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IS EUROPE ADRIFT IN THE MIDDLE EAST? BY MARIANO AGUIRRE AND MARK TAYLOR *

The litany of bad news from the Middle East seems to grow by the week. In Iraq, the U.S. is failing to turn the tide, Turkey prepares to move against the PKK in the north while the Kurdish, Shiite and Sunni communities are on a collision course concerning control over Kirkuk. Millions of Iraqis have fled their country as refugees, adding an element of instability that will last for years. The debate about a U.S. strike against Iran is well underway in Washington and Israel has already conducted air-strikes against Syria. Palestinian militants and the IDF have not stopped fighting, Gaza is suffering the twin evils of the siege and poor governance, and a major Israeli incursion may be just around the corner. Fault lines cut across Lebanon atop of which sit an EU-UN peacekeeping force. In short, the human suffering in the region is extensive and worsening. These violent conflicts are drawing ever closer to each other and to Europe.

Yet, apparently, European leaders still do not feel the motivation to act.

When our two organizations held a roundtable discussion with over 25 Middle East experts from

across Europe last month, we discovered real dismay over Europe's policy drift. European engagement with Iran seems to have been pursued for its own sake, rather than with a clear strategy in mind. Taxpayers in the EU and associated countries (like Norway and Switzerland) were the largest donors in a \$10-billion peace-building effort in Palestine which, it now seems clear, will not have a sustained impact without an end to the occupation. The Barcelona process on Mediterranean integration presumed a correlation between democracy and trade-led growth, yet the region is on a path of increased growth, failing democracy and no dialogue with Europe on critical security issues such as nuclear proliferation. Meanwhile, the EU apparently believes it has virtually no influence over Turkey in its conflict with the Kurds, while the Quartet's principles have prevented Europe from engaging with Hamas in support of peace-making efforts made by Saudi Arabia and others.

In short, at a time when the region is in desperate need of constructive diplomatic action, Europe seems satisfied with following the U.S. lead. The

transatlantic relationship has trumped the relationship between Europe and its neighbors, leading to a paralysis in European policy.

The absence of robust and independent European diplomacy is a bad thing. Here's why:

Rising instability: Both sides of the Atlantic have witnessed a sharp and rapid decline in their ability to influence global events. This results from the reemergence of China, India and Russia in an increasingly multi-polar world. In the Middle East, the U.S. – long the dominant regional power – has been severely weakened by its Iraq adventure. Regional powers – notably Iran, Israel, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Turkey and Syria – are all seeking to fill that vacuum in line with their narrow interests. Virtually no one in the region believes the U.S.-led conference in Annapolis will stabilize an increasingly shaky regional system. Indeed, many at the roundtable feared that the Israel-Palestinian conflict once again would turn into an “existential conflict” -- not unlike the period preceding the 1967 war, only this time in a far more fragmented and violent context. Meaningful European engagement in this period of dangerous transition is badly needed.

Responding to transnational violence: Current U.S. and European policies are not suited to deal with one of the more potent manifestations of this instability, the rise of transnational violence. The single-minded emphasis on security in European domestic and foreign policies has proceeded on the assumption that there is no connection between violence and political grievances. This has led to further polarization, feeding regional conflicts rather than mitigating them. It has meant taking sides in Iraq, between Israel and Palestine, among Palestinians and among Lebanese; it also has meant lining up

against Syria and Iran. Adopting one or two of those postures might be sustainable at any one time; taking all of them at once is not. Worse, it validates the view of many that the U.S. and Europe are determined to subjugate the region and is used as justification for resort to politically-motivated violence. For Europe to focus on security alone – both at home and abroad – to the exclusion of a coherent diplomatic strategy aimed at addressing grievances contributes to the dynamics which perpetuate transnational violence.

Protecting European interests: To a large extent, the U.S. is ignoring European interests on key regional issues. On Iraq, Iran and Israel-Palestine, the key debates are occurring in Washington; European leaders are being asked – and typically agree – simply to follow. In Lebanon as with Syria, European diplomacy is severely constrained by hawkish U.S. policies despite the fact that European (not American) soldiers are deployed in Lebanon. As a result, Europe is forsaking its traditional role as an actor with its own diplomacy and intent on defending certain moral values; worse, it is forsaking its basic obligation to protect its interests.

Participants in the Madrid roundtable voiced considerable skepticism concerning the possibility of an independent European regional diplomacy, in part because there is as yet little domestic pressure for such a role. Yet they also emphasized that a more active and constructive approach was a vital European interest given the interconnection between foreign policy (energy, trade, the Middle East peace process) and domestic issues (such as migration and the ripple effects of Mideast conflicts on Muslim communities across the continent). In the absence of an independent voice and policy, Europe increasingly is exposed to violence by those seeking to express opposition to the U.S.

Although Europe consistently asserts the need for diplomatic solutions, it lacks a coherent diplomatic strategy of its own. Some of this stems from institutional obstacles facing the Common Foreign and Security Policy; even so, both EU and associated states should be able to do more and better, whether individually or collectively.

Diplomacy now: Europe has seemed content to allow further regional polarization, awaiting the resumption of diplomacy at an as-of-yet undefined time in the future. But the passage of time is not neutral or harmless. In Israel-Palestine, it exercises a pernicious influence, both because Israeli policies undermine the likelihood of a viable Palestinian state and because the Palestinian national movement is gradually disintegrating. In Iraq, Turkey's actions in the north risk dragging Europe into the conflict in new ways. A U.S. confrontation with Iran could have devastating implications for the safety of European troops in Lebanon.

Conflict resolution or use of force? European decision makers need to decide whether to stand aside as the region drifts toward a generalized conflagration, or whether to use the full range of their diplomatic tools to try to stop the slide. Israel's air-strikes against Syria were met with a deafening silence, which in the present context amounts to a green light for further attacks. Is this Europe's policy? If so, does it mean that its diplomacy has moved from a commitment to Israel's existence and security towards blind acceptance of Israel's policies? Given the trajectory of U.S. and Israeli policy, Europe must decide whether and where to draw the line.

Likewise, Europe must acknowledge that conflict resolution is above all a political enterprise. Economic projects and institution-building in Palestine, however valuable, are sideshows in regard to the fundamental

challenge of finding a political solution to a political conflict.

Inclusion, not exclusion: European policy should be based on an inclusive approach and in particular ought not to support policies based on the exclusion of significant actors. This is the rationale behind Norway's and Switzerland's approach to Lebanon and Palestine, where they have sought to promote national reconciliation rather than further divide the polities. In contrast the EU, constrained by ill-advised Quartet principles, was unable to react constructively to the Mecca Agreement between Fatah and Hamas.

Security dialogue: The region is in desperate need of an inclusive, longer-term security dialogue, modeled, perhaps, on the CSCE (the precursor to the modern-day OSCE) and Europe is ideally suited to convene it. A regional security framework is needed to regulate the situation in the Gulf, between Israel and Syria and in order to deal with the risk of nuclear proliferation. This is all the more important because the overall regional environment directly affects the safety of EU peacekeepers in Lebanon and could lead to a larger conflagration.

A norms-based approach: A traditional source of strength for European diplomacy has been its grounding in international law and norms. From Iraq to Israel, Europe should insist on evenhanded adherence to such principles as the best way to defend human rights and human security. This would require Europe to engage Israel on its settlement policy or its Gaza siege, just as it would require it to engage with Palestinian factions and Hezbollah to get them to end their rocket attacks against Israeli civilians. Moreover, EU trade instruments should be linked explicitly to EU human rights legislation; this

could be followed up at the administrative level by denying European companies working in Israeli settlements access to EU procurement contracts.

In the same spirit, European diplomacy should adhere to fair and defensible principles. Together with Arab states, it should argue strongly for a resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict on the basis of UN resolution and the Arab Peace Initiative. It should authorize European diplomats to engage with Palestinian armed groups with the aim of managing internal conflict and bringing them into the peace process in ways that will bolster security for Israeli citizens. It should take the position that, in the event of failure on the part of Israelis and Palestinians to reach an agreement, occupation is not a permanent default position: the preambles of both UN Resolutions 242 and 338 affirm the illegitimacy of acquiring territory by force. At the same time, a European approach should recognize that Palestinian statehood coupled with de facto Israeli control (as in the Gaza Strip) is not sustainable.

Participants in the Madrid roundtable were highly skeptical that any of this was politically viable at present. Yet they also recognized that the region needs an independent European voice as never before. This is likely to remain the case for as long as the U.S. pursues policies that polarize the region and fail to create the political space necessary for parties at war – or on the brink of war – to seek common ground through negotiations. Europe cannot become a substitute for the U.S. Still, as a series of interrelated

conflicts looms, it is high time for it to play a more active and constructive role lest it find itself a passive witness to, and a principal victim of, dangerous and misguided policies.



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