

The EU and the Palestinian-Israeli conflict: The limits of the CFSP

By Alfred Pijpers

The June War of 1967, this month widely commemorated (also in the European media), was not just a crucial turning point in the Arab-Israeli conflict, but it was also the trigger for the European Community to launch a common foreign policy. Today it is hard to believe, but during the six days battle the member states of the European Community adopted completely individual stances, without any coordination, and with particularly France and The Netherlands (Germany kept a low profile) finding themselves in opposite positions. France felt sympathy for the Arab cause, while the Dutch government openly applauded the defeat of the Arab armies and the ensuing conquests by the IDF, with overwhelming support from parliament and public opinion,

Everybody realized, however, that the biggest trading bloc in the world with important external trade, aid, and association policies in the making, and soon to be enlarged with new members, needed also to coordinate the foreign policies of its members. In the early 1970s, therefore, a system for political cooperation was set up by the Six and soon Nine members of the EC, with the Arab-Israeli conflict as one of its principal areas of concern (next to Eastern Europe).

Today this mechanism has evolved into the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) for 27 Member States, and it is surprising to see that despite all remaining individual differences, the EU has managed to produce over nearly four decades a rather consistent set of common principles and positions with regard to the Palestinian –Israeli conflict.

With the major UN Security Council Resolutions (242, 338, 1397, 1402, and 1515) as its international legal base, 27 European states, consisting of nearly 500 million people, now unanimously agree on a two-state solution, a “fair solution to the complex issue of Jerusalem”, a “just, viable, realistic and agreed solution to he

problem of Palestinian refugees”, and a “solution in the Israeli-Syrian and Israeli-Lebanese tracks”. These, to be sure, are very general points, and they are also shared by the greater part of the international community, the Quartet included, but European diplomacy has actively helped to shape them.

Whatever its reputation of weakness and discord (not to mention unreliability), the EU has indeed become one the chief external players involved in the conflict. It uses a wide range of commercial and financial instruments to implement its policies, it very often operates as a voting bloc in the UN General Assembly and other UN bodies, and it has an effective foreign policy coordinator in the person of Javier Solana, who maintains frequent and close relations with both Israeli and Palestinian authorities, including the security services. He is assisted by a special EU-envoy for the Middle East Peace Process (MEPP), the Belgian diplomat Marc Otte.

Particularly the three larger EU states, France, the UK, and Germany, however, still retain a lot of individual room to manoeuvre. They maintain extensive bilateral relationships with

the main states and parties to the conflict, and they sent constantly their envoys to the region as if no EU-presidency or foreign policy coordinator does exist. After the deep transatlantic and European divide over Iraq in 2003, they try as the EU-3 to provide some sort of informal leadership in an EU of 27 and more states, with for the time being Iran as their main concern.

Yet, over the years an ever growing number of member states have adapted their foreign policies by and large to the evolving European *acquis*, which is also a requirement for candidates in order to become a EU- member, Turkey included. Compared with what we have seen during the Six-Day War, this is certainly an entirely different European position.

But this collective presence has come with a price. The constant need to find a compromise among a few dozen states with strong national traditions has led to a lot of ambiguity. Voting *en bloc* takes sometimes precedence over policy wisdom, in order to show the world unity and resolve of a big Union with 27 members. This became clear when very soon after the “big bang” of enlargement, the EU decided to support the UNGA resolution (condemning the “Wall”) of July 2004, despite the misgivings of some member states about the political nature of this resolution, and with a counterproductive diplomatic row with Israel to boot.

Europe’s declared ambition for an autonomous “identity” in international affairs, her broad spectre of interests in the Arab (and wider Muslim) world, and her persistent military weakness, have also raised the question whether the EU in the end has really been an asset, or rather a liability in the quest for stable solutions.

Two basic flaws in the EU’s positioning stand out.

(1) EU view on roots of the conflict

The first problem is that despite all references to “evenhandedness”, and despite repeated and unequivocal rejections of violence and terrorism against Israel, both the governments and the populations of the EU member states tend to locate the deeper cause of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict *primarily* in the forty years of Israeli occupation, and not in the military threats to Israel posed by Arab, Palestinian, or Iranian forces before or during that time (though these threats are not denied).

If only Israel could withdraw from the Westbank, so runs the European near-consensus today, and allow a Palestinian state as its neighbour, with the green line as a border, and Eastern Jerusalem as its capital, the problems would soon disappear. It is widely believed by the European public that without the Israeli occupation, the conflict could already have been ended long ago, and peace would entail not only between Israel and Palestine, but also in the wider Middle East.

The Arab belief that the Israeli occupation practices are the root cause for all misery, poverty, and backwardness in the Arab world, and of terrorism, is not officially shared by the EU, but it has many disciples. The EU holds the view that “terrorist attacks against Israel have no justification whatsoever”, but nevertheless many Europeans feel they can very well be *explained* by Israel’s continuous suppression of Palestinian statehood.

Public opinion in Europa has changed considerably over the past decades. The holocaust has resided to the background in the memory of younger generations, and the former Israeli role model of democracy, entrepreneurship and military prowess, has now almost become its complete opposite in the European view. Many EU states contain large muslim populations with a strong pro-Palestinian attitude, and often open sympathies

for radical and violent Palestinian fighting methods.

(2) Europe's civilian posture

A second problem is the persistent non-military outlook of the EU, despite the formulation of a European security strategy in 2003, and progress made in the Common Security and Defense Policy (CSDP), the military arm so to speak of the CFSP.

The EU could theoretically draw on several million military personnel, 10.000 tanks, 38.000 armoured vehicles, 2.500 combat aircraft and 800 combat vessels from its 27 member states. However, the EU is currently far from being a federal political and military power like the United States, nor is it a military organisation like NATO, with its mutual defence clause (Art.5). The European Constitutional Treaty of 2004 consisted a paragraph to this effect, but this treaty was rejected by the French and Dutch voters in 2005, and it is now being renegotiated.

The *culture*, then, of the EU, the origins, ambitions and instruments of its institutions, the mentality of its people, have essentially remained very "civilian". Brussels tends to underestimate international security threats, and to transform these into non-military problems (like poverty and underdevelopment, bad governance), for which diplomatic instruments (aid, trade, international law, state building measures etc.) are much more appropriate than military means.

Just as British foreign policy in the 19-th century had only one leading principle (to maintain or restore the balance of power in Europe), European foreign policy is also governed by one central concern: to avoid conflict in Europe's Southern and Eastern peripheries. It is not just to *prevent* conflict in a more technical sense, but to make sure that in the direct neighbourhood of the EU armed conflict and violence are contained or avoided.

In itself this is an entirely legitimate, be it somewhat narrow, guideline for any decent foreign policy, and particularly for the EU. Warfare and conflict in Europe's near abroad obviously endanger a wide range of vital European commercial and humanitarian interests, disrupt trade, and push massive flows of refugees well into the EU's territory.

But the EU's basically civilian stance is no match for parties for whom the use of violence and armed conflict is not just an instrument for rational political purposes, but rather the normal way to do business, a way of life. It makes the EU vulnerable to the blackmail of terrorism, and prevents a realistic assessment of the deeply violent nature of groups like Hezbollah or Hamas, or the threats posed by Iran , and of the enormous violent character of the Middle East in general and the Palestinian territories in particular. The EU has applauded the disengagement moves by Sharon in Gaza, and it regrets the civil strife between Hamas and Fatah afterwards, but it does not really grasp the endemic nature of the violence, and its structural roots in Palestinian society and muslim ideology.

These two parameters have to a considerable extent shaped the relationship between the EU and the principal actors in the conflict: the Palestinians, Israel, the United States, and they also determine the limits of European influence.

Sophisticated appeasement

"Sophisticated appeasement" is perhaps the best label to summarize Europe's engagement with the PLO since the beginning of the EPC/CFSP. The EU has always been the principal promotor of Palestinian political rights in the West, which were steadily upgraded through a series of common declarations (Venice, Berlin, Seville), culminating in the two-state solution. Europe was the favourite partner for the Palestinians, because it provided political shelter against American pressure, and a lot of money to fill the

coffers of Fatah and the PLO leadership. The EU is the largest donor to the PA, and runs numerous programmes to support the Palestinian statebuilding process.

Arafat has been the EC/EU's pet interlocutor since the origins of European foreign policy, but the EU was never able to prevent him from resorting to the use of violence, which for Arafat was always an instrument as good as any other (even better). The EU was a helpless bystander when the Camp David talks of July 2000 collapsed (though its special envoy Moratinos had flown to Washington), and it could not prevent the outbreak of the second intifada. If EU leaders (like at that time Joschka Fischer) would have been able to put more pressure on Arafat they might have tipped the balance in favour of the Clinton proposals and the concessions already made by Barak.

The EU has put Hamas, Islamic Jihad, and other armed Palestinian groups, though not Hezbollah, on its list of terrorist organisations. The presumed democratic election of a majority of Hamas representatives in the Palestinian Assembly, however, has put the EU off balance. So far the EU toes the line with the US over the boycott of the Hamas ministers, but there are already cracks in the EU position, and after the formation of a Palestinian government of national unity in the Spring of 2007, many European media and politicians have argued for an end of the boycott and a dialogue with Hamas.

Distrust and opportunities

For most of the same reasons mentioned above the EU's political relationship with Israel has always been pretty bad. The numerous common declarations of the EU on the Middle East read as a continuous indictment of Israeli occupation policies, and as a result the EU's political standing in Jerusalem remains low, while her impact on Israeli policies is minimal. Israel distrusts Europe for historic reasons, for having a pro-Arab and pro-Palestinian bias, and for not

being able to make a solid stance against terrorism. But we should not be too pessimistic.

Firstly, the security of the state of Israel and its people and its right of existence remain an unshaken principle in European policy, despite the shifts in public opinion and the lopsided analysis of the roots of the conflict. "It is the EU's position of principle that Israel should live in peace within internationally-recognised borders, accepted by all its neighbours, and free from threats to its security". "A settlement can be achieved only through negotiation, and only through negotiation", declares the Seville Declaration (22 June 2002) of the EU. A better idea than the celebrated "land for peace" formula which (in a wrong reading of UNSC resolution 242) contains the implicit assumption that if land is not forthcoming (quickly enough) violence remains always justified as a last resort.

Secondly, economic, scientific, and cultural cooperation between Israel and the EU is very sound. The agreement on the rules of origins of July 2004 has put an end to the trade conflict about the settlers products from the Westbank, and Israeli scientists are still much in demand in the European research centre. Israel is closely associated with the EU's research programmes, and it was the first non-European country which joint the (now defunct) Galileo-project for satellite navigation. Recently, certain European universities have attempted a boycott of Israeli scientists, but these were soon halted over academic objections.

Thirdly, the bilateral links between Israel and individual EU member states are still very good, a factor always of importance if peacekeeping contributions are required. Relations differ with parties and personalities in office on both sides, but mutual ties are strong and include military and intelligence cooperation. Israel's increasing cooperation with NATO and European NATO members should also be recalled in this regard. Useful elements which may facilitate the future

deployment of peacekeeping troops in this part of the Middle East.

The transatlantic dimension

Part of Europe's self-proclaimed identity in world politics is a degree of anti-Americanism, or at least an attempt to operate independently from the US, and this has led to frequent transatlantic clashes over various aspects of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. But neither on this point we should exaggerate the differences between the two sides of the Atlantic, nor the seriousness of Europe's ambitions. Since the peace between Israel and Egypt, the EU has virtually acknowledged the American lead (as was confirmed through the European participation in the MFO), and despite different approaches towards the PLO or Israel, Brussels has always been careful not to widen the gap between the US and the EU positions too much.

"9/11" formed another reason to join forces, and though the EU was critical over the non-interference policy of George W. Bush during the second intifada, it refrained from independent moves. Instead, the Quartet and the Roadmap became the common platform for US-EU cooperation.

Even the mess created by the Bush-administration in Iraq has not seduced the EU to develop its own initiatives. The transatlantic clashes over Iraq were kept separate from the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. The times when Arafat could play off his European friends against Washington seem to have gone. Apparently, Europe has come to realize that considering the parameters of the conflict, international influence can only work on the basis of a cohesive transatlantic bloc. The Quartet reflects a broad international consensus about the two-state solution, and is a useful platform to tie the European positions to those of the United States. Hopefully this tie can also work to keep Russia on board, for instance over the question whether or not to do business with Hamas.

Peacekeeping

As far as peacekeeping is concerned: the EC/EU has coordinated Europe's contribution to the Multinational Sinai Force and Observers (MFO) in the early 1980s, it provides today the main bulk of troops to the UN Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL), and it helps with the monitoring of the Israeli-Palestinian agreement on the operation of the Rafah border crossing point between the Gaza Strip and Egypt. An upgraded EU role in this area along the lines of UNIFIL is not excluded against the backdrop of mounting violence and civil strife in the Gaza Strip. Israeli Prime Minister Olmert at least is not against such an expanded presence. The EU was also involved in security sector reform for the Palestinian Authority, for example via efforts (EUCOPPS) to improve the performance of Palestinian civil policing.

Much depends on the political situation in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict theater, and the evolving military capabilities of the EU. Under the Headline Goal 2010 (for which planning started in 2004) EU military forces have been created to undertake peacekeeping or peace enforcement tasks, as well as military assistance in humanitarian crises. Such missions can be a stabilisation force in conflict zones, combat support to the peacekeeping operations of the United Nations or regional organizations like the African Union, or military evacuation schemes to rescue European citizens trapped abroad in a crisis.

EU-led troops may also be deployed prior to a larger NATO or UN-force, and the EU may dispatch security and police specialists to instable countries. The Headline Goal 2010 provides for the creation of fourteen EU-battlegroups between 2007 and 2010 in order to implement these ideas. Each year about four battlegroups are supposed to be standby. The EU is working on its airlift and maritime transport capacity as well in order to support the battlegroups. Airlift and maritime support will be coordinated by the EU Movement

Coordination Cell (EUMC) and the Sealift Coordination Centre (SCC) respectively, both located in Eindhoven (Netherlands). For all these purposes the EU has five EU Operational Headquarters (EU OHQ) at its disposal.

Since 2003 the EU has led four military operations: *Concordia* in the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (March-December 2003); *Artemis* in Congo (June-September 2003); *Althea* in Bosnia Herzegovina (ongoing since December 2004); and EUFOR in Congo from July till November 2006.

In terms of handling smaller peacekeeping operations the EU and their evolving security institutions have undoubtedly proven their worth. But thinking about large scale peace enforcing contributions is politically premature, and constrained by the military overstretch which EU/NATO member states already experience with their commitments in various (post)conflict theaters.

Particularly the requirements of ISAF in Afghanistan put a serious drain on the willingness and capabilities of European NATO members to provide forces for substantial (and risky) peace keeping or building missions. NATO has great problems to find enough candidates to follow up the missions of the present contributing countries, due to the number of casualties, the resistance of the Taliban, and the perspective of a very long international presence in Afghanistan in order to have any effect.

Operations in the Palestinian-Israeli theater, particularly when they involve extreme violent organisations like Hamas, will not be very popular. The traumatic experiences of some European countries in Bosnia during the mid-1990s, and the enormous difficulties they encounter today with the Taliban in Afghanistan, will certainly be put in the balance scales when additional commitments are weighed.

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