

Franco-British Council

**French and British views of
the situation in the
Middle East**

Report of a seminar held in Paris

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French and British views of the situation in the Middle East

1. Crisis in the Middle East

Opening the debate, the chairman of the seminar, M. Jean François-Poncet, reminded participants of the contradictory analyses running through the discussions of the Middle East situation. Noting that it was impossible to examine the present situation without reference to the events of 11 September 2001, he recalled that in his first statements Bin Laden had made no mention of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, but had confined himself to attacking the imperialism of the Americans and demanding their departure from the 'sacred soil' of Saudi Arabia. Nevertheless observers have perceived a link between the Middle Eastern crisis and the attack on the Twin Towers, even if not an explicit one. And immediately after the success of the operation in Afghanistan, a resumption of negotiations between Israelis and Palestinians had been expected. But Sharon was not prepared for that. He took advantage of the situation to equate the Al Qaeda and Palestinian terrorism and to argue for a recourse to force, drawing America in his wake.

The result has not been convincing. On the contrary, terrorism in the shape of suicide bombers has spread. Was this what Sharon wanted? Attacks have increased, including those outside the main areas of confrontation, for example in Djerba. Is there not a risk that spiralling violence will draw the United States in even further in Iraq or elsewhere? This would be a worrying development.

The following questions arise:

- 1) Is it possible to eradicate terrorism by force?
- 2) What is Arafat's political future?
- 3) What about fundamentalism?
- 4) What will happen in Iraq?

In response to these introductory questions, a speaker attributed the dangerous situation to three separate but interlocking crises, which had come to a head in a tense politico-religious context. They were the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Iraq, and international terrorism. An added problem was the American policy of unilateral intervention in these three crises. At the same time the governments of the region, including that of Israel, are proving incapable of settling their problems. Yet the two-state solution is known to be a possibility. The Taba accord offers a framework to move forward, including on the issue of Jerusalem. Faced with this, President Bush expressed contradictory views on the Palestinian state and on the departure of Arafat, without proposing a solution.

Meanwhile, terrorism is leading to a radicalisation of the conflict. The principal states in the region have different objectives. Egypt can neither

oppose nor align itself with the United States. Iraq is seeking to rejoin the Arab world. Saudi Arabia needs America, but does not want to be dragged along in its wake. Turkey has to deal with the Kurdish problem. Iran might play a stabilising role in the region. But in that case why classify it as a 'rogue state'? Finally, Russia has returned to the region but without having decided its policy.

According to one speaker, the role of Islam has been overstated in comparison with the nationalism of several of the protagonists. Al Qaeda represents a radical Islamism which has a place in the politics of the states, but which targets the existing system, regimes and leaders. It represents an extremism which rarely manifests itself in the Islam of the Middle East, and whose supporters have become radical in the West. In these conditions, Bin Laden cannot wield much influence in Middle Eastern affairs, the defining characteristics of which are the product of Arab nationalism. The states of the region are threatened by the absence of negotiations since the Oslo accords.

This interpretation was upheld by another speaker who emphasised that the existence of Al Qaeda allowed an enemy to be identified, and thus simplified choices. American policy had hardened and become more radical. It would be advisable for Britain to change its approach and move closer to France, otherwise there will be no European policy in the region. At most Tony Blair could be said to be distancing himself somewhat from George W Bush on the action to take with regard to Iraq.

But could Europe have a different stance from the Americans and remain credible? It could be said to be desirable for the EU to become more active and have more of a presence in the region, but this must not involve hostility towards the United States. It is advisable to establish a partnership if one wants to influence the course of events. Surely there are positive elements in the statements of President Bush which were taken up in the Seville Declaration? Only the United States can translate these principles into actions.

Moreover, said another speaker, what other explanation could there be for the appeals from Europe to the American government to become more involved in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict? There has been a change of attitude on the part of the new French government, which admits some complementarity between the American and French positions.

Can one look at the crisis in the Middle East without relating it to the events of 11 September? Without the attack on the Twin Towers, Sharon's action might not have been possible, because of the opposition of international opinion. 11 September silenced many in Israel and elsewhere who disapprove of Sharon's policies.

Meanwhile, there has been a worsening of the situation in the Middle East, which might have tragic consequences. A few weeks ago a meeting of the Quartet (the USA, Russia, the EU and the UN) was able to give grounds for

hope of pressure from the international community. This is no longer true; the Quartet is marginalized. The possibility of the two-state solution is receding. The likelihood of a military solution is increasing, and the political horizon is darkening. The hawks are dominant in both camps, as can be seen on the ground.

This pessimistic view does not shake the conviction of those who think that Al Qaeda could not be assimilated into any form of Palestinian nationalism. Al Qaeda does not have its roots in the same soil. Islamism is a global phenomenon dating back to the fall of the Ottoman Empire. The nature of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is nationalist and political, much more than religious. Moreover, the destabilising nature of this Israeli-Palestinian crisis for the Middle East is overestimated. Many Muslim states, from the Gulf to Morocco, are quite stable.

Several speakers underlined the reasons, as much historic as political, why France and Britain ought to play a role in this part of the world. The Europeans, and especially the British, might make a useful contribution to the debate in Washington.

Terrorism has an ambiguous nature. On the one hand it justifies Sharon's policy, and helps to reinforce his position. On the other hand the great states of the region are seizing the opportunity to legitimise their repressive policies.

One speaker bore witness to the gravity of the local situation in describing the mutual incomprehension of the protagonists, which leads only to violence. The only solution left would be to put an end to the occupation of the "territories".

From this very open exchange of views, the impression was given that for a large majority of the delegates there is a clear link between the 11th September attacks and the radicalisation of the policies of Ariel Sharon and of the intifada.

Terrorism strengthens the position of the hard-liners of the two countries. It is doubtful that it can be possible to eradicate it by force.

2. Public opinion

At the beginning of the second session a speaker emphasised that if Bin Laden is perceived in the Arab world, especially among the young, as a hero, a sort of Robin Hood, his acts did not mobilise people to political action. At most the result was an escalation of the intifada and the suicide attacks, generally approved by religious leaders, but with negative consequences for the image of Palestinians in the eyes of the world.

What is notable about Europe for those in the Middle East is its effort to distance itself from the United States, the latter being generally criticised for unflinchingly sympathising with Israel. American policy seems to consist in wanting to involve the Middle East in a virtuous circle, after a change of

direction and of leadership in Palestine and Iraq. A sector of American public opinion supports this policy.

Taking a historical perspective, one speaker drew attention to the shift in European opinion on this conflict: thirty-five years ago an Israeli David confronted an Arab Goliath and could count on the sympathy of Europe. There has been a change in favour of the Arabs due to the conflict, the attitude of America, that of the Vatican and of public opinion, shocked by pictures of the repression of the intifada. Since the second intifada the war of words and images has been lost by Israel.

The gap between America and Europe is getting wider. The Americans see the crisis through the prism of 11 September. Washington is worried about Iraq, and this feeling is encouraged by Israel and by the lobby of the American military-industrial complex. There is also the question of Arafat, who Europe still considers a legitimate representative of his people.

There is another gulf, this time between the French and the British on the problems of weapons of mass destruction, terrorism and the 'pax Americana', considered in France to lack legitimacy. Is the French attitude determined by the fact that about 5% of her population are Muslims? What is the reason for the upsurge in anti-Semitic acts? The presence of the two largest communities of Muslims and Jews in Europe heightens awareness of the problem in France.

Next the problem of Iraq was discussed. How should one intervene against Saddam Hussein? What would be the consequences of ousting him? Would Iraq not risk dismemberment? What is the meaning of 'weapons of mass destruction' with which Iraq is said to be seeking to arm itself? An expert stressed that in the present circumstances the chemical weapon could not be regarded as a weapon of mass destruction. There remains the nuclear weapon, but in this field the inspections were followed up, and what needed to be destroyed has been. So why proceed to 'pre-emptive' strikes? Would they be justified? Would world opinion tolerate them?

To carry out the military option against Iraq would require the presence of 250 000 men on the ground, who would have to be pre-positioned in Turkey and Saudi Arabia. It was known that the governments of these two countries were not currently inclined to accept this. Also, American stocks of "intelligent" weapons would have to be built up again, as they have been used massively in Afghanistan. All this does not favour an early intervention.

As regards the 'ethical' nature of a military intervention, a speaker asked whether it was normal to apply a double standard to situations which are broadly comparable. Why bomb Yugoslav tanks in Kosovo in the name of the law and not do the same to the tanks of the Tsahal (Israeli defence forces) in Gaza or the West Bank? Yet the 'ethical' political line has been around for thirty years: there have been enough UN resolutions to say what is just. But little has been achieved which conforms to the UN line.

In their unwillingness to get involved in a conflict with Iraq, the Turks and the Saudis are motivated not by 'ethical' but by political considerations. They see a risk that Iraq might come under Shiite domination, move closer to Iran, and threaten their political, economic and strategic interests.

The economic aspect of the crisis is important: poverty is on the increase, the population is growing, and despair is widespread. People expected concrete measures, but none were taken. Oil might cease to be such a great asset. Economic reforms cannot be delayed, particularly now that the safety valve that used to be provided by emigration will also be shut off.

One of the paradoxes of the situation created by 11 September is that authoritarian régimes have been strengthened by the crisis, whereas human rights activists have had to adopt a low profile. An American armed intervention against Iraq cannot be ruled out. One cannot exclude the risk of failure, and of making a hero out of Saddam Hussein, who has up to now been a controversial figure in the Middle East. After all, the war in Afghanistan is not over.

If the Israeli-Palestinian crisis is at the heart of the situation in the region, if it is used as an excuse by Arab regimes to postpone reforms, if it justifies authoritarian postures, the departure of Saddam Hussein would also have serious consequences. The geopolitics of oil would be affected and perhaps, with its abundant reserves, Iraq post-Saddam would be the first to benefit from international investments, thus strengthening its position in the Middle East.

But will demand for oil continue to increase? Some factors would suggest an increase in supply. These are the improvement in pumping technique, especially off-shore; the fall of the USSR and the arrival on the market of large quantities of Russian oil; and finally the security of supply ensured by the United States, but also by Russia and China. Other factors are linked to an increase in demand from emerging states, and the fact that oil is not really threatened by gas.

At the end of this session a consensus seemed to recognise that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was central to public opinion. While the terrorist acts of suicide bombers move Israeli public opinion even further right than Sharon, the Arab regimes use it as an excuse to refuse reforms and consolidate their authoritarianism.

An American intervention in Iraq was the subject of contradictory forecasts. It was argued (without contradiction) that justification on purely military grounds, such as the building up of an arsenal of weapons of mass destruction, was open to question. It was stressed that the departure of Saddam Hussein would raise many problems concerning the unity of the country and the balance of power in the region. Other speakers judged that the operation could be performed without major risk.

3. The Franco-British contribution to the making of European policy in the region

The third session dealt with French and British views on the settlement of the conflict, which in the past had shown more divergence than convergence. Throughout the history of European interest in this region, the French and the British had usually competed rather than co-operated. However, agreement had occurred, as shown by the Sykes-Picot accords which divided up the remains of the former Ottoman Empire in the Arab world, or at the time of Suez when Britain and France intervened against Nasser. An American President put an end to this latter venture. More recently the two countries participated alongside the United States in the Gulf War, and in taking measures for the disarmament of Iraq.

The experience of the French and the British has certainly been useful in defining a common European attitude towards the Middle Eastern crisis, as witnessed by the Declaration of Venice. However, this is not such a determining influence as in the past. Germany and Italy now play an important role in the region, particularly in Iran, as Spain does in North Africa. With European policy becoming more active, the experience and the extensive knowledge of the UK and France make them the essential European partners. Their action is more effective if it is carried out in close partnership with the United States, whether in the Security Council, within the Quartet, or in other bodies.

This historical note served as an introduction to an analysis of the reasons for acting together now. This is necessary because the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is central to political, economic and ethical questions. It concerns the French and the British because it is at the heart of the transatlantic relationship.

Having voted for the creation of the Jewish State in 1948, the two countries have a historic responsibility, which has become a current preoccupation. It is necessary to go beyond national policy to find a European position, which is the only way to transcend past oppositions and differences.

Europe's mission must be to show, by its own example as well as in other ways, that there is an alternative to despair. Europe must firmly reject extremism on both sides, and encourage the moderates. It is fortunate that some Palestinians condemn 'human bombs', and others admit that they must renounce the absolute right of return of refugees. On their side, 54% of Israelis are ready to accept a return to the borders of 1967 and to discuss the problem of the occupied territories. In other words, the Palestinians must be freed from humiliation and the Israelis from fear. Is it utopian to think that Europe might guarantee an accord?

This vision of the future met with general approval. The United States needs Europe, but Europe must act with the US, not against it.

A speaker stressed that Europe is not without the means to place economic pressure on Israel, though it was difficult to imagine sanctions being applied. Encouraging the moderates also means taking account of the needs of the Israelis in matters of security, bearing in mind that since 1995 the Israeli army has lost its total superiority.

As a concrete measure, one speaker, recalling some of Europe's successes, for example in Bosnia, suggested inviting Israel to make a positive choice: to achieve peace by leaving the occupied territories and accepting the creation of a Palestinian state.

If the moderates were indeed to be encouraged, it must be understood that one must negotiate with the Palestinians, not just the Israelis. Pressure must be applied to the Jewish State. Also the Americans must guard against unilateralism.

One speaker insisted the Americans be made to understand that there is no tenable military solution. Peace proposals must be based on the recognition of the two states and guarantees for the Palestinian state. Europe might do more for the refugees, improve the association of the two states with the European Union, encourage Palestinian regional structures, and encourage civil society in the Arab states to open up to civil society in Israel. It was also suggested that certain actions, such as those carried out by combat helicopters, should be outlawed, and that no encouragement should be given to suicide commandoes. It was proposed to ask the Israelis to equip themselves with specialist forces for crowd control and not to commit brutal reprisals.

In conclusion, it was said that since the new French government was at the early stages of its relationship with the United States, perhaps the time had come for the British to act without complexes but also without preconceptions, throwing all their weight into the debate to breathe new life into the peace process.

At the end of this session there was a consensus that it was desirable for the French and British views to move closer together. But it was emphasised that this must not be a question of Franco-British rapprochement exclusively, but must lead on to a real European policy taking account of the positions of Germany and Italy in particular. This policy could only be conceived of as complementary to American policy.

Delegates to the seminar were pleased to recognise that Europe could and must play a role in offering guarantees and integrating the economy of the region into the world economy. They emphasised the centrality of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict for the Middle East and for transatlantic relations.

4. Conclusions

Taking place, as it did, a few days after the speech in which the President of the United States invited the Palestinian people to force Yasser Arafat to

step down, the seminar allowed a measure to be taken of the broad consensus among the representatives of the two countries who participated. This consensus is based on the recognition of the historical responsibilities of France and Britain, which seemed to require them to seek a common point of view.

In spite of their past experiences or because of them, the French and the British wanted to give their action a European framework to make it clear that they were embarking on a new chapter in their attitude to the Middle East. Although there were several speakers who implicitly criticised American policy, the majority reminded the group that European action could only be appropriate and useful if it was complementary to that of the United States, and not an alternative. Besides, surely the point of a European position was to encourage Washington to adopt a more "balanced" position? What better chance had Europe of playing a role than through dialogue with the United States? This was probably why some delegates called upon Tony Blair to make use of his influence in Washington to promote a solution using the Declaration of Seville as a basis for negotiation.

The Israeli-Palestinian crisis is central to all the region's problems. Peace will only return to the region with a solution of the conflict. It is becoming more urgent every day to achieve peace, for the peoples involved and for international stability in general. The continuation of the crisis will result in a worsening of its political, human and ethical aspects, and jeopardise transatlantic relations themselves.

The issue of Iraq and the departure of Saddam Hussein were debated. Whilst delegates were not all convinced of the potential threat of weapons of mass destruction, the risk of causing unrest in the region was also not confirmed, but neither was it totally discounted. There was no advocate for the cause of Saddam Hussein, and his departure did not seem likely to lead to a disaster. But would a possible American military operation help to solve the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians?

Participants were attentive to comments on the need to restore dignity to the Palestinians, and the Israelis' right to security. But absolute security for one state means insecurity for others, and absolute justice for one state might mean injustice for all. Would it not be right for the Israelis to rise above their fundamental anxieties, and for the Palestinians to assimilate this fear felt by the Israelis into their thinking?

As stipulated in the Seville Declaration, the way to peace is through the withdrawal of Israeli forces from the occupied territories, and the creation of a Palestinian state. Although there was no unanimity on the choice of the means to achieve this, the need for an international conference and the granting of serious guarantees to the Israeli and Palestinian states were recognised.

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PROGRAMME**Tuesday 2 July****1445 Welcome and Introduction** by Jean François-Poncet**1500 Session 1 : Crisis in the Middle East***Introduced by Professor Timothy Niblock and Olivier Roy*

- Current situation
 - historical and religious context
 - Israeli-Palestinian conflict : its central role and repercussions in the region
 - the problem of Iraq
 - role of Islamism in the region
 - terrorism; causes and consequences
- Rivalry and the search for a new balance of power
 - role of the principle states in the region (Egypt, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Iran, Pakistan ...)
 - Geostrategic interests of the United States, Russia and Europe

1530 Discussion**1800 End of session****Wednesday 3 July****0930 Session 2 : Public opinion***Introduced by Gilles Kepel and Paul Taylor*

- How different sectors of the French and British public view
 - historical, political and oil interests
 - the Israeli-Palestinian conflict
- How public opinion in the Middle East sees the role of the EU
- How American public opinion sees the problems in the area ; priority given to the fight against terrorism; American views of the role of Europe in this context

1000 Discussion**1130 Discussion continued****1415 Session 3 : The Franco-British contribution to the making of European policy in the region***Introduced by Edward Chaplin and Dominique Moïsi*

- French and British approaches the Middle
- the position of the other principal European partners
- role of the European Union; the concept of intervention in partnership with the UN
- the search for common Franco-British positions which might facilitate the definition of European policy in the region

1500 Discussion**1700 Close**