

TIME FOR A STRATEGIC RETHINK IN THE MIDDLE EAST

Since the Hamas parliamentary victory in January and the election victory of the Kadima Party in Israel in March this year it has become very clear that regional dynamics in the Middle East have shifted towards a more conflictual pattern of relations. Given this reality, it is just as clear that the international community led by the so-called Quartet that consists of the United States, the European Union, Russia and the United Nations, needs to carry out a rethink of its strategy towards restoring peace in this sub region of the Mediterranean.

The first major shift in such a strategy should be conceptual in nature. The Quartet needs to come to terms with the fact that the window of opportunity that existed to achieve a permanent settlement to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has closed for the foreseeable future. Conflict management and not resolution has to be the focus of any strategy for the next few years. The second objective of such a strategy calls for a much more active policy of engagement with the protagonists of the conflict than anything being offered to date. An increase in diplomatic resources is required to activate such an approach but is essential and much more logical than the policy of isolation we see being implemented vis-à-vis Hamas.

All international efforts need to concentrate on persuading Hamas that there is no viable governing alternative than to pledge their commitment to three non-negotiable principles: the recognition of Israel, the renouncement of acts of terror and violence, and the respect of previous agreements between Israel and the Palestinians. Such a policy of persuasion cannot however simply consist of punitive measures. It must also include political and economic incentives that sweeten the bitter pill that the Hamas political movement must swallow if international legitimacy of its government is to be achieved.

As the main extra-regional power in the Middle East the United States must play a leadership role in such a strategy. During Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert's visit to Washington this week, American President George W. Bush called upon all actors to return to the peace vision of two viable states co-existing next to one another. The United States should follow up on such a call by appointing a special envoy to the region in an effort to attract both Israel and Palestinians to such a path. Introducing such a policy mechanism of engagement is a much better strategy than the policy of isolation and indifference that has dominated in the first half of 2006.

The European Union also needs to adopt a much more active role in seeking to restore stability in the Middle East. An external relations policy that focuses on trying to help Israel and the Palestinians forge a common ground despite their clear differences should be the driving force of such a re-think. Geographical proximity and stability in the region dictates that the EU needs to try and influence regional relations in the Middle East more systematically than it has been in recent years. Failure to do so will continue to stifle attempts to strengthen Euro-Mediterranean relations through the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership and also have a negative impact on the EU's neighbourhood policy agenda that is currently being implemented.

Developments in the first half of 2006 already provide clear insight into what will happen in the Middle East if no international strategic re-think that seeks to foster regional stability takes place soon. First, as Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert has made perfectly clear, Israel will continue to implement a unilateral policy of disengagement from the Palestinian territories and establish the permanent borders of Israel by 2010 without Palestinian agreement. Second, the chaotic political situation inside Palestine will continue to worsen with the likelihood of a civil war taking place becoming more of a reality.

Third, the human suffering that Palestinian civilians have been experiencing will continue to increase plunging the region into a “failed state” syndrome. Fourth, such an increase in conflictual Israeli-Palestinian relations would have a negative spillover effect across the Middle East and beyond. In other words, it would make stabilizing the situation in Iraq, Afghanistan and Iran even more difficult than today. It would also provide a more conducive environment where an escalation of international terror activities would likely take place.

Given the widespread ramifications of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the human suffering in this region of the world itself it is essential that the international community conduct a re-think of their strategy towards the Middle East. It is not too late to try and re-direct Israeli-Palestinian relations in a more positive direction but this will only happen if direct support to proponents of peace in the region is given.

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