
Policy Brief #4

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U.S. Challenges and Choices in the Gulf: European Perspectives

This policy brief is based on the discussion at the seventh in a jointly sponsored series of congressional staff briefings on “U.S. Challenges and Choices in the Gulf.” To receive information on future briefings, contact Jennifer Davies at jdavies@stanleyfoundation.org.

There is growing transatlantic debate on how to realize the shared goals of the United States and European countries in the Gulf: the promotion of peace, stability, democracy and prosperity in the region. Whereas the United States espouses regime change and economic sanctions as key tools for containing and coercing difficult governments in the Gulf, Europeans emphasize the benefits of international political pressure linked to multilateral negotiation and engagement.

If there is to be any hope of bridging this “gulf in the Gulf” eventually, U.S. policymakers need to understand European perceptions vis-à-vis the main actors in the region, as well as preferred European approaches to the challenges they pose. (While generalizations about European views do not capture important differences, it is nevertheless useful to describe those widely shared by European leaders.) This brief will thus explore European views and goals with respect to Iraq, Iran and Israel and the ways in which Europeans propose to accomplish those goals.

I. European Views on the Major Regional Actors

Iraq

Europeans generally agree with the U.S. administration’s characterization of Saddam Hussein as a brutal dictator who bears broad personal responsibility for the misery of his people. European states contributed 61,000 troops to the 1991 Gulf War coalition and they have staunchly supported the agreed UN policy that Iraq must end its programs to build weapons of mass destruction (WMD). They have called for UN weapons inspectors to be readmitted to the country on an unconditional basis, as required in UN Security Council Resolution 687.

Indeed, Europeans note that Security Council resolutions enacted under Chapter VII of the UN Charter, like the relevant resolutions on Iraq, carry the implied threat of the use of force in the case of noncompliance. They would prefer, however, that the current stalemate with Iraq be broken by increased international political pressure. Once beyond the stalemate, European leaders would seek increased cooperation from the Iraqi authorities (in order to advance weapons inspections) and look for continually improved relations between Baghdad and its Gulf neighbors. They thus distinguish between the goal of ending Iraq’s WMD programs, which they support, and the goal of changing the Iraqi regime, which they see as quite different and perhaps not essential for the control of WMD. They do not advocate military operations to depose Saddam Hussein at present and warn that U.S. threats to do so all but preclude the possibility of Iraqi cooperation with the sanctions/inspections policy approved by the United Nations. Europeans also worry that an attack on Iraq could have a detrimental impact on stability in the region.

Europe has significant economic interests in Iraq, though U.S. policymakers tend to misjudge the magnitude of such interests. By way of example, *The Wall Street Journal* and the Heritage Foundation report that the single largest consumer of Iraqi products is in fact the United States, which receives 56.4% of Iraqi exports. Together, the two largest European consumers of Iraqi products (the Netherlands and France) receive only 19.9 % of Iraqi exports. These figures include oil sold legally by Iraq under the UN “oil for food” program, which is supported by the United States as well as European governments.¹

Iran

Unlike the logic behind President Bush’s “Axis of Evil” concept, Europeans see no comparison between Iraq and Iran. In their view, Iran has a democratically elected government (headed by President Mohammad Khatami) struggling with some success against a reactionary and autocratic clerical elite (led by Ayatollah Ali Khamenei). Europeans praise Tehran for its attempts to improve relations with its neighbors and for its cooperation in the fight against terrorism, but they deplore its hostility to Israel, its shadowy intervention in Afghanistan and its attempts to develop WMD.

Though the Iran-Libya Sanctions Act (ILSA) places U.S. sanctions on foreign companies investing in Iran’s oil and gas sectors, Europeans continue to benefit from country and company waivers, as originally granted in 1998 under sections 4(c) and 9(c) of the act, respectively. Accordingly, European economic and political contacts with Iran are substantial, and are steadily increasing. On a practical level, European leaders point out that these contacts (and the information gathering that they permit) have been useful to the United States for transmitting messages to Iranian officials and for putting together accurate data on Iranian economic activity. Given this, many European leaders advocate Iran’s entry into the World Trade Organization, suggesting that the integration of Iran into the world economy would foster greater transparency and allow the international community to monitor worrisome Iranian financial transactions more closely.

Europeans believe that terrorism emanating from the Gulf will never be destroyed by military action alone; the West must also work swiftly to improve its image in the region. In Iran, many of President Khatami’s supporters already aspire to U.S. values and would only be further encouraged by more substantial Western engagement. Germany and France in particular, but also many other Europeans, are optimistic about Iran – believing this particular glass to be half-full.

Israel

Although Israel is not a Gulf state, its relations with Gulf states (and with the other countries of the Middle East in general) are a key factor in regional calculations. Israeli-Gulf relations are poor at the moment, as Israeli incursions into the West Bank continue. Like the U.S. government, Europeans generally support the creation of a Palestinian state as the only way to achieve lasting peace, although their views of the tactics needed to achieve this are quite different from the Bush administration’s view. Both the United States and Europe uphold Israel’s right to exist and to defend itself against armed attack, with Germany and Italy being Israel’s strongest European supporters.

European reactions to President Bush’s call for new leadership and new institutional structures in the Palestinian Authority have been muted. Regardless of the Palestinians’ choice of leadership, the European Union has endorsed the idea of an international peace conference and suggested that international peacekeepers may have to be sent to the region. However, Europe’s leaders are divided on what specific plan of action to promote and few seem willing to challenge U.S. policy on these matters openly.

¹ The Heritage Foundation, *The Wall Street Journal*, 2002 *Index of Economic Freedom: Iraq*. On the internet at: <http://cf.heritage.org/index/country.cfm?ID=69.0>

II. Key Facets of European Policy in the Gulf

Military Actions Must Carry Legitimacy

Nearly all European leaders are adamant that any U.S. or allied military strike in the Gulf be “legitimate” under international law – by which they mean endorsed by a multilateral organization, preferably the UN Security Council. French and German leaders would be especially wary of unilateral U.S. military action aimed at deposing Saddam Hussein, arguing that the group of Gulf War Security Council resolutions on Iraq has set up adequate provisions for coercing compliance from the current regime. The most prominent of these, Resolution 687, draws additional legitimacy in its preambular clauses from Iraq’s signing of both the Geneva Protocol (1925, prohibiting gas and bacteriological weapon use) and the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (1972, prohibiting the development, production and stockpiling of such weapons.)

U.S. Pressure for Regime Change is Counterproductive

European leaders are skeptical of the forceful ouster of difficult regimes in the Middle East, arguing that the threat of such action precludes the possibility of such regimes cooperating with the international community on controlling WMD. They reason that leaders such as Saddam Hussein and Yasser Arafat have no incentive to comply with U.S. or Western demands when the stated desire of the United States is their removal from power. Furthermore, Europeans claim that U.S. regime change rhetoric embarrasses the UN Security Council, undermines its relevance and compromises its legitimacy.

In the case of Iraq, Europeans worry that chaos might well result from an ill-planned coup. They caution that Iraq’s clandestine weapons programs will continue even if Saddam Hussein is deposed and that much of Iraq’s divided and weak opposition forces are just as opposed to outside interference in Iraq’s internal affairs as they are to the current regime. Lastly, European leaders worry that the United States will commit itself militarily and economically to the overthrow and reconstruction of Iraq’s government, to the detriment of its preexisting obligations in Afghanistan, the Balkans and elsewhere.

Engagement is Key

Europeans have generally followed a policy of engagement with the difficult regimes of the Gulf, ranging from an easing of economic restrictions on trade with Iraq to “troika-format” dialogues with Iranian leaders. Despite U.S. insistence to the contrary, Europeans do not view engagement as endorsing the regime in question *per se*; rather, they believe that dialogue and trade relations give them the leverage to moderate difficult government behavior. Only if engagement strategies prove ineffective would most European governments consider actively advocating sanctions, political coercion or military action, and even then they might question whether such action would endanger, rather than promote, the overall stability of the Gulf region.

III. The Value of U.S.-European Cooperation

As demonstrated by the fight against terrorism, the foreign policy goals of the United States and of Europe can be substantially furthered by transatlantic consensus. The difficult challenges and choices currently facing the United States in the Gulf will be most successfully managed if there is transatlantic accord on constructive approaches to achieve common goals.