

The European Union Faces the Challenge of Middle East

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It would surprise many to hear the year 2003 described as one of the most transcendent periods in the Middle East, since there have been many periods that deserve this standing. However, 2003, despite its tragic legacy, could be considered as the point of inflection in a process that had been underway for the past two years. Power relations have changed significantly and we can say without fear of miscalculation that the Oslo accords have been completely buried.

Although 11th September certainly made an immediate impact, it has been during the year 2003 that its full impression has been felt. The war in Iraq, and the new priority given to the fight against terrorism in the agenda of the international community in general, and that of the United States in particular, has very directly and negatively conditioned all attempts to remove this dispute from the current dramatic dialectic. The Arab-Israeli conflict has undoubtedly lived through one of its darkest periods in history. Logically the centre of attention has been the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, but the Syrian front has not been excluded, and for the first time since the Yom Kippur War in 1973 Israeli planes attacked a refugee camp in Syria. The southern border of Lebanon has been calmer in general, but the incidents between Hizbollah and the IDF (Israel Defensive Forces) have not ceased over the course of this year.

It is clear that all diplomatic and political efforts have been concentrated on the Israeli-Palestine crisis. It may be that we are witnessing an intensification of force relations in the area, and also unfortunately the eventual loss of the possibility of interlocution on the part of the Palestinians.

There remains no doubt that the so-called Second *Intifada* has failed, and that the majority of the Palestinian population is exhausted and anxious to put an end to this descent into living hell they have been forced to experience.

The armed struggle, given that it is unilaterally unbalanced, has logically favoured Israel. To a large extent the Palestinian population has had to bear physical, moral and economic suffering that few other peoples would be able to endure, especially that of being isolated for two years and submitted to a continuous devastation while the international community, and in particular their Arab brothers, have lifted not a finger in their aid.

On the other hand, neither has Israel passed one of its best times. It would be difficult to find a period in the history of the Israeli State that has been as dramatic as this year. Although the prime minister did receive massive democratic support in the last elections, this was due more to the fact that the people were logically seeking a strong man who would be able to defend them, rather than because they believed he could offer them an optimistic path out of their nightmarish situation.

The economic situation is currently the worst in the history of Israel and the number of Israeli casualties has been one of the highest since the state was formed.

The societies of both Israel and Palestine are living confused and desperate in a situation that grows more Kafkaesque everyday; and their only hope is that a miracle will pull them out of the crisis.

Paradoxically, the year 2003 began hopefully. The war cries of Iraq caused the international community to mobilise in order to stabilise the Israeli-Palestinian situation. Within this international effort, we should highlight the action of the European Union and especially the individual acts of some of its member states.

The European conduct was nothing new. It was based on a gradual process of a greater involvement in all aspects related to Israeli-Palestinian relations. Aware of the impossibility of forcing a final negotiation on important issues (such as territory, security, settlements, Jerusalem and refugees), the EU offered the remaining members of the Quartet the proposal of adopting a Road Map, which would serve as a catalyst to enable both parties to progressively emerge from the crisis and oblige them to fulfil, on a parallel scale, the necessary objectives for ending the violence and terrorism, and for promoting the creation of a viable Palestinian state.

The context of the war in Iraq favoured this initiative at first. It is true that the proposal was only formally passed after the conventional war in Iraq, and under pressure from the fifteen member states, which right up until the last minute tried to make the Road Map public during the reunion of the Quartet in Washington in December 2002.

The Quartet had to wait for the end of military operations in Iraq, and more importantly for the Palestinian institutional change. That change was achieved thanks to the EU's determination and good work. The political and institutional reform of the Palestinian Authority was without a doubt one of the greatest challenges that the Quartet, and particularly on the parts of Israel and the United States, demanded as a *sine qua non* condition in the attempt to resume the process of political negotiations. European participation was decisive in convincing President Arafat to modify his Basic Law, to propose the creation of a prime minister, to choose a figure with credibility in Israel and the United States, Abou Abbas, and to form a government with Palestinian figures qualified to carry out the new strategy, which consisted principally in putting an end to the armed *intifada*.

The European efforts were gratified by Arafat's decision to accept these proposals and to use them to pave the way to the opportunity for the Quartet's formal approbation of the Road Map. This was delivered to both parties on 30th April, and with this act people began once again to hope that a new normalization process would begin.

Unfortunately, this period of hope was short lasted. The United States administration and President Bush were caught up in the temptation of returning to a unilateral management of the momentary success, and the Aqaba summit did not include the participation of the remaining members of the

Quartet. Palestinian Prime Minister Abou Abbas, excessively pressured by the Israelis and Americans, did not effectively manage his conduct and declarations and gathered neither support nor advice from the European Union. The result of the meeting was viewed very badly by the Palestinian population and the credibility of the new government was gravely affected.

We cannot overlook, and must indeed underline, Abou Abbas' commitment to putting an end to all hostility toward Israel. His insistence on reaching a truce with the different Palestinian factions had the full support of Europe, and figured with its intervention. Hamas and the Islamic Jihad were indecisive and placed all manner of obstacles in the path of this goal, which was only achieved at the end of June. European threats to include Hamas (the political wing) on the European list of terrorist organizations granted them enormous negotiating value. However, neither Israel nor the United States, nor, to a certain point, the remaining members of the Quartet, made the success of Abou Abbas' mission easy. No specific action of political importance was adopted in favour of a Palestinian population anxious to affect a change in the atmosphere of their daily lives. President Arafat was still trapped: he missed the opportunity of being granted freedom of movement, and given these circumstances, neither did he not help his prime minister in applying the government programme.

Hamas' breaking of the ceasefire in August and Israel's immediate response, which added to the whole ill-fated policy of persecution and elimination of the members of Hamas, did nothing but precipitate the escalation of violence and of a return to the tragic scenes of the past two years. Abou Abbas resigned and his replacement, Abou Ala, is currently trying to pick up the pieces.

Neither the deterioration of the state of war in Iraq, nor the forthcoming election year in the United States, are the best omens for contemplating a way out of this crisis. However, in the midst of such darkness, the news of an accord endorsed among important Israeli political figures (including Yossi Beilin and Abraham Burg) and relevant ministers of the Palestinian Authority (such as Yasser A. Rabbo and Nabil Kassis) allows us to look toward the future with a greater optimism. This accord shows us that peace is indeed possible, and that there are interlocutors on both sides willing to close a final accord that will include all the most sensitive issues

such as Jerusalem and the refugee situation. It also demonstrates that the messages hammered into us during the last crisis of how Israelis and Arabs or Israelis and Palestinians are unable to live together in peace are false, and only reflect old stereotypes, not those of the future.

Today, more than ever, the international community, especially the Quartet, have to take responsibility. It is time that the Road Map was put into practice, and that the mechanisms of application and vigilance stop depending solely on American discretion. What are at stake is the region's future, and the possibility that the Palestinian interlocutors be the ones to react and take up the fight against the violence and terrorism, and that the Israelis understand that occupying their neighbours will not guarantee them better security.

A message of hope and strength to the Syrians and the Lebanese therefore seems advisable. On the one hand, they cannot be left on the margins of this historic situation, but on the other they must commit to defending their rights through diplomatic means, and use their influence to pressure all those groups that only understand violent and military methods as a means of «resistance to the occupation».

The Union European is faced with a historic challenge. At the current time it possesses all the political, economic and financial tools it needs to form a positive response. The only danger left is whether its political willpower will again buckle under the weight of past complexes and uncertainties about the future. My view is that everyday we move closer to taking on this historic role and to convincing our US allies to join us in the mission.