

A propitious moment for the EU to assert itself in the Palestinian occupied territories?

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The deteriorating and explosive situation in the Palestinian occupied territories (OTs) requires a long-term, strategic multilateral approach, as opposed to the divide and rule tactics currently being deployed between a Fatah-controlled, (for now) civilised West Bank, and the Gaza Strip which is on its way to becoming or being perceived as a rogue territory, outside international control.

Some soul-searching on Europe's side is an indispensable precondition to devise sustainable and consistent strategies. Firstly, the legitimacy and efficacy of the Quartet were put to a serious test not just by events on the ground, but also by internal criticism such as that voiced by former UN Middle East envoy Alvaro De Soto. One way to bridge the credibility gap would consist of enlarging the diplomatic team, working more closely with Egypt, Jordan and Saudi Arabia. Not only are these Arab states legitimate stakeholders in the region's stability, but they have shown a willingness to play a more active role in conflict resolution. Last February Saudi Arabia compelled Fatah and Hamas to strike a deal to create a national unity government, while last week the three countries participated in a conference with PA President Mahmoud Abbas and Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert. This could provide a sense of ownership among Arab populations in the stakes involved in this crisis' resolution. By no means, however, this should be seen as a form of Western disengagement, with Arab countries assuming some of the burden from the US and Israel, as some commentators in Washington wish for.

In terms of the roles played by the main international players, the EU needs to re-focus the relationship between its stated interests in the Middle East and the policies it has adopted since 2006, when the Quartet started losing its legitimacy as honest broker in the conflict. If European countries want to be seen at least as intelligent payers, they must rethink the basic tenets characterising their relations with Hamas. The grass-roots nature of this political movement has to be acknowledged, together with the recognition that in recent years Hamas has shown some restraint and pragmatism. On the one hand, since the 2005 Cairo Declaration, namely, the movement has avoided suicide terrorist attacks against Israel. On the other, it has participated in municipal and national elections and asked Fatah, which declined in the hope that the boycotted Hamas-led government would collapse, to establish a national unity government after the electoral victory in January 2006.

By talking to Hamas, the EU would overcome the current impasse whereby one of its missions, EUBAM Rafah, is unable to operate without a Palestinian unity government – given that Gaza is under the direct control of Hamas – while the other, EUPOL COPPS in Ramallah, can operate only in the absence of such a government, as the area falls under the control of the internationally-recognised Fatah-led emergency government.

Secondly, the EU should come up with clear-cut aims, differentiating the time horizon for their pursuit. By so doing, Brussels would be in a position to advance a comprehensive strategic vision to the international community. The different political objectives should combine in the short-term political stabilisation and humanitarian relief, both in the West Bank and Gaza, institution-building and good governance-inspired reforms in the medium-term, as the EU did with some success between 2001 and 2005, and democracy promotion as a long-term objective.

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In terms of the first objective, since Hamas' electoral victory and the ensuing adoption of economic sanctions, the EU has, quite paradoxically, increased by a third its humanitarian aid (making up 60% of the overall €700 million aid in 2006) at the expense of development aid. While this has avoided a major humanitarian catastrophe, with the Temporary International Mechanism (TIM) keeping one-third of Gazans afloat, the same policy has had perverse effects. Being unable to deliver public goods and having to rely on international assistance for basic services, the legitimacy and accountability of the Palestinian Authority (PA) have reached an all-time low, with 40% of Palestinians declaring themselves in favour of dismantling the PA, and the same proportion supporting the establishment of a confederation with Jordan.

The EU's traditional focus on institution-building has been marginalised since 2006, with even the most salient European presence there, the borders' monitoring mission EUBAM Rafah and the police training mission EUPOL COPPS, having become almost irrelevant. As a result of Israeli security concerns, EUBAM has been allowed to operate only for 30% of the time since June 2006. Other measures promoted by the EU that were aimed at improving governance in the PA, by tying financial assistance to reforms in the judicial, fiscal, executive and administrative domains, which were bearing fruit, came to a grinding halt last year.

Hence, the EU should first reformulate its views and priorities within the Quartet, using the current impasse in the OTs as a window of opportunity to reach agreement with the US on a different agenda for the way forward. Among the main items the EU should press for are an engagement strategy with moderate Hamas members and exerting pressure on Israel to deliver on some of the basic commitments it has assumed under the Quartet-established conditions – increasing the freedom of movement, giving back all Palestinian tax revenues and committing itself to a calendar for concrete progress in negotiations. In a second stage, Brussels could reformulate a comprehensive strategy comprising relief efforts, institution-building tasks as well as the promotion of good governance.

It is time for the member states of the European Union to not just voice their concern, but to demonstrate their commitment to be major players with a long-term vision for the Middle East. Given the poor credibility and all-time low success rate of the United States in the region, the present conditions argue for subordinating our conventional deference to our transatlantic partner, in order to assert ourselves and realise our ambition to act as a responsible and capable player at this critical time.