

THE EUROPEAN UNION'S ROLE IN THE GREATER MIDDLE EAST

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Introduction

Prior to, and immediately following, the ill-starred US invasion of Iraq, the Bush administration tried hard to justify its military action, offering a number of reasons that prompted the controversial attack. These ranged from the necessity to eliminate lethal weapons of mass destruction, which Saddam Hussein allegedly possessed, to a need to urgently liberate the Iraqi people languishing under the rule of brutal dictatorship. In the beginning of this year, however, the contours of what can be termed an American grand strategy have emerged. In an apparent attempt to excel its British imperial predecessors, Washington set forth a strategic blueprint labelled, in the US diplomatic parlance, the Greater Middle East Initiative. The ambitious project aims at thorough revamping of the region described by the above term. This paper intends to discuss how different international actors, in particular the European Union, are going to position themselves in this strategic area, designated by the US administration for a radical socio-political reform.

The Greater Middle East region¹ has always been important for both its abundant economic resources and its strategic location linking Europe, Asia and Africa. The Greater Middle East's outstanding geo-strategic value and geo-economic significance inevitably place the region at the heart of the international politics in today's world. The region is the site of the world's largest oil and gas resources. Three quarters of all global oil reserves are located in 13 countries of the Greater Middle East and the EIA reports that North American imports of Middle East and North African oil will increase from 3.3 MMBD in 2001 to 6.1 MMBD in

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¹ There is still not a common definition of the Greater Middle East region. However in this article the region will be used as the area that comprises the Arab world, Israel, Turkey, Iran, Central Asia and the Caucasus.

2025 and the increase in exports to Western Europe will be from 4.7 MMBD to 7.4 MMBD.²

The Greater Middle East's diversity makes it an exceptionally vibrant region in the world; however, a host of problems it is faced with makes it also very volatile. The latter can be briefly summarized as follows: political instability of the existing governments and state structures that has a potential to cause the disintegration and collapse of the entire geopolitical systems with grave consequences for the whole world; severe demographic pressure and massive out-migration (mainly to Europe) because of slow economic growth, rapid population growth, unemployment and poverty, income disparities and ethnic tensions; proliferation of weapons and the existence of multiple conflicts; the rise of politically radical, militant Islam generally perceived as a threat and source of instability, etc. In addition to these, several other challenges to regional stability are also affecting the situation in the region where there are no appropriate economic integration schemes, no system of arms control or collective defence.

In the majority of these countries, the prevailing severe social and economic tensions do not permit the establishment of stable democratic political institutions. The regional nations are largely dominated by one-party political structures that are averse to any social transformation of the system of power or to any societal reforms in general. The local political regimes, which are mostly authoritarian, are extremely reluctant to give up or share their power or to ensure the rule of law and respect for human rights. Most of the regimes lack legitimacy and can only get support through political patronage networks. The bulk of these countries don't have the ability to properly tax their citizens; there is the other side of the coin, though: the citizens, for their part, cannot ask too much from their governments. There are, of course, some small states in the region like tremendously rich Kuwait, Qatar and the UEA that are basically awash in oil and thus can boast of high per capita incomes. But rampant corruption of the ruling elites and the

² *Energy Information Agency, International Energy Outlook*, Washington, May 2003, DOE/EIA-0484, pp.184-186.

underdeveloped state of civil society can be regarded as the characteristic features of the region.

It is also impossible to ignore the fact that the Greater Middle East is piled up with military hardware and in not-so-distant future some new nuclear states are likely to emerge there. During the Cold-War era, the Middle East had been the main recipient of arms both from the Soviet Union and the US although the situation has changed since the beginning of the 1990s.

The fact that some areas of the Greater Middle East supply a large volume of illicit drugs to many parts of the world is another characteristic of the region that has to be taken into consideration. As it is becoming more evident that terrorism and drug trafficking are intertwined, this problem becomes more important.

On the other hand, *The Greater Middle East* region has always been important as a geopolitical playground where various external powers seek regional hegemony. Thus, in any analysis of the region it is impossible to ignore the specific local and global interplay that both facilitated the regional countries' creation and within which they currently operate. Today, the region has started receiving more attention from the external world as the main source of international terrorism and proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. Four of the rogue states once labelled by the US - namely Iran, Iraq, Libya and Sudan - are located in the region.

The Greater Middle East Project

It would appear that the *Greater Middle East Project* aims to address all the crises and opportunities from Morocco in the west to India in the east and from Turkey and the Caucasus in the north to Sudan and Great Sahara Desert in the south. Its ultimate ambition is to advance a coherent strategy for dealing comprehensively with the whole vast region. Although the project is a post-Cold War concept, it came to world attention when it was first mentioned in

Al-Hayat newspaper in February 2004.³ In fact, the policy paper on the *Greater Middle East Initiative* that was published by *Al-Hayat* had been prepared for internal discussion among the senior officials at the G-8 Summit.

The initiative formulated by the US was based on some of the ideas and programs that could be found also in the *Middle East Partnership Initiative*⁴ - a document, which was announced by Secretary of State Colin Powell in December 2002. The blueprint specified three main areas of concern - promotion of democracy and good governance, building of knowledge society and expansion of economic opportunities. In fact, the whole initiative is modelled on the 1975 Helsinki Accords.

The motivation for preparing the initiative was mainly the information that was provided by the *UN Arab Human Development Reports*⁵ of 2002-2003 about the Arab world. The

³ Dar al Hayat, "US Working Paper for G-8 Sherpas), english.daralhayat.com February 13, 2004.

⁴The Middle East Partnership Initiative is a Presidential initiative founded to support economic, political, and educational reform efforts in the Middle East and champion opportunity for all people of the region, especially women and youth. The initiative strives to link Arab, U.S., and global private sector businesses, non-governmental organisations, civil society elements, and governments together to develop innovative policies and programs that support reform in the region. The initiative is structured in four reform areas-economic, political, education and women. In his May 9, 2003 speech at the University of South Carolina, President George W. Bush also reaffirmed the U.S. Government's commitment to promote and support reform in the region through the Middle East Initiative. This Initiative is comprised of two essential elements: the existing Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI) and the proposed Middle East Free Trade Area (MEFTA). "The Middle East Initiative", *Fact Sheet*, US Department of State, Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs, Washington, DC, June 18, 2003.

⁵ Some examples of the statistical information given in the Reports: The combined GDP of the 22 Arab League countries is less than that of Spain; approximately 40% of adult Arabs are illiterate, two-thirds of whom are women; over 50 million young people in 2010 and 100 million in 2020 will enter the labour market, at least 6 million new jobs needed to be created each year to absorb them; if current unemployment rates persist, regional unemployment will reach 25 million by 2010; one-third of the region lives on less than two dollars a day; only 1.6% of the population has access to the internet; 51% of older Arab

2002 Report, compiled by Arab intellectuals led by Egyptian statistician Nader Fergany, specified *freedom, knowledge* and *women's empowerment* as the areas involving the region's main deficits.

According to Sami E. Baroudi, that UNDP Report was important in many respects. It was mainly the first UNDP report that dealt with the Arab region as a whole. It was openly critical of the performance of Arab regimes in most areas that were under examination and particularly deplored the status of Arab women. The report has also made a distinction between the concepts of economic growth and development and put the individual at the center of the development process, which wasn't the case for the previous reports, and - last but not least - the report argued that the Greater Middle East region poses a unique challenge and opportunity for the international community.⁶

Reactions to the Greater Middle East Project

Following its publication by *Al-Hayat*, the initiative started to be discussed and criticized more intensively by both European and Arab intellectuals, academics, politicians and laymen. The debates singled out four main drawbacks of the project - its harsh and dominating tone and style being so insensitive to the realities of the region; its neglect of other partners' efforts (such as, for example, the EU's Euro-Mediterranean Partnership⁷); its neglect of any prior

youths expressed a desire to emigrate to other countries, Europe is the favourite destination etc; fertility rate still well above the world average of 2.7; lowest levels of research funding in the world; the Arab world translates about 330 books annually, one fifth of the number that Greece translates; out of seven regions, the Arab countries had the lowest freedom score in the late 1990s. <http://www.undp.org/rbas/ahdr/english.html>

⁶ Sami E. Baroudi, "The 2002 Arab Human Development Report: Implications for Democracy", http://www.mepc.org/public_asp/journal_vol11/0403_baroudi.asp

⁷ The idea of partnership with the Mediterranean region was officially developed at Lisbon, Corfu and Essen meetings of the European Council and took its final shape at the Cannes European Council meeting in June 1995 that adopted the proposal for Euro- Mediterranean Partnership. The last stage was the signing of Barcelona Declaration in 1995. The idea of Euro- Mediterranean Partnership is built around three main goals: definition of a common area of peace and

consultation with any other partners and, lastly, its failure to address the Arab-Israeli conflict.⁸ That is why it is not surprising that the draft initiative had been withdrawn immediately lest it created much misunderstanding.

This Initiative has caused mixed reactions in the Arab world. Some regard it as an act of an external power that wants to impose change; to modernise and reform an area it views as the main source of terrorism and weapons of mass destruction. Others argue that the plan should not be rejected altogether from the very beginning and contend that it could provide some solutions to the problems of the region. However, the critics said, the project should be jointly developed with the participation of all parties concerned and not only by the US. They appeared not very impressed by Washington's pledges to guarantee a broad participation.⁹

However, the general attitude was not very positive. The initiative was mainly perceived as a project that would divide the world into two large camps, as was also underlined by Mohamed Sid-Ahmad.¹⁰ On the one hand, there will be a group of states made up of Western democracies under American leadership with the responsibility of reforming the rest of the world and eliminating the main sources of various threats. On the other hand, there will be

prosperity through the reinforcement of political dialogue and security; construction of a zone of shared prosperity through an economic and financial partnership and the gradual establishment of a free trade zone by the Mediterranean countries among themselves and with the EU and the development of social, cultural and human solidarity in such manner as to encourage cultural exchanges and understanding between civil societies. http://europa.eu.int/comm/external_relations/euromed/bd.htm

⁸ Stanley Crossick, "The US Greater Middle East Initiative", *European Policy Centre*, April 19, 2004.

⁹ Salama A. Salama, "Facing up to Unpleasant Facts", *Al-Ahram Weekly*, July 11-17, 2002; Khaled al-Maena, "A Report which should Open Arab Eyes", *Arab News*, July 5, 2002.

¹⁰ Mohamed Sid-Ahmed, "A New Berlin Wall?", <http://www.palestine-pmc.com/details.asp?cat=4&id=845>; Maggie Mitchell Salem, "Where the Greater Middle East Plan Went Awry", *Arab News*, April 7, 2004.

another group of states deemed incapable of dealing with all those threats on their own and thus destined to be the passive objects of global developments. No wonder that many of the regional countries that regard the project as something that will be imposed on them *from above* have received it with some reservations rather than welcomed the initiative.

Furthermore, the Arab world's concern about the resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict should also be mentioned here. According to Mohamed Sid-Ahmad, the overwhelming majority of Arabs think that the key criterion by which this project should be judged is its ability to resolve the Palestinian problem as the main burning issue of the region.

There are also some other aspects of a general debate over the issue of why the idea of the Greater Middle has popped up to the surface these days. Is it really connected only with an extravagant desire to spread the concepts of democracy, rule of law, civil society and human rights to that part of the globe or does Mr. Bush have some ulterior intentions? Might he actually be trying to legitimize his hegemonic designs through the clever manipulation of information provided by Arab experts in the 2002 and 2003 UNDP development reports?

In addition, it should be noted that the US and the EU have rather different outlooks on the *Greater Middle East Initiative*. The EU's position¹¹ appears to be much closer to the one held by the Arab world, since the EU also believes that *democratic change and economic modernization must be driven from within* the Arab societies and that they cannot be imposed from without in the absence of any base in the home countries. The EU also believes that the resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is key to further progress in the region. According to the EU's approach, national sentiments and identities of the region should definitely be taken into account, and every country should be dealt with

¹¹ Toby Dodge, Giacomo Luciani and Lee Litzenberger, "An EU Strategy for Iraq"; *European Policy Centre*, June 29, 2004; Günter Burghardt, "EU-US Relations after the Summit", *European Policy Centre*, June 30, 2004.

individually since there is no one size that fits all. Furthermore, the EU holds that Islam must not be regarded as a religion incompatible with modernity. According to the EU's perspective, it is also necessary to build on what has already been achieved - like, for example, the Barcelona Process¹² - instead of starting everything from scratch.

The EU and the Greater Middle East

The main interests of the EU in the region are *economic interests* including easy access to the energy resources; *regional stability* through the prevention of threats that could spill over from the region into the EU (like the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, religious extremism, international terrorism and drug trafficking) and through the settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict; and *the prevention of mass migration* from the region to the EU Member States due to geographic proximity.

It is true that, as was explained above, both economic interests and regional security considerations of the EU can be advanced as the main reasons for the EU's concern in the region. But a new idea has also started to shape the ever growing interest of the EU -- that a *modus vivendi* with Islam is not only possible but also necessary.

In this sense, then, the EU came to face basically three interrelated policy challenges - namely, the ongoing conflicts in the region (mainly the turmoil in Iraq and the Palestinian-Israeli conflict), the struggle against international terrorism (terrorist organisations based in that region and their possible state sponsors), and the support for the economic, social and political transformation of the region.

To deal with all these challenges, the EU has already developed a mixture of different tools and strategies ranging from a *Common Strategy for the Mediterranean Region* (Barcelona Process) to the

¹² The Barcelona Declaration was signed in 1995 by the 27 ministers of foreign affairs of the EU and the Mediterranean countries and built the idea of Euro-Mediterranean Partnership.

*New Neighborhood Policy*¹³ that aims to deepen relations with most countries in the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership - Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia (Maghreb); Egypt, Israel, Jordan, the Palestinian Authority, Lebanon, Syria (Mashrek); Libya (which currently has an observer status) as well as some other neighbouring countries including Russia, Belarus, Moldova, Ukraine, Georgia, Azerbaijan and Armenia - in line with the objectives (to promote the development, through partnership, of a common zone of peace, prosperity and progress; the resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict; a long term and sustained engagement and the strengthening of the Union's political dialogue with the region) specified in the *European Security Strategy*.¹⁴ On the other hand, the *Middle East Peace Process*¹⁵ is another important concern of the EU's Middle East policy. The EU has also developed cooperation with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) that involves Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates.¹⁶

After taking into consideration all these policies and strategies of the EU, we can argue that the EU is an actor in its own right in the Middle East region; however, its capacity to behave actively and efficiently in relation to other actors in the region is limited.

First of all, the absence of a Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) at the European level, the difficulties in adopting common positions and implementing these positions weaken the cohesion and adversely affect the credibility of the EU in the region. Due to the existence of national interests of the member states, individual states naturally manifest important differences and thus bilateral

¹³ http://europa.eu.int/comm/world/enp/policy_en.html Attina, Fulvio, "The Wider Europe Neighbourhood Policy and the Building of Security around Europe", <http://www.fscpo.unict.it/EuroMED/cjmhomeengl.html>

¹⁴ <http://ue.eu.int/pressdata/EN/reports/76255.pdf> Yury Federov, Roberto Menotti and Dana H. Allin, "European Security Strategy: Is it for Real?", *European Security Forum Working Paper*, no:14, October 2003.

¹⁵ http://europa.eu.int/comm/external_relations/mepp/decl/index.htm

¹⁶ Gerd Nonneman, "The Gulf: Background Assessment in the Middle East and Europe-An Integrated Appraisal", *Federal Trust for Education and Research*, 1992, pp. 55-57.

relations become more important than the EU's relations as a whole.

Secondly, the EU still has limited resources allocated for foreign policy activities, which forces the EU to make a list of priorities between various regions and various activities. Due to the disagreements and suspicions among the member states, in the current economic environment the member states are not willing to provide the Union with the necessary financial resources in this respect. Thus, at least till September 11, this region was not a number one priority for the EU, which was mainly focused on both deepening and enlarging itself.

Thirdly, frustration of the Arab states with the EU can also be regarded as a weakness of the EU in the region. It is true that during the Cold War, the Arab States have looked at the EU as a possible third option in addition to the geopolitical choice between the US and the Soviet Union. However, starting from the 1990s, the EU came to be perceived by the Arab States as the only alternative to the US hegemony in the region. This perception increased the expectations from the EU, which may not be met due to the special characteristics of the EU structure and the interplay between the various actors in the region.

The Interaction of the EU and the USA in the Greater Middle East

Although it is impossible to predict what course transatlantic relations might take within the context of the Greater Middle East policies during the next couple of years, some arguments can still be discussed on the basis of the current developments. As can be understood from the US-formulated Greater Middle East project and the EU's general approach toward the region, there are important differences between Washington's and Brussels' strategic postures. Given this reality, can there be a joint transatlantic strategy for the Greater Middle East? Can all differences be reconciled if both sides decide to take risks, make concessions, rethink their existing approaches and be prepared to commit significant resources to this project? There is an even larger

question looming: is it really necessary, and if yes, why is it necessary to shape a common transatlantic strategy? What will be the main elements of this strategy?

Despite some differences in threat perceptions and in strategic responses between the EU and the US, the problems that were specified as principal threats (international terrorism, weapons of mass destruction and failed and corrupt states) in both the *European Security Strategy* and the *September 2002 US National Security Strategy*¹⁷ are quite similar. The main differences concern the tools and strategies in dealing with these threats. In this sense, the US, which casts itself as the main security guarantor of the region, places greater emphasis on military action (both as an instrument of preemptive action and one employed during the crisis). The EU, in contrast to Washington, stresses the promotion of rule-based societies and institutions and the development of policies seeking to avoid more serious problems in the future as a major instrument of preemptive action.

Thus, it would seem that while the US wants to concentrate more on military solutions and short-term effects, the EU prefers to base its strategy on the experience of the Barcelona Process.

Can these different strategic approaches be complementary? In order to give a positive answer to this question, the first requirement is the ability of the EU and the US to frame the transformation of the Greater Middle East as a common interest of the West and the Greater Middle East.

Currently, the EU is already acting in the region with its partnership with the Mediterranean countries and countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council. Either through NATO or alone, the US is also present there. NATO had already taken over the UN mandate for the international peacekeeping force in Afghanistan in August 2003; some NATO countries have soldiers on the ground in

¹⁷ <http://www.whitehouse.gov/nsc/nss.html>

Iraq, and since 1994 the Alliance has a *Mediterranean Dialogue*¹⁸ with Israel and six Arab States.

If the EU and the US can define the transformation of the Greater Middle East as a common interest of the West and the Greater Middle East, the new transatlantic strategy will include the following elements: security considerations; the fight against terrorism; preventing the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction; the transformation of military and civil-military relations; determination of the main elements of mutually beneficial economic and technological cooperation; determination of minimal social standards; increased cooperation between non-political actors and common concern about the realization of sustainable human development in the region. The tools of the Strategy are expected to be democracy as a project; trade and aid; maintenance of the regional military balance in the Persian Gulf; prevention of the proliferation of nuclear weapons; combatting terrorism; finding a way to talk to opposition movements in the countries concerned and dealing with Palestine and Iraq.¹⁹

¹⁸The Dialogue was launched in 1994 with the participation of Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Mauritania, Morocco and Tunisia. Later in 2000, Algeria became a participant. The aim of the Dialogue is to create good relations and better mutual understanding throughout the Mediterranean and to promote regional security and stability. It is mostly based on bilateral relations between each participating country and NATO and also allows for multilateral meetings on a case-by-case basis. It consists of a political dialogue combined with participation in specific activities. *NATO Handbook*, Brussels, 2001, pp. 91-92.

¹⁹Anthony H. Cordesman and Arleigh A. Burke, "The Role of Europe in the Middle East: An American Perspective", *IISS/CEPS European Security Forum*, Brussels, March 11, 2002; Steven Everts, "Difficult but Necessary: A Transatlantic Strategy for the Greater Middle East", *Paper prepared for the GMF conference*, Washington DC, June 25, 2003; William Burns, "US, Europe Face Four Policy Challenges in Greater Middle East", <http://www.scoop.co.nz/mason/stories/WO0311/S00127.htm>; Ludger Kuehnhardt, "A New Transatlantic Project and a Joint Euro-Atlantic-Arab Task", <http://www.worldsecuritynetwork.com>; George Soros, "Global Governance-Are the American and European Visions Compatible?", *European Policy Centre Dialogues*, January 27, 2004; Ahto Lobjakas, "EU/US: Talks to Focus on Greater Middle East", <http://www.rferl.org/featurearticleprint/2004>, March 01, 2004.

That kind of a common strategy will help both sides in sharing intelligence, in making both theoretical and practical use of different experiences, strong points and expertise. Furthermore, both sides will be much more comfortable sensing that the global strategic objectives are broadly shared by the international community.

As with the EU, the US also has some weaknesses in dealing with the Greater Middle East. The negative attitudes toward the United States and its policies are very intense in the Middle East region. There is a lack of confidence and trust towards the US among the Middle Easterners due to the fact that they generally find some contradictions between what the US says and does. There is also strong criticism of US backing for Israel or US trade policies. Much deplored in the Greater Middle East are America's great tolerance of regional autocratic regimes, its unilateralist behaviour and environmental policies. All this appears to highlight, in the eyes of the region's peoples, the hypocrisy of American rhetoric about democracy and human rights.

The US has been greatly concerned in recent years over the rise of radical Islamic movements in the Middle East. However, the US seems to have difficulty in understanding that Islam, like other religions, can be quite diverse regarding its interpretation of the faith's teachings as they apply to contemporary political issues or to insensitive to the cultural differences or peculiarities of a particular region.

Having weighed up the US and EU respective weak points and advantages, one might suggest that a good division of labour can still be possible between the EU and US/NATO in the region. The latter can be achieved through the clarification and limitation of the ambitions that necessitate reforms of the existing structures and operating procedures of both sides, or by letting each side do the best it can perform.

Conclusion

The radical shift in strategic perceptions triggered (tragically) by the September 11, 2001 attacks in the United States has created important opportunities for cooperation between the EU and the USA in the Greater Middle East. Despite the existing differences on the wide range of issues including Iraq and Palestinian-Israeli conflict, at present, the EU's and the US's interests, tools and strategies can be regarded as compatible, although they are not necessarily identical. In this sense, differences in strategic outlook between Brussels and Washington in the region concern the means rather than the ends. The determination of the future of Iraq, the willingness of the US to include the solution of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict into the Greater Middle East project and to respect the EU's previous efforts in the region (especially through the Barcelona Process) will be important test cases for EU-US cooperation in the Greater Middle East. If we consider the common dangers that the international community faces in the area discussed in this paper, there will always be a strong hope for joint efforts aimed at the promotion of regional stability and security and the achievement of a common denominator based on realistic and feasible expectations.