

Europe Can Still Make a Difference in the Middle East

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Articles & Testimony

The challenge is to find a common line that accounts for different national positions on regional issues while still promoting a coherent foreign policy.

Europe has been relegated to play second fiddle in the Middle East, a region once dominated by its post-World War One powers, and has struggled for years to design a new role for itself. The Middle East is witnessing a fierce competition, often dotted by growing instances of open friction, between the US and Russia (both relying on their military presence in different countries), as well as strife between the US and China in the technological and economic domains. The main issue for the European Union and the United Kingdom is how exactly and to what extent they should help shape American policy, take part in a coordinated effort to prevent the collapse of Arab countries into an ever-expanding cycle of hostilities, and avoid the very acute danger of implosion into impoverishment, bankruptcies, and massive flight towards the northern shores of the Mediterranean.

Futile Attempts

Attempts by several European governments to independently initiate resolutions to crises in the region have proven futile. France and Italy pursued contradictory policies in Libya and together failed to achieve reunification of the divided country under an effective government. France's truly pathetic insistence on mediating in Lebanon only proved its irrelevance there. The EU's commitment to—and financial investment in—the vision of a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian quagmire did not arrest the continuing deterioration on that front. The same goes for European diplomacy in Syria ever since the outbreak of the devastating civil war in 2011.

In short, Europe is well aware of its limitations. This by no means implies that the continent does not have crucial interests in the region or that there are no significant contributions it can offer to alleviate risks and steer the region towards a more peaceful and hopefully prosperous future. Here are a few possible courses of action.

Iran

No other country has tried for over 30 years to acquire nuclear weapons without assembling a bomb. The Islamic Republic certainly possesses the material and know-how to obtain an arsenal, yet it has chosen to inch forward to the brink of becoming a nuclear power without crossing the red line.

One reason for this conduct is fear that others—Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Turkey, and even the United Arab Emirates (UAE)—will rush to get their own bombs. The second reason is the threat of a much more comprehensive international sanctions regime. Therefore, the E-3 (the informal foreign and security cooperation arrangement between the UK, Germany, and France) should put pressure on Washington to raise, loud and clear, the option of sanctions “snapback” plus additional measures in order to bolster those in Tehran who are warning against the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) push to produce a bomb.

The “Axis of Resistance”

Through the IRGC’s Qods Corps, Iran is implementing the “Muqawama Doctrine,” envisaged by the late General Qassem Soleimani, to dominate the Levant via proxy militias in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and Yemen, with the objective of becoming the de facto hegemon of the Arab East and encircling Israel with a “ring of fire.” They are already threatening to attack an EU member (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/hezbollah-threatens-cyprus-capabilities-intentions-and-potential-consequences>), Cyprus, and have openly declared their intention to become capable of military action at a distance of 10,000 kilometers, which includes much of Europe. Disrupting this strategy requires joint US-European moves to prevent Iraq and its Kurdistan Region from turning into puppet entities.

Bolstering those political forces in Baghdad who still oppose Iran’s ambition to control its neighbor should be a primary target. In cooperation with the Gulf states, economic incentives may stall the takeover of the country by Iran’s agents in the “Popular Mobilization Forces,” an Iran-backed militia army raised to fight the Islamic State and now subsidized by the weak Iraqi government. Even maverick figures such as Muqtada al-Sadr—a radical Iraqi cleric, militia leader, and Shiite politician whose forces fought against U.S. and Iraqi troops from 2004 to 2008—could be seen as potential partners.

If Iraq is kept out of total Iranian control, it would hamper Tehran’s campaign to establish west-bound land corridors from its border to the sea. The EU may also weigh the pros and cons of sending small contingents of troops with the goal of discouraging whoever wins the White House in November from pulling out of Iraq.

Syria

Iran has complex relations with Russia in Syria. Despite their close alliance in Ukraine, for example, President Putin has forbidden Iran’s Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei from embroiling the Assad regime in the current confrontation with Israel.

More can be done to curtail Iran’s power over Syria. As in Iraq, Europe can send small contingents to northeast Syria and to the southeastern Tanf enclave (a military base in Syria used by the US) to support the case of those in Washington who warn against allowing Assad to capture the fertile oil-rich areas across the Euphrates River, now held by the Kurds. These two zones also serve as important barriers to Iranian shipments of arms to Hizbullah and (via smuggling) to the West Bank. Evacuation from Tanf would pose increased threats to the stability of Jordan, and the massive trafficking of drugs produced in Lebanon and Syria would reach even bigger proportions, flooding the Arab peninsula and far beyond. Another possible option for Europe would be to back, together with the US, the opening of a three-kilometer humanitarian corridor from Jordan to the nearest Druze village in order to support Sweida province’s unarmed revolt against Assad and his Iranian patrons.

Lebanon

Unfortunately, Lebanon cannot be restored as a functioning state or extricate itself from Hezbollah's grip in the foreseeable future. Again, however, Europe could partner with the US to find ways of boosting anti-Iranian political parties—including rivals of Sheikh Hassan Nasrallah within the Shiite community—who share the goal of preventing the election of a pro-Iran president and the nomination of a pro-Iran cabinet.

Europe should also consider participation in a post-war upgraded UN Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) and set conditions on providing equipment to the Lebanese army in order to keep as much of it as possible out of Hezbollah's hands. When the time is ripe, Europe may consider offering its services for final demarcation of the border with Israel. One substantial project that has so far failed to take off is pumping "Egyptian" (in reality, Israeli) gas from Jordan to Lebanon, which suffers from an acute shortage of electricity.

The Palestinian Authority

As a major donor to the PA and UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA), Europe should have a strong interest in compelling President Mahmud Abbas to introduce serious reforms. This could help uproot the culture of corruption and waste and form a new, "can do" government that is willing to establish decent social services, invest in developing a productive economy, and reorganize the security services.

The plans for reforms are on the table, but the 87-year-old Abbas is resisting American and Gulf pressure to relinquish at least some of his responsibilities and transfer powers to capable, politically unaffiliated experts. The PA's ongoing stagnation and the deterioration of its popularity endanger its prospects of survival.

Hamas, backed by Iran, has already doubled its efforts to undermine the PA's legitimacy and prepare to capture the West Bank. Thorough reform of the PA has become an urgent task, especially if it is to be entrusted with running the Gaza Strip (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/what-if-gazas-day-after-converges-day-after-abbas>). At this point, it seems, only a firm ultimatum may bring about a change: the EU, along with Norway, Japan, and others, should warn Abbas that donor states will halt the transfer of funds until reform is underway. There may be no other way to convince him.

Israel

In parallel to pressure on the PA—and without delving into the intricate divisions in Europe regarding Israel—it is obvious that the EU and UK need to press Benjamin Netanyahu's government (as long as it clings to power) to take the following steps:

1. Wrap up the current war in Gaza, even if it keeps pursuing the goal of converting Hamas from a well-tunneled terrorist army with large depots of rockets into an unarmed underground
2. Declare that Gaza will come under the PA once reform is in progress
3. State its adherence to the two-state vision
4. Suspend further settlement construction
5. Instruct the police to proceed with legal action against the few dozen young, radical right-wing settlers who harass neighboring Palestinians
6. Remove the ban on Palestinian workers coming to Israel in order to improve the difficult economic situation in the West Bank.

Such steps would help defuse tensions and allow Israeli-PA cooperation on the reconstruction of Gaza.

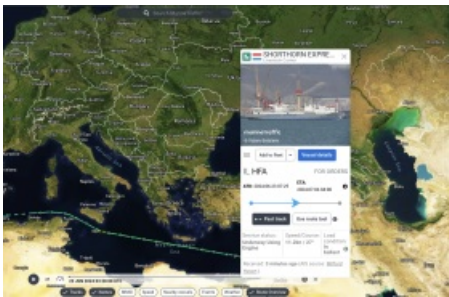
Egypt

“The Giant on the Nile” is on the verge of collapse, saved so far by the injection of funds from Gulf states led by the UAE. The implosion of a country with 100 million people would carry enormous repercussions for Europe. The immediate mission should be to pressure President Sisi to privatize state-owned corporations and the multitude of companies managed by the armed forces. A free economy is imperative in order to lift Egypt out of misery. Instead of happily responding to Egypt’s endless appetite to procure expensive military hardware, Europeans would ultimately benefit more from making profits on economic investments there.

Rescuing Egypt from itself is crucial in order to cope with what lies ahead: the specter of 300 million unemployed youths in the whole Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region two decades from now. This is a European concern that will not fade away if not addressed properly. The Middle East is a ticking time bomb that threatens to explode in Europe’s direction.

Ehud Yaari is the Lafer International Fellow with The Washington Institute and a Middle East commentator for Israel’s Channel 12 television. This article was originally published on the Qantara website (<https://qantara.de/en/article/relations-middle-east-europe-can-still-make-difference>). ❖

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