

Imperfect Alliances: Will Europe and America Ever Agree?

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When compared to the United States, the European Union (EU) and individual European states have a distinctly differing set of policies toward the Middle East. Some principles are agreed upon across the Atlantic but geography and history make a common foreign policy elusive. In general, European capitals have a greater commercial orientation toward the region than does the United States, so their foreign-policy choices tend to make accommodations and allowances that Washington is likely to rule out.

Aside from their common strategic interests, such as oil, Europeans and Americans differ on humanitarian concerns in determining their policy toward individual countries in the region, policies that have differed greatly in the past and are not likely to converge in the future.

Geography and History

Europe's geographical proximity to the Middle East has led the two regions' histories to be closely intertwined. At various times during the past millennium, Europeans occupied the Middle East from Morocco to Iraq, just as Middle Eastern dynasties occupied Europe from Granada to Budapest. For centuries, the Middle East's waterways -- the Mediterranean Sea, Dardanelles, Persian Gulf, and Suez Canal -- have been integral to European interests. The map of the modern Middle East came into being as a result of European decisions in the World War I era: the Sykes-Picot Agreement, the Hussein-MacMahon Correspondences, the Balfour Declaration, the League of Nations, and San Remo. European foreign ministries drew the maps, demarcated boundaries, and even created states. European actions -- bolstering this or that local leader -- bound Middle Eastern leaders as clients to Paris and London. Europe's imperial departure left the Arab world divided. And Europe's culture and institutions remain strong in the Middle East, still shaking its tectonic plates.

In contrast, save for the activities of missionaries and educators, the Middle East meant little to Americans until World War II. Prior to that, Washington had no strategic or economic reason to be involved and was not even a junior partner in influencing the future of the Middle East; U.S. policymakers saw the region as an extension of Europe. Symbolic of this uninvolvement, the American delegate at the crucial San Remo conference in April 1920 did not receive his instructions on time, so he "sat in a hotel garden reading the newspapers while the British and French settled the most important matters affecting the Middle East." During the interwar years,

domestic oil reserves were so plentiful that Middle Eastern sources were unnecessary. Only in World War II, when common action was needed to defeat German imperial aspirations in North Africa and the Arab East, did an American-European relationship vis-à-vis the Middle East develop.

After World War II, three factors brought America in earnest into the Middle East: the Soviet challenge to Greece and Turkey that began the cold war; the diplomacy surrounding the United Nations's decision to establish Israel; and the growing importance of Arab oil. European and U.S. involvement in the Middle East lacked harmony from the beginning. American and European efforts to establish collective defense pacts with Middle Eastern states failed in the 1950s. In 1956, President Eisenhower did not know what surprises France, Great Britain, and Israel were planning in the Suez Canal crisis, and he certainly did not like being told after the fact. The British and French role in the region declined precipitously with the Suez crisis, so that the United States became the major outside power in the Middle East. It was subsequently the only Western power to spar actively with the Soviet Union, Washington's major rival in the region.

Over the next three decades, Europe's power in the Middle East so declined that by the time of the 1990-91 Kuwait crisis, it stood almost helpless to protect its major interests in the region without American leadership. Most European states were very willing to engage in diplomacy with Saddam Husayn but shied away from committing ground troops. A year later, Europe's role was peripheral at the Madrid peace conference, consisting of host and observer. Since 1991, many European capitals have staunchly disagreed with Washington's defense of the U.N. sanctions and embargo on Iraq, the embargo placed on Libya for its support of the culprits of the 1988 bombing of Pam Am 103, and the sanctions imposed on Iran for its alleged complicity in state-supported terrorism. Washington insists on punishing what it calls rogue states; the Europeans, to the contrary, seek to maintain diplomacy and trade with all Middle Eastern states.

Differing Outlooks

In general, Europe and the United States share common foreign-policy objectives but differ over procedure and the means needed to implement those goals. Both seek political stability in the region, economic development, and limitations on weapons of mass destruction. Both want access to Middle Eastern oil at a reasonable price and an Arab-Israeli settlement. Both agree on the need to contain radical political and religious forces, as well as to coordinate efforts to prevent terrorism. But move away from fundamental principles and contentious disagreements arise. While Washington seeks "dual containment" of Iran and Iraq, Germany and France respectively seek to sustain their commercial and political ties to Tehran and Baghdad. Washington reportedly reproved Paris in November 1996 for cancelling some of Syria's debt prior to Damascus's making concessions in its negotiations with Israel. Other disagreements include the Arab-Israeli conflict, the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, and fundamentalist Islam.

These disagreements result in large part from Europe's closer historical links because of geographic proximity to the Middle East, which means that it assigns more importance to the region, including its commercial markets. Germany's minister of state Helmut Schaefer made this point succinctly in March 1996: The Middle East in German foreign policy has a more vital

interest geographically and strategically than it holds for the United States. The same can be said for all Europe, not just Germany. Other than the strategic need for access to Middle Eastern oil, the United States has historically been less motivated by commercial interest in the Middle East. Concerned as they are with commercial ties and a dependency on Middle Eastern oil, Europeans calculate responses to foreign-policy issues in terms of their impact on trade and oil access. Consequently, Europe is more likely to open or keep open lines of diplomatic discourse to protect trade interests. At the end of 1996, Germany and France eagerly sustained trade relations with an Iran still in the process of rebuilding infrastructure from the war with Iraq, while the United States looked at Tehran's support for terrorist groups and found such openings to Iran totally unacceptable.

Proximity also means that Europe contends with population and labor flows from the Middle East not experienced by the United States until recently.

Intra-European Differences

The European Union is just that -- a union of countries, each of which separately determines how much and which of its foreign-policy issues to donate to a common European policy. Once the "donations" are made (often times reluctantly), then comes the often contentious and prolonged process of developing a consensus policy and an acceptable means to implement it. The EU's problem is that it has as many answers as there are member countries. For example, at its December 1996 Dublin summit, European leaders found themselves in disagreement over the degree of EU enlargement, the terms by which Eastern European countries might be admitted to the union, definition of a common currency stability pact, labor flows between states, how to fight crime, drugs, terrorism, etc. The Union makes consensus statements on Cuba, China, Africa, and the Middle East, but member states differ on the importance assigned to each and the necessary response. France is far more focused on immigration from North Africa than is Great Britain, Germany more so than are the Scandinavian countries. Southern European countries concern themselves more with a Mediterranean dialogue and cross-Mediterranean trade.

The EU has a broadly ambiguous consensus policy on doing business with Iran. In the Florence communiqué of June 1996, EU foreign ministers stated in rather bland fashion that "the European Union expects this [critical] dialogue [with Iran] to lead to concrete results also in the areas of non-proliferation, terrorism, and human rights, including Salman Rushdie." Within the union, the Germans, French, or Italians lead the way to Tehran, while the Dutch and the British are more reluctant.

On resolving the Arab-Israeli conflict, all Western European capitals agree upon the importance of nurturing Arab-Israeli agreements. All have a common interest in the economic development of territories under Palestinian control. But they disagree upon the level, intensity, and degree of EU engagement in the actual diplomatic process. The British are most willing to defer to American-mediated negotiations, the French most eagerly interventionist. Germany has a unique relationship with Israel and often finds itself in a bind between current views (the need for greater Israeli concessions) and restraint (out of deference to the past). Mediterranean states, such as Italy, Greece, and Spain, tend to propound the Arab viewpoint. Northern European

states, like the Netherlands or the Scandinavian countries, take a more quietly persuasive and humanistic approach to the negotiating process.

Conflict over the Arab-Israeli Conflict

The Arab-Israeli conflict provides a case study of European-American differences. While agreeing that the Arab-Israeli conflict should be resolved through negotiations, and that those negotiations must not stagnate, Europe and the United States part ways over the methods to achieve that objective. Europe's anti-Israel tilt and pro-Palestinian stance after the war in June 1967 clashed with the American approach of protecting Israel's interest of achieving a negotiated rather than an imposed solution to the conflict. President Charles de Gaulle of France turned on Israel. The Four Power talks held in the spring of 1969 (between Moscow, Washington, London, and Paris) caused great consternation in Israel for many reasons, mainly the demand made by Arab leaders, backed fully by Moscow and to a lesser extent by Europeans, that Israel should withdraw from territories it captured in the June 1967 war before the Arab states declared an end to their belligerency, and that no peace be declared. In the 1970s, European leaders sometimes rationalized Palestinian terrorism and refused to take effective steps to stop it. During the October 1973 war, every European country except Portugal denied the United States refueling or over-flight rights for the resupply of arms and equipment to Israel. In its Venice Declaration of June 1980, the European Community declared support for the "legitimate rights of the Palestinian people" and a place for the Palestine Liberation Organization in negotiations, an especially disconcerting move for the Likud leadership of the time.

Europe's leaning toward Arab oil interests kept Israel from seeking an active European role in the negotiating process that followed the 1973 war; instead, it turned to Washington, which intentionally left Europe on the diplomatic periphery. For example, Washington limited European access to the substance of Arab-Israeli negotiations at both Middle East peace conferences, December 1973 in Geneva and October 1991 in Madrid, save for the venue and a convening function. Washington did not interfere with Europe's catalytic role in achieving the September 1993 Israel-PLO Declaration of Principles but the agreement was signed on the White House lawn, with little recognition of Norway.

Led by President Jacques Chirac of France, the EU in 1996 sought to play a more prominent role in Arab-Israeli negotiations. This reasserted ambition was concertized in the appointment in November 1996 of an EU Middle East envoy, Spain's ambassador to Israel Miguel Angel Moratinos. The EU sees this appointment as an important part of its debut on the international stage; when asked about a sudden increase in Europe's attention to the peace process, Peter Carter, an EU official directly involved in drafting the union's policy statements, replied that "we [the EU states] are a new player in international relations, so we need visibility and prestige and the Middle East affords us that opportunity."

Characteristic of its difficulty in achieving a consensus, the EU defined Moratinos's mandate much less ambitiously than the French or Arab sides desired, owing to German and British caution. In particular, Britain's Foreign Minister Malcolm Rifkin paid close attention to Washington's displeasure at the EU's recently attempted foray into Arab-Israeli diplomacy and made it clear that the Europeans must not compete with the Americans. Similarly, Ireland's

Foreign Minister Dick Spring noted that Moratinos "will fulfill his mandate in close cooperation with all parties in the region and complementary to the important role which the U.S. plays in the peace process." Specifically, his mission was blandly defined as: establishing and maintaining close contact with all sides; observing the negotiations so as to be prepared to offer EU mediation; contributing to the implementation of international agreements; supervising compliance with human rights and the law; and suggesting to the Security Council initiatives to revive the peace process. *Les Echos* (Paris), Oct. 29, 1996, FBIS, WE, Oct. 29, 1996.

Europe's interest in playing a more active role in Arab-Israeli negotiations meets with overwhelming Arab and Iranian support. Arab quarters see Europe as a counterbalance to Washington's "tilt" toward Israel, hoping perhaps that Europe will fill the Soviet Union's old role in this respect. In the words of Faysal Husayni of the Palestinian Authority: "France holds a balanced position. . . . If the United States continues to discriminate against us and to favor Israel, we should look for new mediators."

The May 1996 election of Binyamin Netanyahu as Israel's prime minister exacerbated differences between Europe and the United States. To punish Israeli actions or perceived procrastination with regard to the peace process, the EU considered a slowdown in implementation of new trade agreements signed in the last several years with Israel. In contrast, the U.S. government initially celebrated Netanyahu; for example, when he addressed a joint session of Congress in July 1996, he inspired repeated standing ovations by an almost adoring audience (leading one Republican member of Congress to remark, "If we had Netanyahu as our presidential candidate, we could beat Clinton"). One cannot begin to imagine his being so well received in a European parliament or by the general European public. Though the Clinton administration has recently directed harsher remarks at Netanyahu's policy of expanding settlements, the Israeli prime minister still overwhelmingly prefers to deal with Washington rather than European capitals.

These differences then played out in the diplomatic arena. In October 1996, the EU published the Luxembourg Declaration, its most authoritative statement on Arab-Israeli negotiations since the Venice Declaration of May 1980. Coming in the shadow of violence associated with the Jerusalem tunnel opening and the Washington summit, it got little notice, but this important declaration affirmed a number of positions inimical to the present Israeli government: that the inadmissibility of the acquisition of territory by war applies to East Jerusalem, which is therefore not under Israeli sovereignty; that Israel should refrain from measures that prejudge the outcome of final-status negotiations (such as the construction of new settlements); and that Israel should release Palestinian prisoners in a timely fashion. It is not clear why, if the EU wants to serve as an honest broker in Palestinian-Israeli negotiations, it publicly adopts such antagonistic positions toward Israel.

U.S. policymakers seek to protect their exclusive role and to minimize Europe's place, hoping it will just provide funds or provide venues at which to conduct high-level meetings. In this spirit, a senior State Department official disparagingly remarked in July 1996 that he "was pleased by the junior role Europe plays in Arab-Israeli negotiations." The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, July 1996. Washington seems prepared to have Europe play a lead role in peacekeeping but not in diplomacy. The Europeans wanted to play an active role in negotiating Israel's

withdrawal from Hebron but were relegated to the (useful but secondary) function of providing personnel to observe the agreement. Europeans want more: Italy's Prime Minister Romano Prodi noted that Europe is providing the lion's share of the funds for Palestinian reconstruction, and so "Europe must transform its simple economic presence into an economic and political presence."

The Israeli Labor Party has long encouraged a more engaged role for Europe in Arab-Israeli diplomacy, though not one that supplants American domination of the negotiating process. Shimon Peres, for example, frequently used the example of European integration as a model for his notion of a New Middle East. By contrast, the Netanyahu government wants no other government than the American to choreograph Arab-Israeli diplomacy; it resents the Europeans for encouraging Arab leaders to hold out the unrealistic hope of winning Europe's intercession on their behalf. Nor does the present Israeli government have any interest in accepting the precedent whereby anyone who disagrees with the Israeli position unilaterally appoints his own special envoy. That said, the Israelis have shown themselves willing to deal with Europe on an occasional basis, as demonstrated by their acceptance of the successful German effort in mid-1996 to exchange bodies of Israeli soldiers for Lebanese in Israeli prisons, and European slated participation as observers monitoring the implementation of the January 1997 Hebron agreement. Yet American mediation was required to finalize the Hebron agreement.

Conclusion

Will differences about how the Middle East is managed undercut the future of NATO? Can Germany, a half century after the Holocaust, put aside its unique relationship with Israel? Can Americans understand the historical importance of the Middle East's geographic proximity to Europe? Can Europeans understand the degree to which strategic and humanitarian concerns can influence Washington's foreign policy? Does a second Clinton administration have the political will to force German or French companies to embargo all trade with Iraq, Iran, or Libya? Can Europe deliver more than Washington in Arab-Israeli diplomacy? Will it provide billions of dollars annually to Palestinians, Lebanese, and Syrians in assistance, as the United States has given Egypt and Israel for almost two decades?

The answer to all of these questions is "probably not." European-American differences will remain open and divisive until events in the Middle East dramatically threaten, causing another joint but ad-hoc reply. A common foreign policy toward the Middle East and its peoples will remain in the realm of defending general principles. Despite shared interests in the Middle East, a trans-Atlantic partnership in policy toward the region does not exist and is not likely to develop.

Short-term compacts of necessity, such as working to implement the Oslo accords or to curb state-supported terrorism, or the alliance against Saddam Husayn, will most likely continue to define trans-Atlantic policy choices toward the Middle East. Conditions that might spur other short-term compacts include threats to oil supplies, threats connected to nonconventional weapons, fundamentalist Islamic threats against a NATO ally, state-supported terrorism, or challenges to overthrow Western-friendly regimes in the Middle East. But no Middle Eastern issue is so great or long-lasting that it would deeply rupture an otherwise reasonably sound relationship.

A trans-Atlantic partnership toward the region does not exist and is not likely to develop. For their part, Middle Eastern leaders prefer to negotiate separately with the Europeans and the Americans; this remains the case with regard to arms and security negotiations, foreign assistance, and the forgiveness of debt. Middle Eastern leaders also prefer bilateral approaches to individual European capitals and the United States. Were Europeans and Americans able to agree on a single policy approach on specific issues, this would likely meet with disapproval among many Middle Eastern leaders.

Middle Eastern states while seeking common European and American support and engagement on general issues, such as protection of national sovereignty and support for a negotiated Arab-Israeli settlement, these states have a preferential history of negotiating and dealing separately and independently with Washington and European capitals in bilateral rather than in a multi-lateral fashions.

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