

European responses to Obama's Middle East policy

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>> There are five areas of Middle East policy on which EU-US cooperation has been an objective on both sides of the Atlantic alliance since President Obama came to power – with variable results. These are: the Middle East Peace Process (MEPP), counter-terrorism, political reform, Iraq and Iran. This policy brief concentrates on the MEPP, but this cannot be understood in isolation. A brief discussion of the other four areas at the outset will serve to establish the situation and the context of the MEPP.

THE CONTEXT

Counter-terrorism. Since 9/11 countering terrorism has been a major US preoccupation. President George W. Bush declared a 'war on terror' in 2001 and put the US on a war footing. In Europe there was no parallel declaration, but the language of the war on terror was adopted to varying degrees in EU member states.

Leaving aside Afghanistan, cooperation between the EU and US has been most apparent in the security sector and intelligence sharing – tracking the movement of individuals and intercepting terrorist plots. In this connection, the following points deserve emphasis:

- Obama has chosen to change the rhetoric, moving away from the language of 'the war on terror'. This has been broadly welcome in Europe.
- This is in part because the focus of counter-terrorism efforts in Europe has been more domestic than foreign – revolving around issues to do with radicalisation, Islamophobia, anti-Semitism, multiculturalism and

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»»»»» immigration – as well as police work, data collection, surveillance, airport and border security. In all cases the language of ‘war’ is not appropriate or conducive to effective policy.

- The relevance to the terrorist threat of developments in the Middle East and US and/or EU policies in the region is ill-defined and assessed differently in different EU member states.

Reform. The main EU mechanisms for promoting reform in the Arab world are the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership Programme (EMP) and the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), which are now both encompassed by the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM). This French initiative has been adopted by the EU and accorded new instruments, including a joint European and Arab presidency, high level policy meetings and a bureaucracy.

However, the prospects for the UfM are still subject to debate and suspicions abound that it will serve more to disguise lack of progress on Arab reform than invigorate it. Equally unclear is the capacity of the UfM to deal with the Arab-Israeli conflict. It could bolster the MEPP, or may sit uneasily alongside it.

Either way, EU commitment to Arab reform has waned in the face of resistance from Arab governments whose cooperation is considered necessary to counter terrorism and contain Islamist movements.

In this respect, however, the EU is in step with the United States. Obama's Cairo speech of June 2009 was welcomed by EU members mostly because it appeared to counter the rise of anti-Americanism across the Arab and Muslim world. In effect, Obama's charm offensive has helped the EU in so far as it is no longer an embarrassment for Europeans to be identified with US policies on regional issues in the way it was under Bush.

That said, warm words only go so far. Both EU and Arab expectations of Obama were raised by the Cairo speech and if there is no follow-through action or change in regional dynamics,

there will be disappointment. The EU has looked to Obama for a lead on the Middle East and if he falters, inertia and internal differences in Europe could undermine EU cohesion and effective action.

Iraq. The Europeans are relieved to have this issue relegated to the margins of transatlantic attention. The invasion was hugely divisive for Europe and in their eagerness to repair the rifts with Washington that emerged over the issue, the EU effectively stepped up cooperation with the US on the MEPP – notably in their stance on Hamas. As of Obama's election, differences over Iraq and even the MEPP have ceased to be so problematic.

Iran. By the time Obama took office, the efforts of the EU3 (Britain, France and Germany) together with Javier Solana to persuade the Iranians to halt their uranium enrichment programme had failed and the problem appeared to be worsening. Obama came to the rescue.

He persuaded the Israelis, who were threatening unilateral military action against Iran, to allow him time for a new diplomatic initiative. He then reached out to the Iranians and the US formally joined the international negotiations with Tehran. After an apparent breakthrough in summer 2009, the whole issue was overtaken by turmoil inside Iran, triggered by the disputed presidential elections in June. By year end the US was soliciting support for new UN sanctions on Iran. For these British and French support in the Security Council has been forthcoming, but Russia has proved ambivalent and China is opposed.

Meanwhile, the EU members have shared Washington's anxieties about how to respond to the ongoing internal power struggle in Iran – for fear of playing into the hands of the hardliners there. As a consequence, proponents of military action in Washington and Israel have become more vocal again. Consequently, the question of how best to deal with Iran looks set to loom large in 2010. European support for more sanctions does not translate into support for military action if these fail.

THE MIDDLE EAST PEACE PROCESS

Differences between the EU and US over the MEPP definitely narrowed during 2009 and in many respects cooperation became more effective. However, in 2009 the EU operated on the assumption that Obama should and would take the lead and its job was to follow and support. When Obama's initial strategy ('Plan A') ran into difficulties, the Europeans (and initially the US) had no 'Plan B'.

Obama's arrival heralded an unprecedented convergence of US and EU positions on conflict resolution. Obama signalled early his commitment to achieving a 'two-state' solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Unlike Bush, whose 'vision' of a two-

state solution was an aspiration, Obama was unequivocal and he laid out requirements for all the parties for serious negotiations to begin.

Europe's espousal of the 'two-state' goal has been explicit for some years. Irrespective of the parties' views of the conflict,

the Europeans have consistently used international law as their central reference point. By contrast, the US has placed more emphasis on finding agreement between the parties themselves.

In addition, since the collapse of the Oslo process (2000), if not before, Washington has shown more understanding of Israeli concerns, especially in relation to terrorism and security, than sympathy for the Palestinians. The EU has tended to view continued occupation as perpetuating the problem of terrorism. That said, in the aftermath of 9/11 and transatlantic quarrels over Iraq, the EU did concur with Washington's view that Hamas is a terrorist organisation.

Since the 1990s, the EU has deferred to the US to do the heavy lifting with Israel, while it has spent

millions of euros and much energy keeping the Palestinian Authority (PA) afloat under occupation. Prior to Obama's arrival the Europeans became frustrated when the US appeared unable or unwilling to 'deliver' Israel.

On Jewish settlements in the West Bank (and Gaza until their withdrawal in 2005), the EU has been consistent in labelling these illegal. EU measures discriminate against Israeli imports produced in settlements. By contrast, Bush conceded to the Israelis that the major settlement blocks could be incorporated into Israel in the event of a peace deal.

On Jerusalem, the Congress voted to move the US embassy from Tel Aviv to a part of Jerusalem annexed by Israel in 1967 and President Clinton allowed this to become law. The EU deems East Jerusalem illegally occupied and has frequently protested the expansion of Jewish settlements there as elsewhere.

It was against this background that Obama issued his call for all Israeli settlement expansion to cease. In so doing he put an end to US acquiescence in the progressive growth of Jewish settlements and neighbourhoods in land claimed by the Palestinian leadership for an independent state under the MEPP. The EU took this as a signal of serious US commitment to a peace process expected to result in a two-state solution.

In two other key respects the positions of the EU and the US have been closer, at least since the 1990s. On the problem of Palestinian refugees, the EU, as the US, has expected a peace deal to find a solution which would not involve a mass return of refugees to what became the state of Israel in 1948. However, while the US has tended to ignore the refugee question pending agreement on the West Bank and Gaza, the EU has explored possibilities.

On the question of the Palestinian Islamist movement Hamas, which won the Palestinian elections of January 2006, the EU has joined the rest of the Quartet in refusing to deal directly with the organisation unless and until Hamas accepts three Quar-

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»»»»» tet principles: renunciation of violence; acceptance of existing agreements; and recognition of Israel.

Since Hamas took over exclusive control of the Gaza Strip in 2007, the EU has therefore essentially acquiesced in the isolation of Gaza under an Israeli economic blockade. During the Gaza war a year ago the EU did suspend plans for a new and closer partnership agreement with Israel, but member states varied in their levels of criticism of the Israeli offensive.

Meanwhile, in terms of helping the Palestinians to begin to build a state from the grassroots up in the West Bank – as advocated by Palestinian Prime Minister Salam Fayad – there has been considerable US-EU cooperation. Together with the Canadians and the Jordanians, the US – principally under the auspices of General Dayton – and EU members have been training the new Palestinian security force. The EU has taken the lead on training and equipping a Palestinian police force now deployed in Palestinian cities in the West Bank.

Capacity building in the civilian sector, begun even before Obama, has also begun to show results and the whole donor community, US, EU, the UN and various NGOs are very active in this respect. Through the Quartet, pressure on the Israelis to enable more freedom of movement within the West Bank has also met with some success. The bad news is that none of this progress has affected Gaza, where the population still languishes pending some sort of reconciliation between Hamas and the PA. It is the Arab states that are expected to make this happen. The EU and the US are essentially keeping their distance.

Plan A has collapsed. If the EU foresaw what would happen to Obama's call for a freeze on settlement expansion in 2009, they gave no indication of this publicly. Instead they prepared for what the Americans foresaw would be a breakthrough by September 2009. Anticipating that by then Obama's envoy George Mitchell would have secured Israeli and Palestinian agreement to resume face-to-face negotiations, the EU expected to provide incentives or 'deposits' as a reward for substantive progress.

As it transpired, the Israelis refused the settlement freeze and offered only a temporary halt, excluding East Jerusalem. Palestinian President Abbas, having embraced the prospect of a settlement freeze as a condition for resumed negotiations, felt unable to climb down from that position. Meanwhile, Arab governments rejected Obama's call to provide incentives to the Israelis to begin moves towards ending the occupation.

The September deadline came and went and no negotiations have been resumed. Significantly, while the US regrouped, the EU made an unexpected move of its own. On 8 December the Council agreed a formal statement on the MEPP which outlined the EU position on all major aspects of the peace process. Even though formulation of the final draft involved compromises between the members, with France and Italy apparently demanding a softening of some of the positions tabled by the Swedes, it was still a strong statement compared to US pronouncements.

PROSPECTS

As a result of the December statement and a follow-up statement by Catherine Ashton, in her first speech as EU foreign policy chief, the stage is set for Europe to actually share the heavy lifting with the US.

However, as of the end of 2009 it emerged that the US had devised a Plan B and EU-US and Quartet (US, EU, UN and Russia) consultations in January indicated renewed cooperation, but also more uncertainties about the prospects. The question before the EU now is whether to stay with the 'follow and support' role, or assume a stronger stance in partnership with the US. The problem with the latter is that leading EU member states (France, Germany and Italy as well as some newer members) are pursuing unilateral approaches to Israel that could unravel the EU consensus – as embodied in the December statement.

To complicate matters further, the passing of the Lisbon Treaty means that the EU will be preoccu-

pped for a while with the development of a new diplomatic service. Also, Ashton will need time to establish the authoritative voice needed to keep member states in line and thereby deliver a convincing, unified message to the conflicting parties.

Meanwhile, Mitchell has returned to the Middle East. Reportedly, if the parties will not meet face to face, he intends to embark on 'proximity talks', shuttling between Jerusalem and Ramallah seeking framework agreements on the location of the future borders between the two prospective states. Success will depend on whether the Israelis and Palestinians feel they have to take this process seriously.

So, the challenge for the EU now is to demonstrate a seriousness of purpose; commitment to its December statement; and a determination not to let 'facts on the ground', more talks about negotiations and recurrent crises deflect attention from the agreed goal.

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