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DEFINING THE DIFFERENCES

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to prevent conflicts in the Middle East**

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Paper prepared in the framework of the Programme for Promoting Conflict Prevention in the Mediterranean and the Middle East (CP Med) and published in "Conflict in Focus", no. 5 (February 2005)

IAI0535

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A European point of view on transatlantic efforts to prevent conflicts in the Middle East

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It is often assumed that the United States and Europe share the same basic interests in the Middle East. Hence, transatlanticists on both sides of the ocean urge their governments to improve efforts to promote joint initiatives and coordinated actions. In their view, the main problems affecting transatlantic relations on Middle Eastern issues originate in the inability to forge a common strategy that will be able to serve the interests of both Europe and the US. Nebulous notions such as promotion of stability, prosperity and democracy, as well as much more concrete issues like solving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict or preventing Iran from acquiring military nuclear capabilities are often mentioned as shared European and American priorities.

Although it is highly desirable for the transatlantic partners to cooperate effectively so that the various challenges arising from the region can be addressed better, it does not necessarily mean that they have exactly the same interests. In fact, the structural factors underlying European and US attitudes toward the Middle East partly differ. To the extent that a well-functioning partnership relies on a clear definition of the role the partners have to play with similarities and differences taken into account.

What the United States seeks in the Middle East is direct, durable and secure access to oil. Hence, traditional US policy toward the region has focused on efforts to establish a regional environment able to guarantee oil supplies at the best available price. Oil is by far the first US priority, but it should not be seen as an isolated and all-dominant imperative. Strategic and political factors also matter, the most relevant being the legacy of the Cold War and the special relationship with Israel.

During the Cold War, the Middle East was one of the axes around which the confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union revolved. Because of its oil capacities and its geographic position, the Middle East was of fundamental strategic relevance. So the American need for access to energy resources was not isolated from geopolitical considerations, such as the attitude of regional governments toward the Soviet Union. Current amities linking the United States to some Middle Eastern countries, as well as US antagonism with other regional actors, still depend on which side – American or Soviet – past governments took.

Israel also played a part in the US' containment of the Soviet influence in the Middle East. Yet, US support for Israel has never been based solely on the strategic advantages that a friendly government in Tel Aviv could provide. Cultural linkages and political trends within the US opinion- and policy-making environment have forged a deep-rooted relationship that cannot be simplified to geopolitical convenience. Therefore, significant strategically motivated changes in the general direction of US policy toward Israel are not to be expected.

In the early nineties, the end of the Cold War gave the United States a chance to increase its presence and influence in the Middle East and the Gulf region. The Bush Sr. administration saw the possibility of developing the traditional policy of exploiting regional rivalries into a more comprehensive approach. The aim was to maintain regional stability by providing support to Arab governments and diverging their

political priorities away from the Palestinian cause. From an American point of view, the 1991 war against Iraq, waged by an international coalition joined by several Arab countries, contributed to building political legitimacy for further US intervention in the area. On the other hand, the Middle East peace process, started by Bush Sr. and continued by Clinton, involved the creation of the Palestinian Authority, further contributing to circumscribing the conflict to the Palestinians. For the Americans, this could be regarded as an important success on the way to framing and establishing a stabilized and controlled regional context.

The emergence of the terrorist threat undermined the fundamentals of the strategic concept envisaged by Bush Sr. It revealed that supporting authoritarian and often unpopular governments may not be the best way to achieve regional stability: Public dissatisfaction with political leaders can give rise to organized fringe groups of extremists, fatally radicalising the political debate. These considerations led the Bush Jr. administration to adopt a more intrusive approach, partly based on different strategic objectives.

While the need for oil sources remains the essential rationale for any US policy in the Middle East, priorities toward the area now also involve security concerns. The paradigm under which a government in the area is seen as a trustworthy partner seems to have changed: Not only should it provide privileged access to oil or be capable of preserving regional stability (or both), but it should also cooperate in counter-terrorism activities.

In the eyes of the current US administration, these three basic objectives can be achieved better and faster through the elimination of hostile regimes. This could imply either armed intervention (Iraq) or exerting economic and diplomatic pressure (Syria) or adopting a confrontational stance (Iran) in order to gain time without giving the wrong impression of willingness to accommodate or appease. Since the White House has increasingly linked its interventionism with the rhetoric of democratisation, even much friendlier governments have been put under some pressure, at least formally. In addition, in 2004 the US government launched several initiatives to deepen cooperation and assistance in a range of fields, including security, trade, human development, etc.

In the end, a changed regional environment, including the rising of 'jihadist' terrorism, has prompted the United States to transform itself into a revolutionary force. Here lies the source of the substantial disagreement with Europeans.

Europe's need for an uninterrupted oil flow from the Middle East is even more urgent than that of the United States because Europe, which is the world's largest oil importer, has no significant internal reserves. The regional arrangement established by the United States in the aftermath of the 1991 Iraq war was in line with European energy interests. Aimed at maintaining regional stability, it secured and strengthened the well-established Middle Eastern channels of oil supply.

The European integration process, which experienced a surge in the early nineties, prompted European governments to try to give the European Union a high-level profile in foreign policy issues, especially in its "near abroad". The shaping of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP), which includes several Middle Eastern countries, was in line with EU's ambition of taking on a more prominent role as a regional actor. As a comprehensive political arrangement, aimed at fostering economic and security cooperation and promoting cultural dialogue, the EMP attempts to reproduce to some extent the achievements resulting from the positive integration dynamics of the EU member states.

In the eyes of many EU governments, the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership corresponded to their need for a stable Middle Eastern environment, favouring gradual reform processes through deeper economic integration and closer diplomatic relations. The EMP's rationale also reveals the specificity of European security priorities. Unlike the United States, EU members face the enormous challenge of managing the increasing migration flows coming from the southern and south-eastern shores of the Mediterranean. Immigration, especially from Muslim countries, has a strong impact on European societies' perceptions. It feeds widespread anxiety about possible negative effects on jobs, crime, 'cultural identity', etc. Instability in the Middle East has greater implications in Europe than in the United States, because it not only impacts on foreign policy objectives, but directly involves domestic issues, which are crucial for creating political consent for governments in power. The EMP was also aimed at preventing an uncontrolled flow of migrants from flooding into the EU.

Favouring the status quo in the Middle East for security reasons, Europe fears that the US's transformation into a revolutionary force will increase risks of spill-over effects. Above all, Europeans fear the infiltration of terrorist cells in their large Muslim communities. Therefore, even among those countries which joined the 2003 US intervention in Iraq, regime change policies are not generally favoured.

The EU approach toward Iran's proliferation crisis exemplifies this moderate attitude. For the European negotiators, Britain included, the main goal is to avoid the spread of nuclear weapons in so critical a region as the Middle East. If the Europeans were able to offer what Iran desperately seeks, that is, a security assurance, the proliferation crisis would already be over. In their view, regime change, though desirable, is not a rational option in the current context. The United States, on the contrary, has publicly confirmed that the option of regime change in Iran is "on the table", as President Bush stated last February during his visit to Europe.

In the end, the United States and European countries have converging energy interests and diverging security priorities in the broader Middle East region.

Europe's scramble for oil is theoretically in competition with American needs, but the EU does not exert a political influence able to contend with that of the US. Alignment with US priorities on energy matters is by far the best option for the majority of EU countries. This dependence on American political influence has to be taken into account in considering European policies toward the Middle East and the Gulf region. It affects Europe's compactness because some European countries have a larger stake in the system of supplying oil than others and have no strategic interest in reducing cooperation with US government and firms in the energy field.

This structural weakness prevents the Europeans from defining their specific priorities in the Middle East, which partly differ from those of the US. This ambiguity in its own basic interests made it easier for some EU governments to join the US-led invasion of Iraq: In fact, the strategic question they had to answer regarded their relationship with the US, and not their priorities in the Middle East.

The European Union's failure to implement its policies toward the Middle East and North Africa effectively also contributed to the divisions that occurred over Iraq. In the past ten years, Europeans succeeded in underlining the differences between their initiatives toward the Middle East and those promoted by the US. So, for instance, while the US administration tried to mend fences with France, Germany and the Arab countries in 2004 by launching the Greater Middle East Initiative (GMEI), a multi-level

cooperation offer resembling the EMP in its goals and concept, Europeans emphasised the EMP's specificity as a European initiative. At that time, the EU was also developing its new European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), which is meant to enhance bilateral relations in order to achieve the EMP's goals. In addition, given that neither the EMP nor the ENP covers the Gulf region, France and Germany pushed to establish a Strategic Partnership for the Mediterranean and the Middle East for the countries of the area, Iraq included.

The GMEI has in the meantime been diluted into a much more indefinite and highly rhetorical "Broader Middle East and North Africa" initiative. The Europeans had a point in marking their differences from the US: After the division in the EU over Iraq, Europeans had to stress their autonomy to uphold their diplomatic position in cases like the Israeli-Palestinian conflict or Iran's proliferation crisis. Despite this diplomatic success, however, the European Union's efforts to assume a high-level profile are likely to prove pure rhetoric unless it obtains some positive, concrete results. The EMP is widely seen as a half-failure, and few expect a better outcome from the ENP. The Strategic Partnership for the Mediterranean and the Middle East is at best ambiguous. European assistance may be decisive for the Palestinian Authority's survival, but does not make the European stance on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict incisive. Finally, the only way Europeans can solve Iran's proliferation crisis is by involving the US in the talks, which seems improbable (though not impossible).

Assuming that the invoked 'democratisation' of the Middle East can only take place if there is an endogenous 'democratic' actor, it would be better to have two distinct global interlocutors than only the US. Such a trilateral relationship would reduce the probability of any Middle Eastern political actor defining itself in purely pro- or anti-American terms and enable that actor to represent broader interests. To the extent that conflicts break out because of incompatibility between different interests, broader representation could reduce the need to resort to violence. Furthermore, the EU prefers to be a cooperative partner rather than replace the Soviet Union as a global rival of the US. The mechanism of exploiting rivalries, which plays an important role in producing political and social acrimony, would be limited to secondary issues.

In the end, it would be an important step forward if European countries were able to clarify their strategic interests and develop a consistent strategy, independent of – even if not opposed to – that of the United States. The probability of this occurring is rather minimal. After the 1956 Suez crisis, no European country has been able to exert decisive political leverage on Middle East equilibrium, nor has the European Union as a whole proven successful in achieving its envisaged regional goals. Given the prominence of the United States in the area, EU member states have to frame their Middle East strategies as a part of their US strategy. As a result, there is no real transatlantic strategy for the Middle East. What there is, is a transatlantic set of initiatives set by US strategy – a very weak instrument with which to prevent the outbreak of conflict.