to form a common will, there needs to be more explicit recognition of its necessary components. There are some principles on which it is very likely possible to find considerable convergence. However, there are certain questions which are intrinsically controversial, even within the family of centre and centre-right political groups. The controversial nature of these questions makes it tempting to sidestep them, if only to avoid internal rifts; yet, if progress is to be made, these questions need explicit, extensive discussion.

What we identify below is a sample of important, necessary principles and hard questions. One of the purposes of listing them is to stimulate other suggestions. Another is to test whether what are listed here as relatively uncontroversial principles are indeed considered to be uncontroversial, and whether the 'hard' questions are indeed considered to be hard.

#### **Principles**

These three principles should inform the Union's sense of what it ought to expect of itself as well as of other States. The first two are general principles of international conduct, while the third is specifically concerned with the current regional situation.

- 1. European foreign policy should be guided by the respect of a principle of strict subsidiarity. Do not interfere directly in internal affairs. Avoid taking side. Strengthen dialogue with all sides. Europe cannot approach the region with a mandate like approach. Other international actors such as the UN or the Arab League (that is, within the UN, the C.VIII regional organization in the region) may more legitimized and better equipped to intervene. Any agreement reached between local parties should be considered much better than settlement imposed from outside. Europe's role should increase in mediation, support to the civil society and economic reconstruction.***

2. European foreign policy should be guided by support for the rule of law in international affairs and in matters concerning State sovereignty and the stability of established borders. Projects to change “maps” in the region will foster anxiety and instability, reduce trust and encourage militarization.

This principle is to be taken as an obligation that the EU takes on itself in order to be taken more seriously than it is already when it demands the rule of law and transparency from other States, including those of the Near and Middle East.

(...)

3. As soon as possible, European military forces should responsibly disengage from the region.

‘Responsible disengagement’ means: first, disengaging only when the military security of the people whom European forces are protecting is met; second, transforming the short-term engagement in military security into a long-term participation in economic and ecological security.

Unnecessarily prolonged military engagement is counter-productive: it makes it easier for forces of regional instability to portray Europe and its allies as being engaged in a colonial project, with the likely result that instability is increased rather than decreased.

### **Hard questions**

One important general feature of each arc of crisis is that involves both State and non-State actors. Iran’s increasing regional activity, for instance, is enabled by the collusion or partnership of non-State actors like Hamas and Hizbollah; the democracy movements naturally involve non-State actors pitted against regimes in control of the state apparatus; the multifaceted nature of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict cannot be understood without taking into account the various non-State actors.

Given the importance of their role, an integrated European policy will therefore need to address the various kinds of non-State actors. However, how to do this is a matter of controversy in Europe – which is why the principles stated above do not include anything about how to address this issue. For example:

- Should activists for a liberal democracy be supported, in any way, even when their campaign is directed against a regime that is an important regional ally of the EU?
- Should Islamist parties, whose electoral programme is committed to democracy, be engaged in dialogue?

What makes the second question a hard one is not only the wide range of Islamist groups, nor the difficulty of judging how strong is the actual commitment to democracy and respect for human rights, since even close observers are sometimes unsure. In several known cases (including that of Hamas), the commitment within the movement itself seems fluid, responsive to events, and might perhaps take an important turn towards democracy only if the movement is engaged in dialogue prior to making an unequivocal commitment to democracy and human rights.

## IV Integrated European initiatives and time-frames of crises

Proposals for an integrated European approach to the region need to keep in mind the various timeframes within which the crises are to be understood.

### Short term: military security

Although military security is obviously vital, the subject does not fall within the remit of this taskforce.

### Medium term (till 2010): political, economic and ecological security

Although the choice of 2010 as marking the limit of the medium term has an arbitrary element, it is not unmotivated. The year 2010 marks several regional milestones – such as the formation of a Euro-Mediterranean Free Trade Area. While these milestones are difficult to reach by that year, we are using that date to signify the period whose end will bring to a certain closure several regional developments to do with political-economic reform and dialogue.

The States that are considered in this section all fall, with one exception, Iran, within the EU's immediate neighbourhood – the Euro-Mediterranean area. This is not at all to suggest that there is nothing that can be undertaken in the rest of the Middle East in the medium term; but it was judged that coming up with medium-term initiatives for the rest of the Middle East largely depended on what kind of long term vision Europe has for the region (see in the section on long-term initiatives).

Although what follows primarily considers bilateral relationships between the EU and Near and Middle Eastern States, it should be understood that in general it is to their mutual benefit that the EU also helps facilitate, where it can, multilateralism, including between Near and Middle Eastern States (since regional multilateralism is currently weak).

#### *Iran*

Assuming that the current crisis raised by Iran's nuclear programme is successfully resolved, the question concerning future EU-Iranian cooperation in the region needs to be broached. Iran is clearly a major player in the region and its inclusion in future discussions on Palestine, Iraq and the Gulf waters should be seriously considered. ***American efforts to integrate Iran's perspectives in the discussions about the future of the region should be supported, provided Iran demonstrates its ability in being a trustworthy partner for the international community. In this context, direct military involvement and support to terrorist groups in different have to be addressed. Iran should also have a clear road map about the benefits its economy and people may gain in cooperating with the international community.***

#### *Israeli-Palestinian conflict*

It is banal to say that every effort should be made to bring the two parties back to the negotiating table; but perhaps it is less banal to suggest that the negotiating method be changed: from the step-by-step progressive method to agreeing first on a final settlement and then working out a way to reach it. This method has been recommended by certain Israeli and Palestinian negotiators.

Again, it is banal to say that progress toward a two-state solution needs to keep into account various aspects of the military security of both sides: the recent war between Hizbollah and Israel has highlighted how Israel's sense of her military insecurity has been affected by Iran's nuclear programme. But perhaps it is less banal to say that it is not just military security that needs to be addressed. Ecological and economic insecurity are affecting the conduct of the two sides immediately involved in the conflict; they are not the most important factors, but they are relevant. For example, hydro-politics shape the perception of risk by both parties, as well as their claims to territory; aid with the transfer of water-desalination technology might mitigate this problem. A long-term viable solution to the crisis would need to address these security aspects, too, and the EU could serve a key role by helping to identify these economic and ecological security issues and address them as a matter of priority in the allocation of European aid.

***Europeans have to make clear that they still favor the establishment of one Palestinian State and will not be satisfied with two rival autonomous "cantons" with two different Authorities. Dialogue with the Palestinians of Gaza should be maintained with the perspective of reunification of Palestine.***

#### *The Lebanon*

It is in the Lebanon that, uniquely, the three arcs of crisis coincide: Not only is there the democracy movement pitted against Syrian interference; the Shiite interests, at least as represented by Hizbollah, are increasingly diverging from Christian and Sunni interests and conceptions of the national common good; while the rivalry between Fatah and Hamas is being played out in the Palestinian refugee camps in the Lebanon.

This coincidence would make it very important for Europe urgently to engage the country (beginning with actively supporting all UN resolutions concerning the Lebanon), even if it had not experienced the recent war. A successful engagement with the Lebanon is likely to have a wider regional effect. And the country itself has a number of features that perhaps make it easier to tackle, in some respects, than others: for example, it has a large, politically assertive Christian community, and its professional middle class is prominently active in the democracy movement (whereas in certain other States it appears more ambivalent about democracy, fearing an Islamist victory at the polls).

***The Lebanese unity has since last summer been undermined by foreign interference, unresolved conflict between the Lebanese parties, a renewed tensions with the Palestinians. Europe's position cannot be one-sided. Dialogue between the parties have to be kept open. But the two basic principles of European support to reconstruction have to be clear : respect of constitutional order and state of law, end of military supplies to Lebanon militias by outside powers (in contraction with UN resolutions).***

In the light of the Lebanon's vulnerability to being used as a pawn in regional conflicts that do not have to do directly with it, an enforced neutral status for Lebanon could be considered. The country could then play a role analogous to that played, in the past or at present, by certain neutral European States, like Austria, Switzerland and Malta, similarly situated in geo-politically fraught areas.

#### *Jordan and Egypt*

It is important to engage Egypt and Jordan in a special way because of their particular circumstances. Both are States that are capable of instituting gradual reform successfully, without upheaval: yet both face radical opposition groups that might put such gradual reform at risk.

How can the EU help them reform their political and economic system without destabilizing their societies?

The question is particularly pressing in the case of Egypt since it is fast approaching an important transition in its internal politics: It is unlikely that President Mubarak will stand again for the Presidency when the next election is due in 2010.

Three proposals are here offered for consideration:

- Positive conditionality: This proposal has been made several times, with reference to the entire region, but it bears reiteration: EU agreements negotiated with southern Mediterranean States should be based on rewards for progress made on mutually agreed reforms, and not on sanctions for failing breaking agreements. The current agreements are based on sanctions, which tend to stall progress since sanctions are difficult to enforce in practice.
- A 'Bill of Rights' approach in pressing for respect for human and civil rights for all minorities and women.
- Perhaps the proposal by President Jacques Chirac for a Charter for dialogue between cultures and civilisations could be a preparatory step towards a Mediterranean Charter for Human Rights, which would be articulated in a manner that reflects the various cultural traditions of the area (while naturally being fully compatible with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights), and which all Mediterranean States, north and south, would adopt.

### **Long term (after 2010): the need for a more integrated and more ambitious vision of EU/Middle East relations**

It is striking that there is no articulate, long-term European vision for the region. Indeed, in much public commentary and discourse, the region tends to be defined by what it is not or does not have: rightly or wrongly, for example, it is often claimed that the region has yet to have its Reformation or its Enlightenment or its 1989. The official statements auguring a future of stability, prosperity and partnership are too vague and, in part perhaps as a result, often regarded cynically, particularly in the region itself. Europeans need to begin to spell out and debate, among themselves and in dialogue with their counterparts in the region, a vision of the conjoined future they would like for Europe and the Near and Middle East.

This is not the place where such a vision can be spelled out. But certain key elements for consideration can be highlighted.

#### *Shared governance*

- 'Privileged partnership': The draft Constitutional Treaty refers to such a partnership in Title VIII (Article 56): 'The Union shall develop a special relationship with neighbouring States, aiming to establish an area of prosperity and good neighbourliness, founded on the values of the Union and characterised by close and peaceful relations based on cooperation.' The Treaty does not explore this special relationship in further detail. Indeed, its generic formulation leaves open the possibility that the special relationships that the Union might cultivate could be of more than one kind.

Again, this is not the place to discuss what kind of content such a partnership could have (in part because that is part of the remit of another taskforce). But it is worth pointing out that it is important to divorce the exploration of the possible content of the 'privileged partnership' from the question of Turkey's application to join the Union. The two are logically separable and it is in practice important to do so: partnership with respect to Turkey has so far been discussed as a form of partial membership of the Union (involving full economic union without full participation in governance); but another possible form that 'privileged partnership' could take, with respect to States on Europe's southern boundary, is joint participation in networks of regional management.

- Maritime affairs: The Near Eastern States situated in the immediate neighbourhood of the Union share, with the Union, responsibility for the good governance of the Mediterranean Sea. As the European Commission's recent Green Paper on maritime affairs argues, the sea is becoming an increasingly important source of wealth, food, energy and knowledge; at the same time, this increasing importance is also making certain questions of military, political, economic and ecological security more salient, for both northern and southern shores of the sea; its good governance often involves one form or another of regional management.

So perhaps Europe's long-term vision for the Near East should include partnership in a regional network for the management of the sea's resources.

#### *Economic reform*

- The southern Mediterranean States have often argued for an agreement permitting the free movement of workers between themselves and the Union. Europe needs to decide if there is any point in the long term when it would be prepared to countenance such free movement.
- The liberalisation of trade in agricultural goods has also been often urged by southern Mediterranean States. The issue is currently subject to WTO talks. But the ball might be returned, eventually, to the EU's court, and Europe would need to decide on whether to be more generous on the terms of trade it offers the region.
- How should Europe think about the long-term future of the region in terms of both its production and consumption of natural resources like water, oil and solar energy? What kinds of networks of knowledge and governance would such production and consumption require?
- Long-term economic reform needs to envisage cooperation in knowledge-based enterprises. To enable the mobility of researchers and joint research and innovation, the facilitation of multilateral scientific collaboration is essential. Currently, multilateral research collaboration is rendered difficult by the need to acquire a research permit from each nation state involved. This difficulty would be greatly eased by the creation of a research permit which would be valid for the entire region. The possibility of instituting such a permit should be given an energetic attention.

#### *Cultural dialogue*

Developing a long-term vision for the region involves developing a new narrative for Europe, one that sees the reformist and network-building impulse that has guided the Union from its

inception applied to the political, economic and cultural needs of the twenty-first century. Such a narrative is bound to be articulated slowly: the beginnings and shapes of stories can only be recognised some time after their occurrence and formation.

However, one can hasten the development of this narrative by engaging in cultural (or public) diplomacy. Several Member States already conduct cultural diplomacy in the region, and have gathered considerable experience. But there is a value added by having a European dimension to cultural diplomacy. The setting up of the Anna Lindh Foundation for Dialogue Between Cultures and Civilisations is one step in this direction. But there is also a role that can be played by the European Parliament: for example, the centre and centre-right decision makers can routinely host journalists and civil society leaders in Brussels, with the support of their political grouping.

An extension of the Erasmus Programme to the Near and Middle East should be considered. The mobility of youth is one of the preconditions for cultural dialogue.

An EU broadcasting network aimed at the region should perhaps also be considered. Since this would be a very expensive and complex venture, it would probably be wise to begin with a pilot project, that is more modest in its ambition. Such a pilot project could be based on that currently being urged by the Permanent Conference of Mediterranean Audiovisual Operators (COPEAM). This network has eschewed an earlier plan to set up a EuroMed TV for a project entailing four hours of programming (plus repeats) on a satellite channel that would make extensive use of existing national productions addressing regional issues – where the value added consists of translating these productions, from and to various European languages and Arabic, and diffusing them throughout the region, beyond the original intended audience.