

spotlight europe

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After Gaza: A Common Dialogue Platform for the Middle East

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If one wants to have peace in the Middle East, one will have to persuade all of the actors to sit around a table and to talk about all of the conflicts. Secret negotiations are just as ineffectual as the exclusion of certain actors. Only a common platform for dialogue will enable the European Union and above all the U.S. to fulfil their peacemaking mission.

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The Hamas-Israeli War

The war against Hamas has strengthened Israel directly in military terms, but has completely ruined its reputation in the Arab and Muslim world. The danger of Hamas rocket attacks may have been terminated for the time being, but in regional terms Israel's security situation has not got any better.

Can anyone still provide security in the Gaza Strip? The Palestinians are divided and without a legitimate leadership, and the situation seems hopeless and desolate in Gaza. The Annapolis negotiations between Israelis and Palestinians have not

yet led to a two-state solution. The strategy which involves strengthening Fatah on the West Bank and isolating Hamas in the Gaza Strip has not worked. The political elites continue to fight shy of an open and honest dialogue with their citizens. Although they are fully aware of the basic facts of a solution to the conflict between Israel and Palestine, they continue to steer clear of spelling out the compromises that will have to be made.

Trust in others has reached its nadir. Each side has its own media and perceptions. The Arabs watch Al Jazeera, the Israelis watch Channel 2, the Americans watch Fox News, and the Europeans watch the BBC. The conflict has generated a great deal of emotional turmoil, as the world-

wide pro-Israeli and pro-Palastinian demonstrations have shown. Apart from demonstrations in European capitals, hundreds of people took to the streets in German provincial towns, too. This poisons the whole atmosphere, and more and more people are prompted to espouse radical views. The moderate forces and governments are being weakened and the prospects of an Israeli-Palstinian two-state solution is becoming increasingly improbable.

In the Hamas-Israeli conflict in particular the European Union is once again being called upon to bear the burden of conflict management. This was already the case in the summer of 2006 in southern Lebanon, when the war between Israel and Hizbollah ended only after the deployment of the [UNIFIL II mission](#). Yet this conflict demonstrates that the end of a war does not signify peace by any stretch of the imagination. The international missions monitoring the ceasefire will only turn out to be a success once peace treaties between Israel, the Palestinians and their Arab neighbours have been concluded.



Everything is Interconnected

The convoluted state of affairs continues to worsen because all of the actors in the Middle East taken as a whole have their fingers in the pie somewhere, either with regard to the use of force or to attempts at peace-making, as some examples connected with the most recent Hamas-Israeli war demonstrate:

- Syria is allowing exiled Hamas leader Mashaal to act more freely in order to show Israel and the U.S. that Syria wishes to have a say in matters relating to war and peace.
- The hardliners in Iran are relieved yet again that international attention has now

shifted to Israel and Gaza and away from their nuclear programme.

- Israel is attacking Hamas also in order to deter Hizbollah on its northern border.
- Egypt has sealed off Hamas within the Gaza Strip in order to prevent it from cooperating with the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood.
- Iran and Syria are using their influence on Hamas in order to strike the U.S. via Israel, in other words, to demonstrate that they can harm American interests in the region, but that they can also promote them.

“Regional Powers are playing the game indirectly.”

In these manoeuvres the regional powers are playing the game indirectly. Whilst demonstrating to each other how potentially disruptive they can be, they are not giving anyone a reason to attack them.

This method is also used in order to delay or even to torpedo bilateral attempts to resolve conflicts.

- Turkish attempts to bring about a rapprochement between Israel and Syria has mobilised Lebanese and Palestinians, since they fear that such an agreement will be at their expense.
- Mere rumours that Washington is trying to reach a bilateral agreement with Tehran has Saudis, Emiratis, Israelis and Iraqis up in arms. They are afraid that an American-Iranian treaty might fail to take into account their own security interests.
- Israel is in favour of peace with Syria primarily in order to isolate Iran, and construes the stand-offs with Hamas and Hizbollah as proxy wars with Iran.
- Pictures of the unabated construction of settlements in East-Jerusalem or on the

West Bank make it increasingly difficult even for moderate Arab leaders in the Gulf

- The Israeli government’s plan to negotiate a two-state solution with Fatah has ground to a halt also because it has been impossible to isolate Hamas, who are in control of Gaza.

- The Lebanese Hizbollah emerged strengthened from the asymmetrical war against the Israeli Army in the summer of 2006. It was able to exercise its veto in the context of intra-Lebanese wrangling and, by pointing to the ongoing conflict with Israel, to stop attempts to disarm it. In this regard Iran and Syria have displayed the extent of their influence. A Syrian-Saudi quarrel paralyzed an intra-Lebanese agreement for months.

Thus the so-called non-state actors such as Hamas and Hizbollah are in fact tools of the competing regional powers in the Middle East. And to make everything even more complicated, moderate politicians and radical leaders are jostling for power even within movements such as Hamas and Hizbollah.

The former CIA case officer and Middle East specialist Robert Baer sums up the situation thus. “Hizbollah, Hamas and the Shiite parties in Iraq look to Tehran for financial aid and support. As long as the U.S. does not solve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Iran’s influence will grow.”

Thus it is possible to argue that the attempt to isolate the regional powers Syria and Iran has been a failure. Furthermore, bids to conclude bilateral agreements have come to grief on account of the veto powers of neighbouring states. Conflict management as in the case of Israel-Gaza and Israel-South Lebanon may be of importance in order to

to ask their countries to support the Arab peace initiative with Israel.

The attempts to ignore, neutralize or isolate spoilers and obstructionists have come to grief as a result of regional entanglements.

Who wants what? The interests of regional key actors

- Egypt**
 - to assert its key role in the Arab world
 - to promote social and economic development
 - to secure the regime against Islamists
- Iraq**
 - to restore domestic security and make economic progress
 - to avoid disintegration of the country
 - to regain a regional role
- Iran**
 - to establish itself as a regional power in the Gulf
 - to make economic and scientific progress
 - to gain recognition from the USA
- Israel**
 - to secure that Israel is recognised as a Jewish State
 - to establish its military supremacy in the region
 - to keep as much settlements as possible
- Saudi Arabia**
 - to assert its key role in the Muslim world
 - to modernise the country while maintaining power structures
 - to foster the solution of conflicts by consensus
- Syria**
 - to get the Golan Heights back from Israel
 - to gain recognition from the USA
 - economic development while maintaining power structures
- Turkey**
 - to join the European Union
 - to become a regional power with conflict resolution capacity
 - to prevent the creation of an autonomous Kurdish state

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bring armed conflicts to an end, yet conflict management per se simply increases the potential for further wars. The next step in the dispute relating to the Iranian nuclear programme is already discernible on the horizon.

And last but not least, conflict management is becoming more expensive. The international community is having to come up with more and more diplomatic, financial and human resources to support a UN mandate, whilst at the same time endangering the lives of its aid workers and blue helmets. And the missions come to an end only when it is possible to make peace. For example, the UNIFIL II mission in southern Lebanon, which since the summer of 2006 has been run primarily by European blue helmets, will turn out to be a success only after Israel has signed peace treaties with Syria and Lebanon.

Each actor in the Middle East is afraid that his interests and anxieties will be passed over or ignored. Each actor wishes to be esteemed, accepted and taken seriously by his neighbours and the USA. Each actor would like to show how important he is in the region and that it is worth supporting him in political and economic terms. Each actor is striving for security and prosperity.

Politics is no doubt a sober business of balancing interests. Yet in the Middle East emotions, symbols, vivid ideas and neurotic images also play an important role. Future conflict management and conflict resolution need to pay more attention to such perceptions.

III

A Common Platform for Dialogue

Future diplomatic efforts should be directed primarily at providing a common platform for all of the actors and thus for all of their interests, fears and cleavages.

However, this common platform will not simply be part of a never-ending series of Middle East intergovernmental conferences and not another summit held for its own sake. No actor will be excluded, all interests will have a voice, every conflict will be taken seriously and everyone will have the same opportunity to explain his anxieties and fears about the future. It will all be about honesty, openness, modesty and a new language of reconciliation.

It is not about pageantry, showmanship, big promises or bitter accusations. This is not a naive or cosy strategy, and is also all about sending out a symbolic signal: There will be no more secret negotiations of the kind which give rise to nothing but suspicion and opposition. Secretiveness spawns rumours and conspiracy theories, and in the Middle East this always means that everything has already come to grief before it has even got off the ground. The search for peace in the Middle East needs to escape from this vicious circle.

“Avoid as much diplomatic wrangling as possible.”

The methodology of this new approach is based on the idea of inviting all parties to share a common platform on which they can search for ways for a common and sustainable resolution of their various interlinked conflicts. The goal of this quest is not as in the past conflict management as such. Many actors in the region reject the kind of conflict management strategy pursued in recent years, which they believe is nothing more than muddling through and procrastination, and has been unable to reduce the potential for new outbursts of violence.

In contrast to this the goal of this quest is nothing less than conflict resolution, though in all modesty on two levels of attainment: The first level, which takes its bearings from the notion of conflict transformation, is a stage in which the dialogue platform becomes the forum within which potential conflicts can be nudged into

peaceful channels. The second level presupposes that a serious effort will be made by all of the participants to terminate as many conflicts as possible with the help of peace treaties. Thus the platform could move on from being a dialogue forum to become a negotiating forum.

Once all of the actors are sitting round a table, they will have become an integral part of the process. No one will be able to claim that he was not invited or that he was not listened to, and that he thus has every right to opt out of the process and to make trouble for everyone else. Anyone who turns down an invitation is telling the rest of the world that he is trying to hold things up. He can no longer hide behind the claim that an external force, as was the case with the Bush administration, has done all it can to isolate him (as in the case of Iran) or is actually dead set against having him there at all (as in the case of Syria).

All the actors will be invited on the basis of equality. The envoy system will be used in order to avoid as much diplomatic wrangling as possible about status questions before the platform convenes. Every head of state and government will choose an envoy. The Palestinians (in point of fact without a legitimate leadership since 9 January) will decide themselves, without pressure from outside, who is to represent them at the talks. If it is one person from Gaza and one person from the West Bank, then that may initially be

possible, though in the course of time they will also have to reach agreement on a special envoy. The platform will be exerting pressure on them to attain a consensus. As a multilateral external actor the European Union should agree on one voice, which might well be that of the High Representative for the Common Foreign and Security Policy, Javier Solana.

The meetings will take place on a regular, or, and this would be even better, on a permanent basis, so that invitations to the

The main cleavages in the region

Conflicts over territory and dominance

- The Arab-Israeli conflict (Israel-Palestine, Israel-Lebanon, Israel-Syria)
- Iran (nuclear programme, regional role)
- The future of Iraq
- The Kurdish issue (Iraq, Turkey)
- The stability of Afghanistan and Pakistan
- Fragile states: Yemen, Sudan, Iraq, Palestine, Lebanon



Cross-border conflicts

- Struggling over resources and transport routes (water, oil, natural gas, rural land)
- Social issue: countries with raw materials vs. countries without raw materials, rich upper class vs. poor lower class
- Demographic pressure to create jobs
- Immigration
- Armament
- Extremism and terror
- Good governance/the ability to modernise

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next gathering will not involve a great deal of diplomatic effort. The envoy solution will make it easier to agree on dates and on an agenda. All the various conflicts will be on the agenda. The discussions will then consider all of the more or less interwoven lines of conflict: Israel-Palestine,

Israel-Syria, Israel-Lebanon, Arab World-Israel, Lebanon-Syria, Iraq-Iran-Turkey-Syria, Gulf States-Iran, Iran-Israel, and Iraq and its neighbours. The most important thing is to attempt to create as much consensus as possible and to balance the various interests in an equitable manner. And if progress is made in the discussions and negotiations on the Israeli-Syrian agenda item, for example, it will have a positive influence on the other conflicts.

All the fundamental issues on which these conflicts are based, such as Israel's right to exist as a Jewish state, the Palestinians' and the Kurds' right to self-determination, the territorial integrity of Iraq, the independence of Lebanon and Syria, Iran's security interests, or the stability and security of the Arab Gulf states will be taken into account.

The comprehensive approach of a common platform for dialogue will give the Arab world the assurance that all the contentious points relating to Israel will be dealt with, as will Israel's concerns about its regional security and full incorporation into the region. Iran will be able to make out a case for its wish to be an integral part of the region. The U.S. will perceive that the withdrawal of its troops from Iraq is safe in the regional context. And the smaller countries of the region will also have their say.

The symbolism of the venue is of some importance. For this reason the common forum for dialogue will not be meeting in places which remind people of previous Middle East initiatives such as Oslo, Madrid, Annapolis, Camp David or Shepherdstown. Nor will the participants be meeting in places which are associated with important historical agreements such as San Francisco, Rome or Seville (however pleasant it might be, though not all of the actors may be of this opinion). The common forum for dialogue is supposed to stand for a new beginning of a modest, inclusive and goal-oriented kind, and for this reason as many associations as possible

should be avoided. It must be a practical working location for the envoys. The best thing would be somewhere in the Middle East, partly in order to emphasize the connection with the region, and the commitment of the actors who actually live there.

The greatest responsibility devolves on the host as discussion leader. What is needed is a powerful and very tactful personality. Even if many actors believe that the U.S. has lost its reputation as an honest broker, it continues to be the most powerful external actor. It has a sizeable number of armed forces in the region, a plethora of interests, and the greatest ability to issue certain guarantees. For almost everyone in the region the new American president stands for hope and a new beginning. His envoy should also embody this positive kind of authority. The reason for this is that the American envoy will bear the principal responsibility for the atmosphere of the talks. He must avoid that the multi-lateral talks will fall apart into bilateral and (semi-)secret negotiations. And last but not least he will also have to incorporate the other external actors (EU, UN, Russia, China, and Japan) on an equal footing.

IV

No time to lose

The inauguration of the new U.S. president would seem to be a good moment to start with the initiative. Barack Obama himself has announced that he will quickly become involved in the Middle East conflict. Thus it seems that on this occasion presidential participation, in contrast to Obama's predecessors Clinton and Bush, can already be expected at the beginning of a term of office and not at the end. That would strengthen the authority and the commitment of U.S. involvement. At the same time Obama will encounter a great willingness on the part of the Europeans and many regional actors to work together closely.

In recent months Obama's advisers have let it be known that they will be suggesting to the new U.S. administration that there should be multilateral involvement, close cooperation and burden-sharing with the EU, and a dialogue between Washington, Damascus and Tehran. Furthermore, Israel is electing a new parliament in February and thus a new government, and Iran is electing a new president in June. And the Palestinians are being pressured to determine a new legitimate leadership. These are the points which suggest that 2009 may well be a year of opportunity in which it would make sense to embark on a new approach to conflict resolution in the Middle East.

The difficult and unpredictable challenges posed by the global economic and financial crisis still constitute a risk. Thus the Obama administration might well have to deal with growing intra-American problems, and this may leave little time for foreign policy initiatives. Similarly, new incidents in the Middle East may lead to crises or wars at a moment's notice, and this would terminate an ongoing dialogue or defer it indefinitely.

V

What is the EU doing?

The European Union possesses a wealth of experience and skills with which it can help to implement a new Middle East approach on the basis of a common platform for dialogue.

- The EU can impress upon the new U.S. administration that the inclusive approach is better than to act bilaterally and to isolate important players; that Obama must move on the Middle East at the beginning of his presidency and not towards the end; that the strategy should be conflict resolu-

tion and not procrastinatory conflict management; that a new negotiating approach must be adopted and that all this taken together can dramatically improve the image of the U.S. in the region, and in the final analysis can even create better regional conditions for a withdrawal of U.S. troops from Iraq.

"The isolation of Syria and Iran has failed."

- The EU has resilient relations with all of the actors in the region, and for this reason it can underline the importance of American envoy invitations to states such as Iran and Syria that have hitherto been isolated from the USA.
- The EU is the largest financial donor to the Palestinian administration. It is involved in police training ([EUPOL COPPS](#)) and in customs clearance at Rafah crossing between Gaza and Egypt ([EU BAM](#)).
- Europe needs peace projects in its southern neighbourhood so that the Mediterranean Union can get off the ground and that at long last the great social and economic challenges in North Africa and the Middle East can move to the centre of the policymaking stage.

Despite this important potential, the European Union should not adopt a competitive stance towards the USA. In fact the EU should realize that a solution of the conflict will only be possible if there is a new and stronger role for the U.S., which in its turn is placing its hopes in a resilient Transatlantic partnership.

For Further Reading:

Christian Hanelt / Almut Möller (Editors): Bound to Cooperate - Europe and the Middle East II, Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2008

[Bertelsmann Foundation: Trans-Atlantic Briefing Book – Managing Expectations, Expanding the Partnership, Shaping the Agenda for 2009, November 2008](#)

Aaron David Miller: The Much Too Promised Land - America's Elusive Search for Arab-Israeli Peace, März 2008

Robert Baer: The Devil we know – Dealing with the New Iranian Superpower, September 2008

[Richard N. Haass / Martin Indyk: Beyond Iraq. A New U.S. Strategy for the Middle East, Foreign Affairs, January 2009](#)

[Henry Siegman: A Last Chance at Middle East Peace?, The Nation, January 2009](#)

[Hussein Agha/Robert Malley: How Not to Make Peace in the Middle East, The New York Review of Books, Volume 56, No. 1, January 2009](#)

Responsible

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