



BULLETIN

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Greater Middle East and Polish Presidency of the EU Council

by Patrycja Sasnal

In the coming years the Greater Middle East area may witness an array of sweeping changes, including an escalation of tensions (connected with the possibility of Israel's striking a preventive attack against Iran or an armed conflict breaking out between Israel and the Palestinians), but also possible progress in the Middle East peace process. As demonstrated by the experiences of Finland and the Czech Republic, the assessment of Poland's presidency of the EU Council (slated for the latter half of 2011) may be greatly influenced precisely by the way the country reacts to developments in the Middle East, so problems of the region should be accorded special attention during Poland's preparations for the presidency.

Due to factors which include Iran's progress with its nuclear program, changes on the Israeli political scene and the continuing Arab-Israeli conflict, the situation in the so-called Greater Middle East remains unstable. Over the next few years, including the period of Poland's presidency of the EU Council, a sudden crisis may explode in the region, such as the outbreak of an armed conflict between Israel and Iran, or between Israel and the Palestinians. A less likely prospect is another conflict in Lebanon. On the other hand, the expected resumption of Arab-Israeli talks may provide a chance for the EU to contribute towards achieving lasting peace in the region.

Iran. Israel's top security priority is to counter the Iranian nuclear arms program, which threatens the country's very existence. According to U.S. intelligence data of February 2009, over 2010–2015 Iran may turn out enriched uranium in quantities that would suffice to produce nuclear weapons (although this does not mean that it will be capable of constructing a nuclear bomb by then). Almost until the end of the George W. Bush administration, the Israeli government relied on action by its strategic partner, the United States, with regard to the Iran program. But the Obama administration now speaks of returning to diplomatic talks with the Islamic Republic within the P5+1 formula (permanent UN Security Council members plus Germany) even before Iran meets the Bush administration's precondition of nuclear program suspension. In the opinion of the Israeli authorities, the U.S. diplomatic approach will not lead to Iran's definitive rejection of its plans, while giving that country more time for nuclear program development.

The Israeli government makes no secret of its working on plans for a preventive attack against Iranian nuclear installations. The military option should be expected to be shunned by the Obama administration as long as Iran is willing to conduct constructive dialogue on the nuclear program, or until conclusive evidence is obtained about Iran's possessing nuclear weapons. But it is likely that even without the U.S. go-ahead and regardless of the U.S. administration's progress in talks with Iran, Israel will in the coming years go for a precautionary attack on the Natanz facility, provided its intelligence confirms Iran's readiness for nuclear weapons production and Israel proves technologically capable of launching such an assault effectively. Another possible scenario involving Israel's attack on Iran may be a linkage between U.S. consent to such an operation and Israel's concessions in the peace process to end the Arab-Israeli conflict.

Arab-Israeli Conflict. Given intense U.S. activity towards reviving Israeli-Arab negotiations (e.g. the appointment of a special envoy or plans for Obama's meeting with the leaders of Israel, Pales-

tinian Authority and Egypt in Washington in May), the peace process should be expected to continue in the years ahead. But the main obstacles it faces—related to the policies of Israel's right wing-dominated government, and the divisions among the Palestinians themselves—will prove extremely hard to overcome. Israeli-Syrian talks might be resumed as well, and given the more favorable political circumstances, these actually stand a better chance of success.

With both sides to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict increasingly radicalized, a renewed Israeli attack on the Gaza Strip cannot be ruled out in several years' time should Hamas grow perceptibly stronger or resume the shelling of Israeli territory. Such a scenario will be even more likely if Israel goes on with the Gaza Strip's blockade and third parties' attempts to mediate between Fatah and Hamas end in a fiasco. After the 2006 war, the prospect of an open armed conflict between Israel and Hezbollah in Lebanon seems less likely, although such a possibility should still be taken into consideration. And it should be borne in mind that the Iraq situation has yet to be durably stabilized, while the U.S. is required to pull out its forces by the end of 2011 under an agreement with the Iraqi government.

Presidency Experiences. As demonstrated by the experiences of Finnish and Czech presidencies (in 2006 and 2009, respectively), the reaction to Middle East developments on the part of the country holding the EU Council presidency may be decisive to the overall perception of the presidency's performance. The biggest challenge for the Finnish presidency in the second half of 2006 came with the outbreak of the Lebanon war between Israel and Hezbollah, even though originally the country had put the EU's relations with Russia as its priority objective. The Finnish government's swift reaction to the Lebanon crisis and the skills demonstrated in working out the member states' uniform position and obtaining their consent to beef up the UNIFIL force proved to be the main factor behind the overall success of the Finnish presidency.

And in early 2009, the Czech presidency faced another Middle East crisis after Israel went on the offensive in the Gaza Strip. Politically burdened with the image of an Israeli backer, the Czech Republic was seen in the Union as partial, which made its task of representing the whole EU perceptibly more difficult. And the absence of a presidency initiative stood in stark contrast with the involvement of France, which managed to sideline the presidency and come forward as the major player in negotiations to reach a ceasefire.

Conclusions. The Middle East will continue high on the EU's external policy agenda. Each of the previously discussed scenarios—Israel's unilateral attack on Iran, with or without U.S. consent; escalation of the Israeli-Arab conflict; or resumption of the peace process—will require preparations and adequate response on the part of the presidency, whether or not the changes provided for in the Lisbon Treaty are introduced (provided it is ratified). Assuming that the events described previously may occur prior to or during Poland's presidency of the EU Council, it would be appropriate to draw conclusions from the experiences of previous presidencies and include the region in the Polish agenda of 2011 presidency preparations.

Poland has no vital interests in the Middle East (just as Finland or the Czech Republic), nor are we regarded as a country with special experience in activity in the region—although the longstanding presence in UN missions in the Golan Heights and Lebanon must be noted. It is thus all the more important to develop appropriate competence in this area through regional activity and through cooperation with Mediterranean countries, such as France, Spain or Cyprus—with the latter to be in the presidency troika with Poland and Denmark—and also through activity in the forum of the Union for the Mediterranean. Conclusions must also be drawn from the experiences of the Czech presidency and ways sought of countering the stereotyped perception of Poland as an Israeli backer.

Even though the most important topics on the Polish presidency's agenda will have to do with Eastern Partnership and energy safety, the success of the presidency will also be contingent on factors other than due completion of planned tasks. According to the Finnish government, reactions to expected events accounted for only 35% of its 2006 presidency's activity, leaving 65% for reactions to unexpected developments. Poland should, therefore, seek to reduce the risk of being taken by surprise with a sudden conflict in the Middle East, and also to maximize profits from participation in possible Arab-Israeli negotiations. An increased early monitoring of the regional situation, and the drawing up of scenarios for future developments along with reactions thereto, may contribute to a success of the Polish presidency of the EU Council.