

European powers seek to benefit from Bush's Middle East setbacks

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Within days of the Bush administration's defeat in the mid-term elections, due to widespread opposition to the Iraq war, a number of European powers were attempting to flex their political muscles.

Their aim is to take advantage of the weakening of the US's world position in order to assert their own interests in the Middle East and to advance an alternative to the Bush administration's pro-Israeli stance, which they believe has destabilised the entire region.

To this end, Spain, Italy and France launched a new five-point Israel-Palestine peace initiative with the stated aim of calming tensions across the Middle East. It marks a significant break with the common front represented by the European Union's participation in the US-led "Quartet" alongside Russia and the United Nations. This was based on President Bush's "Road Map" for peace in the Middle East, which promised a negotiated settlement establishing a Palestinian state.

However, with Washington supporting every military provocation against the Palestinians by Israel and endorsing every demand Jerusalem has made in order to reject negotiations, the three countries have concluded that the road map is effectively defunct. The US now tacitly endorses the Israeli government's plan to unilaterally set the borders of a Palestinian state and in so doing permanently annex much of the West Bank and East Jerusalem.

The concerns this has aroused were amplified by the politically disastrous Israeli offensive against Lebanon—a country with close ties to Europe, particularly France. This left Lebanon economically ruined and strengthened Hezbollah. It ended with the despatch of a UN military force, to which the three countries all contribute, under conditions in which Lebanon remains the focus of bitter geopolitical conflicts between the US, Iran and Syria.

Spain's Prime Minister Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero announced the new plan at a summit meeting in Girona with French President Jacques Chirac.

"Peace between Israel and the Palestinians means to a large extent peace on the international scene," he said. Middle East peace, he continued, "is one of the factors that can contribute most to cornering fanaticism and terrorism."

"Violence has reached a level of deterioration that requires

determined, urgent action by the international community," he continued, referring to the 89 people killed by US-backed Israeli attacks on Gaza since the beginning of November.

The plan is significant for its call for an immediate ceasefire and its break with the demand of the US, strenuously insisted upon by the Olmert government, that recognition of the State of Israel must be a precondition for negotiations on a Palestinian state.

Miguel Angel Moratinos, Spanish minister of foreign affairs, said that his country had an interest in events in the Middle East. "We have police and civil guard [in Lebanon], two Spanish citizens were kidnapped in Gaza, because there is a big disaster," he said. "It's affecting my economy and security in terms of the whole situation. I have interests that are affecting my country, and so, what do I have to do, just wait and see?"

Chirac told businessmen and professors, "When I arrived, Zapatero said to me, 'We have the same vision of problems and concerns over the Middle East and particularly Palestine. We should take a common initiative.'"

Italy's Prime Minister Romano Prodi told reporters, "I think the European countries present in the area, have an obligation to look for a way to get out of this situation and prepare...a peace process."

There was no immediate reaction from Washington, but Israel rejected the new peace initiative out of hand. Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni told Moratinos that it was unacceptable that an initiative concerning Israel should be launched without coordination with Jerusalem.

Hamas Prime Minister Ismail Haniyeh, given that the plan offers the prospect of financial resources for his barely functioning government, said the initiative contained "good points" that should be studied. Israel's rejection of the initiative was "proof that Israel doesn't want any form of stability or quiet in the region," he added.

Fateh's position was not supportive, in part because President Mahmoud Abbas is dependent on US backing. Chief Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erekat of Fateh said, "We don't need to reinvent the wheel; we don't need a new initiative. What we need is a mechanism for implementation and time lines."

The three states pointedly failed to inform, let alone consult

with, British Prime Minister Tony Blair, Bush's main ally in Europe. This was despite the fact that Blair has long called for Washington to use its influence over Israel to pressure it into accepting a Palestinian state on parts of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. Germany, which is closely allied to Israel, was not supportive of the initiative and also appears not to have been consulted.

Zapatero made clear that the tripartite alliance were seeking to assert their independence from the US and to outflank the British. He said that while the plan had still be to fleshed out, it would be put to an EU summit in December, where he hoped it would be backed by the UK and Germany.

The plan came just as the US vetoed a UN Security Council resolution, with Britain abstaining, condemning Israel's ferocious attack on Gaza, which killed 18 Palestinians, mostly civilians. It follows Russia's opposition to US and Israeli demands for the isolation of Hamas. In March, Russia invited the Hamas leaders to Moscow.

Sharp differences also emerged at a closed meeting of the United Nations Security Council's five permanent members and Germany on November 7, regarding sanctions against Iran over its nuclear enrichment programme.

Washington objected to the draft resolution put forward by France along with Britain and Germany as being too weak. The closed meeting became so acrimonious that the participants abandoned their normally restrained diplomatic language and attacked each other openly. The Russian ambassador to the UN, Vitlay Churkin, said, "We think our [diplomatic] toolkit is full of tools. But for some reason, for some people there is only demand and sanctions—the hammer and sickle."

A French official told *Le Monde*, "Our position [on Iran] is very close to that of the Russians."

Even before the elections, all the European powers were seeking to reassert their influence in the Middle East. Last August, France agreed to expand its UNIFIL force in Lebanon. Spain, Italy, Belgium and Finland are also contributing troops, whilst Germany has sent a small navy unit to patrol Lebanon's coastal waters.

There are clear differences within Europe over whether to risk antagonising the US. But the European bourgeoisie is at least united by a desire to play a larger role in the region than they did in the 1990s.

Spain hosted the Madrid talks in 1991, the first initiative to find a resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in more than a decade. It was the Norwegians who secretly hosted the second track, informal talks between the Israelis and Palestinians in 1992, that were to result in the 1993 Oslo Accords. And while the Clinton administration soon seized control of the "peace process" from the Norwegians, the European powers were still quick to exploit the new trade opportunities in the Middle East.

At Barcelona in 1995, they negotiated a new European-Mediterranean Partnership agreement with 12 countries bordering the southern and eastern shores of the Mediterranean,

including both Israel and its Arab neighbours. The Barcelona partners soon became enmeshed in a network of multinational committees devoted to joint programmes in agriculture, industry, communications and transport.

For Europe, Oslo was an opportunity to challenge America's four-decades-long role as guardian of Western interests in the Middle East. While the agreement was not designed specifically to deal with Arab-Israeli relations, it provided a basis for the Europeans to assert themselves into the region. Following Oslo, the European Commission has given US\$500 million a year in aid to the Palestinians as well as further grants to underwrite the Palestinian police force and has funded PA elections. It also provided tens of millions of dollars to Jordan in the aftermath of the Gulf War to cope with the influx of Palestinian refugees from the Gulf.

Later, the EU extended the EU-Med agreement to Palestine and declared that the trade concessions for Palestinian commodities applied to those goods produced for Palestinian not Israeli profit. The latter would not be accepted into the EU without duties under either the Palestinian or Israeli category. In practice, this was no more than a political gesture to demonstrate the EU's evenhandedness towards the two parties and was never implemented. By 2004, Israel had become an important market for European goods, when total EU exports reached €12.75 billion and imports from Israel reached €8.6 billion.

All of these economic and political advances were undermined in 2001 when the neoconservatives under Bush took control of the White House. This signalled the beginning of a policy of asserting US control over the oil resources of the Middle East by military means, elbowing the Europeans out and in the process destabilising the region. The efforts by the European powers to reverse the setbacks they have suffered must inevitably be translated into increased militarism in Europe and provoke retaliatory measures from Washington.



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