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Israel-Palestine: The Dispute at a Crossroads

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Bearing in mind recent political developments in the Middle East, the Institute organised this seminar in Paris on 3 April. Its purpose was twofold: analyse the new political environment following elections in Israel and the Palestinian territories, and reflect on possible courses of action for the European Union as an external actor that has declared support for a peaceful resolution of the dispute. Some Israeli and Palestinian experts were invited to share their views with European academics, diplomats and EU officials.

First session: Following the Israeli and Palestinian elections: what next?

Three main subjects dominated the debate:

1. Unilateralism on both sides. The incoming Kadima-led government will probably first focus on economic and social issues, and then it will take a unilateral stance on relations with the Palestinians. Unilateral Israeli disengagement of parts of the West Bank and border demarcation are the most likely developments. Following a decade of frustrating negotiations, Israel is no longer looking for a responsible partner. From an Israeli point of view, the experience shows that (a) there is no prospect for peaceful agreement by negotiations and (b) there is no prospect of maintaining occupation. The unilateral path is, therefore, the only way out, which will not result in a two-state solution but rather will lead to a 'two-state situation'.

Palestinian participants in the seminar pointed out that Palestinian unilateralism is a logic consequence of Israel's unilateralism. In the latest elections, Palestinians have decided to support Hamas for two reasons: they were fed up with malfunctions of the previous government and they thought Hamas's tough attitudes were the best manner to dealing with Israel. The end of diplomacy and unilateralism on the Israeli side – some participants argued – has triggered further radicalisation of the Palestinian society.

2. Urgency of the situation in the Palestinian territories. A European speaker said that the fact that Fatah and Hamas had not reached an agreement to form a coalition government made the political situation quite unstable. In addition, the Palestinian territories are not viable from the economic point of view and difficult access to resources, to basic needs such as education and health as well as mounting poverty may provoke a humanitarian crisis. Some participants underlined that the Israeli occupation and the 'security wall' were contributing to a worsening of the situation. External aid was necessary to support the Palestinian administration, and a question on what Israel intended to do with unpaid Palestinian taxes and custom duties (about 50 million US dollars per month) remained unanswered.
3. Will Hamas moderate its agenda? Participants were split on this point. Some suggested that Hamas has abandoned neither its objective of destroying Israel nor its terrorist methods. The EU should, thus, stick to conditions imposed on Hamas, namely recognise the existence of Israel, renounce to violence and respect the existing peace accords. One participant said that Islamic regimes have demonstrated that they represent a danger to international peace and security in Afghanistan, Iran and Sudan. In contrast, other participants argued that Hamas actually is an agglomeration of interests and political strands, not a monolithic bloc. Hamas will change and become more moderate, and will endorse the Arab Peace Initiative of March 2002. Equally, it was suggested that Hamas will eventually appear as a model of 'enlightened Islamist values', evolving along the lines of Turkey's Justice and Development Party.

Second session: Structural and contextual factors: understanding the drivers for peace and conflict

The central issue in this session was expansion of democracy in the Middle East and possible Western responses to it. One European expert clearly stated that democratisation was the best formula to resolve disputes in the Middle East region in the long run, including the Israel-Palestinian dispute, and the European Union should stand ready to accept the consequences of democratic changes. The American and European efforts to promote democracy in the region are less relevant than the peoples' desire to change their political systems. In democratic elections, the majority will surely vote for anti-Western governments, but the EU and its member states are better placed than the United States to 'digest' those governments as well as their more assertive foreign policies. The EU – this argument concluded – should be consistent with its declared strategy of supporting democracy also in the Middle East.

Another participant described the Israeli perception as being increasingly surrounded by Islamist forces. Taking into account the Iranian threat, Hizbollah's threat, the ongoing crisis in Iraq and the increasing power of Islamist parties in other countries – for instance, Egypt – Israel should impede Hamas' success in the Palestinian territories. Otherwise, Islamists elsewhere will be encouraged. Some participants replied that, given the demographic trends in the region and the unstoppable democratic tide, it was in Israel's interest to reach an agreement on the Israeli-Palestinian dispute in order to ensure peaceful co-existence in the future.

Another controversial issue was whether the Israeli-Palestinian dispute is in a *déjà vu* state of affairs or we are confronting a new situation. A majority of participants joined the ‘new situation’ school of thought. The Gaza disengagement plan of August 2005 and the result of the latest elections suggest that large parts of the Israeli society have renounced to the most ambitious version of the ‘Greater Israel’ project. On the Palestinian side, Hamas’ ceasefire, respected since March 2005, might imply that the new government is *de facto* ready to put on hold violence as the main method of dealing with Israel. As a result, a ray of optimism, however dim, stems from the fact that both parties seem to have adopted a more pragmatic approach.

Third session: The potential role of the European Union

European participants made an overall negative assessment of EU policies towards the Israeli-Palestinian issue in the last twelve months or so. ‘Lack of coherent EU policy’, ‘frustration’, ‘damaging repercussion on CFSP’ were some of the expressions used. The fact that the EU member states Heads of Mission report on East Jerusalem was not published at the end of 2005, but was leaked to the press, or the fact that a letter from James Wolfensohn, the Quartet’s special envoy, criticising Israel’s obstacles to Gaza’s development in October 2005, was also leaked were quoted as two examples of European passivity. One speaker said that the European approach, which put the accent in negotiations and damage-limitation had been accompanied by expanding settlements, weakened Israeli security, worsening Palestinian economy and Hamas’s arrival to power.

The real issue is whether the European Union should accept *faits accomplis* or stick to principles. Participants were divided on this, for some said that it was impossible to reverse realities on the ground, while others remembered that the EU was consistently engaged with principles, even in the most contentious disputes. Towards the end of the seminar, many voices proposed that the best solution to this dilemma was constructive ambiguity, already practiced by the EU, in order to show flexibility and allow for a compromise between the status quo and principles.

Most participants suggested that the Quartet and its Roadmap were no longer at the centre of the debate. The role of external actors in the dispute has been diminishing at least since 2000. One European expert said that, given the political difficulties of President Bush’s Administration both domestically and in Iraq, the United States will not be in a position to make efforts towards a resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian dispute in the coming months and years. Neither will be the European Union, for different reasons – notably its internal divisions and lack of assertiveness in this issue.

An interesting debate on how the EU should deal with Hamas took place. Most participants favoured intensification of contacts with Hamas, on the grounds that we should pay attention at ‘what they do, not what they say’, and that, on other occasions, European governments have made contacts with violent groups in order to persuade them to change their tactics. However, many insisted on the need for maintaining conditions. In addition to the EU’s declared three conditions – it was argued – the Europeans should also make clear that good governance, respect for the rule of law, human rights and liberties and the status of women are essential. On the other hand, some participants said that aid from the European Union should not be interrupted, in order to avoid chaos in the Palestinian territories, and should focus on health and

education. One participant said explicitly that the Arab public would interpret the suspension of the EU's aid to a democratically elected Palestinian Authority as 'sanctions' and would criticise this decision as based on 'double standards'

Finally, most participants supported a bigger European involvement in the dispute. One European expert suggested that the European Union should give assurances to both parties: it should declare that it is ready to defend Israel, and guarantee continued aid to the Palestinians. In addition to the current ESDP operations to support the Palestinian police and to supervise the Rafah border crossing, the Commission should also support other administrative tasks of the Palestinian Authority, another participant proposed. A minority, though, pointed out that, as regards the political aspects of the dispute, European declarations and deeds would have no impact whatsoever on Israel.

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