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Options for the Greater Middle East

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The purpose of this seminar was to analyse the current situation in the Middle East and to assess the various Western initiatives to deal with the region. Its main conclusions can be summarised as follows.

1. A tension is perceived between the long-term plans for the region and its urgent needs. While those projects can only bear fruit in the long term, day-to-day events call for immediate answers. In the Middle East, recently events have gone faster than the West's reactions to them. Therefore, the EU and its member states must envisage a twofold approach: (a) a strategy to tackle open crises, such as Iraq and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, on the one hand; and (b) a strategy to address the underlying problems of the Middle East region, on the other.
2. As far as the short-term strategy is concerned, however, there is no agreement between the Europeans concerning the Iraqi crisis. The EU member states broadly agree on how to deal with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and insist on the need to uphold the 'road map' as the only way to proceed towards a two-state solution (as the Quartet's 4 May 2004 declaration emphasized once more). But some European governments would like to see a more profound European involvement in Iraq's reconstruction process, whereas others believe that both international and internal legitimacy must be restored before considering any involvement. Thus, according to a first school of thought, containment should be applied to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and Western efforts should focus on Iraq's reconstruction, whereas a second one promotes tackling, as a priority, the Israeli-Palestinian dispute, and waiting for more propitious circumstances in Iraq. The security situation on the ground and the lack of a 'law and order' environment were mentioned as momentous obstacles to increasing the European presence in Iraq.

3. The United States government will present a 'Greater Middle East Initiative' (GMEI) at various summits during June 2004, with the stated aim of promoting democracy and reform in the region as a whole. However, the proposed content of this initiative has been changed – watered down, actually – by the US administration in the last few months, owing to less than enthusiastic reactions on the part of states in the region. Generally speaking, political regimes in the region are reluctant to embrace democratic reforms, and this might partially explain their doubts over the American initiative. But they also argue that the GMEI is hardly consistent with the American occupation of Iraq and with President George W. Bush's lack of interest vis-à-vis the Palestinians' rights. One participant in the seminar said that, from an Arab point of view, the current United States administration lacks 'moral authority' to propose democratic changes in the Middle East.
4. The European Union has given a 'proactive' response to the GMEI. In other words, the Union is ready to support the American plan but, at the same time, it reaffirms the appropriateness of its own initiatives (as is made clear in the Interim report on an EU Strategic Partnership with the Mediterranean and the Middle East, presented to the European Council, 25 March 2004). In doing so, the European Union and its member states have 'rediscovered' the virtues of the Barcelona process and expressed renewed self-confidence towards their policies for the region. Given that the measures in the social, political and economic fields within the GMEI will be quite similar to some activities within the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership, many Europeans have come to the conclusion that the Barcelona process was the right course of action after all.
5. Another issue debated during the seminar was the role and leverage of external actors in the process of transforming the Middle East region. Bearing in mind the complexity and scope of the issues at stake, external actors only have limited influence and capacity. While they can promote political change, the main drive for this change should come from within. Local actors have a crucial role to play, and external actors should support political forces in the region that are ready to engage in democratisation processes. It was underlined that potential for change does exist in the region. For instance, local moderates are the best placed to confront radical Islamism. It must be also remembered that secular and democratic traditions are present in the Arab world: the widespread idea that it is a backward, hopeless region, incapable of acceding to democracy, is misleading.
6. In connection with the role of external actors, the financial packages assigned to the respective initiatives were also discussed. Most European participants backed the idea of increasing the funds allocated to the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership. Some participants suggested that the EU should focus on specific objectives, such as political and social development in Morocco. The American GMEI – it was mentioned – will probably have a very limited budget (about one tenth of the EU funds, even though it is very difficult to make a comparison for the time being). It can be questioned, therefore, whether the GMEI would have a substantial impact on the region's transformation.

7. At a time when the appropriate transatlantic synergy for dealing with the Middle East region is being defined, some positive elements and some obstacles are evident. On the one hand, without any doubt there are common transatlantic interests in the region: the fight against terrorism, oil supplies, non-proliferation, democratic transition in the Arab world, resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and Iraq's stabilisation. Cooperation between the Americans and the Europeans would be the best way to tackle all these challenges. For the moment, those common interests allow for possible common action on specific issues, such as Iran. On the other hand, however, dialogue between the transatlantic allies on Middle East issues has become very difficult following the Iraq crisis and misunderstandings regarding the Israeli-Palestinian dispute. Despite rather superficial agreement on those two issues that has been reached in the recent past and will be announced in the coming weeks, transatlantic cooperation on the Middle East is not working satisfactorily. As a result, parallel American and European initiatives for the region will be presented during June 2004, and coordination between them will be rather cosmetic.
8. 'Wait until the November US presidential elections' was one of the phrases most heard at the conclusion of the seminar. The current stalemate in transatlantic cooperation on Middle East issues cannot be overcome in the months before the American elections. After those elections, a new window of opportunity will open. At least, the long-term foreign policy of the new U.S. administration will have to be defined and known. Be it a re-elected President George W. Bush or President John Kerry, the new American government will have to define a clearer policy for the Middle East region. This policy could, then, break the ground for renewed transatlantic dialogue on this vital region. More ambitious joint 'triangular' (US-EU-Middle East) projects for peace-building, and even region-building, might be possible after November 2004.

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