

The European Union and the Crisis in the Middle East Until Summer 2003

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Since the creation of the CFSP in the Maastricht Treaty (which came into effect in 1993), and the strengthening of that policy in the Treaty of Amsterdam in 1997 including the nomination of Javier Solana as High Representative, the Union has supported or participated in all international efforts to resolve the dispute between Israelis and Palestinians, even when the peace process was converted into a crisis in the summer of 2000, to become open conflict and a war that progressively destroyed the land.

Indeed, the conflict that has been raging in the Middle East since summer 2000 has been a difficult test for Europe's doctrine of crisis prevention and management. The policy that the Union had built up over the years had to be combined with its crisis management capability, which was itself still in its early stages. As a result, the Union's involvement was certainly creditable, yet was unable to systematically maintain the European position according to its principles. What exactly did the Union do, given the attitude of the factions who had been in conflict since the beginning of the *intifada* in September 2000, which brought the end of the peace process and seriously challenged the EU's vision of resolution for the conflict? Four phases can be distinguished

within the period of conflict, which can be termed as follows:

- «Desperate negotiation», from August 2000 to February 2001;
- «The search for a cease-fire», February to December 2001;
- «Paroxysm of violence», January to September 2002;
- «A new mediation», since September 2002.

The first phase extends from Arafat's refusal to agree to the Clinton plan in July 2000, until Ariel Sharon's election as Prime Minister of Israel in February 2001. This was a time of intense diplomatic activity in which, by modifying and refining the plan discussed at Camp David, attempts were made to reach an agreement before Bill Clinton was replaced as President of the United States. To this end both the US administration and the Israelis and Palestinians agreed to the participation of Egypt, Jordan, the United Nations and the European Union in the mediation process. The violence had only just begun, and given the relative calm of the preceding years, it was met with international pressure to negotiate a solution. During this period, in which a definitive agreement was almost reached at Sharm el-Sheikh and again at Taba between October 2000 and January 2001, the personal intervention and efficient work of the EU's High Representative (HR) Javier Solana, and special envoy Miguel Angel Moratinos played a very important role.

Conversely, the second period, from February to the end of 2001, saw a gradual increase in violence and the exclusion of any mediators. President George W. Bush did not wish to become involved in the substance of negotiations and adopted a *laissez-faire* policy. US involvement was limited to the publication of the independent Mitchell Commission's report in May 2001 (in which Javier Solana participated), and the Tenet ceasefire plan of August 2001, alongside the sporadic presence on the ground of the Secretary of State and envoys Anthony Zinni and William Burns. The EU's policy was to condemn violence, from whichever side it emanated, repeating that it advocated the resumption of negotiation. To establish the necessary conditions for this negotiation, it supported the Mitchell report and the Tenet plan. A ceasefire was, however, impossible to achieve, since at the time neither side wished to end the violence, but rather each preferred to see how far the violence could actually be used to obtain advantages for its cause.

During the period between the end of 2001 and autumn 2002 the crisis was at its height. In the face of an escalation of violence, US intervention was very limited, since the policy following the events of 11th September that the fight against terrorism had to be pursued, which was exploited by the Israeli government, had an undoubted effect on President George W. Bush.¹ The Europeans redoubled their efforts during this period. On one hand, from

¹ A detailed examination of the crisis from summer 2000 to summer 2002 can be found in May Chartouny-Dubarry's, «L'après-Oslo: paix avortée ou guerre annoncée?», in *Politique étrangère*, juillet-septembre 2002.

2001 onward, individual member states attempted to take on a role with the purpose of reducing the violence and renewing dialogue. The foreign ministers of Britain, France, Germany and many other countries paid successive visits, but failed to obtain any tangible results. On the other hand, the EU as an organisation continued to try to maintain an open dialogue and to reduce the effects of the violence (particularly through the Council's statements and actions by the presidency, the HR and the special envoy). Yet despite the occupation of Palestinian towns, which were under the exclusive administration of the Palestinian Authority, the siege of Arafat in his headquarters and open fighting in several areas, EU intervention was restricted to damage limitation and humanitarian issues.

The fourth period began in September 2002. The Quartet had been established the previous April, and a second meeting held in July, but it was not until September that its members arrived at an agreement, which was to be refined in December. The Quartet is led by the United States, but it is clear from the text of the Road Map that EU participation has been crucial. Most of the Europeans would have wanted the Road Map to be published before the military intervention in Iraq in March 2003, but the US government preferred to delay publication until the war there had ended. Indeed, the end of the war heralded a new period of hope, following the summit in Aqaba on 4th June, 2003, attended by President Bush, Ariel Sharon and Abu Mazen, the new head of the Palestinian government. But events in the field during the summer of 2003 demonstrated, given the misgivings felt on both sides, that the Road Map was not going to be workable.

This brief historical overview reveals three lessons regarding the EU's role in the management of the Middle East crisis in respect to the recent past, as well as four lessons for the future.

With regard to the past, for a number of years the Union has taken part in efforts to solve the conflict in at least three different ways. First, the EU has taken a clear, coherent position regarding the resolution of the conflict, based on principles accepted by the

international community, and which have been established throughout the peace process, beginning with the Madrid Conference in 1991: the acceptance by Israel's neighbours of its right to live in peace and security, and the creation of a Palestinian state, which would allow the two countries to coexist within stable borders, and negotiation between the parties – on the basis of «land for peace» – as essential elements of a solution to all aspects of the problem. EU member states have endeavoured to reach a shared viewpoint, allowing the Union to maintain a common position, which has been spelt out in important statements, notably in those annexed to each European Council since Berlin in March 1999. The Union has done everything in its power to ensure that this common position is balanced, condemning violence by both sides and repeatedly calling for the recommencement of negotiations.

Secondly, direct action by the EU has been possible through the presence of the High Representative and the Union's special envoy. Their interventions have been constructive in all four phases of the crisis: during negotiations at Sharm el-Sheikh and Taba in winter 2001-02, in the Mitchell Commission's efforts to reach a ceasefire, in the security dialogue and humanitarian action during the worst stage of the conflict in spring 2002 (which was particularly effective in bringing an end to the siege of the basilica in Bethlehem), and in the active participation of the Quartet since its creation in April 2002, leading to the Road Map. The presence of Javier Solana as representative of the Union rather than any particular member state is an initiative that has contributed to the visibility of European policy on the conflict.

Thirdly, the Union has clearly understood that the violence on the ground has extremely damaging economic and social consequences for both sides involved in the conflict. It has therefore done its best to minimise, or at least not to aggravate, the negative consequences of what has proved to be a war of attrition. The Union has therefore given emergency assistance to the Palestinian Authority (to prevent its collapse, which in the event would

lead to even greater violence), and has ruled out the imposition of economic sanctions against either party. The Commission has ensured that economic and trade relations are not harmed by the crisis and, like the Council, has emphasised the need to halt the violence.

For the future, there are other important lessons to be learned regarding the EU's role in crisis management in general. Possibly the most important of these is that the violence in which both the Israelis and Palestinians have been engaged from summer 2000 ran counter to the European policy of ending the violence and finding a solution to the dispute. The Union's principles and values, together with its own security and that of its member states, have been challenged by the crisis. The parties in the conflict have suffered enormous losses, and the chances of finding a peaceful solution at some future date have been damaged due to the psychological effects and harm caused to the confidence of both sides. The European Union should understand that in future a speedier, more determined response to crises that put its security at risk would be of benefit to the parties concerned, the Union and international order.

The second lesson is that the EU tried to manage the crisis using a wide range of actors and means (the Council and its declarations, successive EU presidencies, the High Representative and special envoy, the Commission, and individual member states) but that an adequate synergy was never achieved, and consequently the outcome has been unsatisfactory for European citizens, for member countries, for the Union and for the parties in conflict. Member states tried to intervene at various points in the crisis but their initiatives, despite their good intentions, have merely demonstrated their powerlessness. The Union was unable to play a more important role owing to the lack of agreement among member states over how its declared principles should be applied. If in the future the external action taken by Europe in conflicts of vital importance to it is managed in a similar manner, the efforts of both the Union and member states will be doomed to failure.

Thirdly, the Union did not fully exploit its potential. The Union has a range of political and economic instruments that could be used in support of its foreign policy, yet it preferred not to employ them, as can be observed in the example when it ruled out economic sanctions even though the European Parliament had suggested their use against both parties in its resolution of 10th April 2002.

The last lesson concerns the EU's relationship with the United States. It is true that when the United States takes the lead the Union can play a very useful accompanying role, but if the former decides not to become involved (as happened at the height of the violence in spring 2002), the Union appears to be incapable of acting alone in the search for a political solution. Since September 2002, the United States and the Euro-

pean Union have found that the Quartet is an adequate framework for cooperation. Nevertheless, just as the publication of the Road Map was a result of the combined effort of the Quartet, all the mediators must monitor its implementation closely. It must be stressed that only objective mediation, in which the Union will always have an important role, is likely to guarantee the success of the peace plan in the long term.