

FROM DIVERGENT VIEWS TO A COMMON POLICY: U.S. AND EU APPROACHES TO PROMOTING DEMOCRATIZATION IN THE MIDDLE EAST

The transatlantic “Partnership for Progress and a Common Future with the Region of the Broader Middle East and North Africa” (BMENA) bears the potential to revolutionize Western policies towards the Middle East. However, the chances that BMENA will gain touch with reality are very low if Palestinians are not granted the right of self-determination. This article examines the conflict between Israel and Palestine in its relevance for the policy approaches of the U.S. and the EU towards the Middle East.

Martin Beck^{*}

^{*} Dr. Martin Beck is a Senior Fellow for Near Eastern Studies, German Institute for Middle East Studies, and Acting Professor for International Relations, Helmut Schmidt University, Hamburg, Germany.

Reflection on international relations in the Middle East has revealed that the success of Western policies in this region will require a durable peaceful resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. At the same time, there can be hardly any doubt that the conflict over Palestine, the roots of which can be traced back to the late 19th century, escalated in the course of the previous century. No less than five inter-state wars were fought between Israel and its Arab neighbors between 1948 and 1982. Also after Israel's invasion of Lebanon in 1982, the Palestinian territories occupied by Israel in 1967 — East Jerusalem, the West Bank and the Gaza Strip — remained a major source of tension. Even two peace treaties made by Israel with Egypt (1979) and Jordan (1994) as well as the Oslo Peace Process (1993) did not bring any progress towards a comprehensive peace in the Middle East.

Thus, given the configuration described above, Western policy towards the Middle East cannot be evaluated as a success. This assessment, which meets the actual appraisal of many scholars of international relations, can be substantiated by other major issues related to Western policies towards the Middle East such as the terror attacks of 11 September 2001, and the difficulties of restructuring a functioning state apparatus in Afghanistan. However, there are also counter-arguments. For instance, one of the major goals of Western policies towards the Middle East was achieved in the last century: the stabilization of the state of Israel. Moreover, there have been no other major turbulences in international oil politics since the 1970s OPEC crisis. The conclusion to be drawn from these findings is that the evaluation of Western policies towards the Middle East as a failure is apparently based on a contentious criterion.

In political circles, the view that peaceful regulation of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is a precondition for a constructive and successful Western policy towards the Middle East in general is widely shared by the European Union (EU). Although the U.S. is interested in peace between Israel and the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), it can be argued that this goal never obtained priority on Washington's agenda. This article aims at examining why and how tensions grew between the U.S. and EU regarding their policies towards the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

The U.S. and the European foreign policy approaches towards the Middle East were shattered by the events of 11 September 2001. After an initial period of transatlantic solidarity, which became apparent in EU members' support or toleration, respectively, of the war in Afghanistan (2001), major "cracks in the West"¹ became apparent in the wake of Anglo-Saxon preparations for war against Iraq (2003). However, after victory over Saddam Hussain's regime, a new period of Western coordinated foreign policy towards the Middle East started. Most prominent among several schemes is the program to democratize the Middle East. After the U.S. had taken the initiative by launching the "Greater Middle East Initiative" (GMEI) in early 2004, it was transferred into a transatlantic "Partnership for Progress and a Common Future with the Region of the Broader Middle East and North Africa" (BMENA) in June 2004. After examining the chances and problems of BMENA in general and its meaning for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in particular, the article finishes with a summary.

¹ Peter Mayer, Volker Rittberger and Fariborz Zelli, *Cracks in the West? Reflections on the Transatlantic Relationship Today* (Tübingen: Tübinger Arbeitspapiere zur internationalen Politik und Friedensforschung, 2003), available at: <http://www.uni-tuebingen.de/uni/spi/taps/tap40a.pdf>, 6 June 2005.

The Approaches of the U.S. and the EU towards the Conflict over Palestine

After the Second World War, U.S. policies towards the Middle East were centered on oil interests, thereby focussing on the Gulf region. Although the US. gave some diplomatic as well as material support to Israel while the Jewish state was being established, it was Soviet backing rather than U.S. support that contributed to its survival. In the 1950s, arms deliveries from France were crucial for Israel's military apparatus and so-called German "reparations" stabilized its fiscal situation.

It was only in the 1960s, when the region composed of Israel and its Arab arbiters — the Near East — became a major location of the East-West Conflict. Due to region's involvement in this global conflict, the U.S. started to perceive it as an area of high strategic relevance. The then U.S. President John F. Kennedy terminated the U.S. tradition of restrictive arms exports towards the Near East in 1962. Yet, only after Israel's triumph in the Six-Day War of 1967 against Egypt and Syria, major Arab allies of the Soviet Union, did Washington decide to embark on a strong strategic alliance with Israel.

U.S. engagement with Israel, born out of strategic motives relating to power politics in the international system, helps to explain why the Israeli occupation of Palestine constituted an issue of only secondary relevance to the U.S. This does not mean, however, that the U.S. would not be interested in a peaceful regulation of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Rather, due to the widespread outrage among Arabs of all social strata in all Middle Eastern states caused by Israel's occupation of Palestine, the U.S. would definitely prefer to resolve the issue, thereby making cooperation of Arab regimes with the U.S. more likely. Yet, in the late 1960s, the U.S. had already established strong bilateral ties with the Gulf states. Moreover, in the early 1970s, the US Administration was ready to sacrifice the interests of "its" transnational oil companies, thus enabling the oil revolution which strengthened the Middle Eastern oil states. Thus, the well-established relations of the U.S. with strategic Arab actors, plus its high power capabilities, prevented the "Palestinian question" from obstructing U.S. interests in the Middle East.

The initial situation of the EU was totally different. Great Britain had been the unchallenged external power in the Middle East in the interwar period. Yet, when the U.S. created an international oil regime after World War II, Great Britain could only obtain the role of a junior partner. Also in the Near East, Great Britain and the second major European power - France- had to learn bitter lessons. When the traditional European powers and Israel decided to wage war on Egypt in 1956, Washington compelled the European-Israeli alliance to retreat. At the same time, the Suez War shed some light on the fact that Europe's behavior towards the Middle East was still patterned by its role as a colonial power in this period. France gave up its colonial project in Algeria only in 1962 and the British decision to retreat from east of Suez was not made until 1968.

Whereas the U.S. disposed of strong alliances both in the Gulf and the Near East in the early 1970s, the European powers had not only lost their influence but also their credibility in the eyes of the Arab actors. When, in the wake of the 1967 War, Israel took the chance to become a major ally of the U.S., Europe's strategic option was to embrace the "Palestinian question". Exempted from the colonial war in Algeria, then French President, Charles de Gaulle, seized this chance with great determination and switched from being the main supporter of Israel, which had won the war in 1967 mainly using French weapons, to its major critic in the Western camp.

Up to 1970, there was no such thing as a shared European policy towards the Middle East. Yet, with the establishment of the ‘European Political Cooperation’ (EPC) in 1971, the basic foundation of the common foreign policy of the EU was laid. In the following years, the development of a joint position towards Palestine became the focal point of the EPC. In 1980, the EU managed to shape history by releasing its Venice Declaration; however, the Europeans’ influence was confined to the level of declaratory politics, whereas the U.S. had proved able to change “real” history by mediating the Israeli-Egyptian peace just some months in advance.

Camp David and Venice

Under the patronage of the U.S., negotiations, which were held in Camp David in 1978, resulted in a peace treaty between the two adversaries that had waged four major wars against one another. By surprisingly offering to travel to Jerusalem, then Egyptian President, Anwar al-Sadat, paved the way to peace with Israel. However, the peace deal was rejected unanimously by the entire Arab world since Egypt was ready to leave the guard of the “front states” without wresting any of the Arab minimal concessions towards the Palestinians from the then Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin. In the ‘Framework for Peace in the Middle East,’ which aimed to deal with the Palestinian issue, the PLO was not even mentioned, although the Arab League in 1974 had agreed upon the role of this very actor as the only legitimate representative of the Palestinian people.

From the U.S. point of view, the peace treaty signed by Israel and Egypt in 1979, was a major strategic triumph. First, the alliance with Israel was consolidated. Secondly, Israel’s former arch enemy ceased to be in the Soviet camp. Even the Arab rejection of the peace treaty proved to be functional from the US perspective since no alternative was left to Cairo than to embark on stronger ties with the U.S. Thus, Camp David played a critical role in the East-West Conflict in the Near East. Consequently, although Carter had failed to convince Begin to make concessions in the conflict over Palestine, the benefits of the Israeli-Egyptian peace outweighed the costs by far from the U.S. perspective.

The Europeans, though, perceived the course and results of Camp David in a different way. Once again they experienced their powerlessness, and their options were confined to more or less outspoken criticism towards the Western superpower. At the same time, the Egyptian-Israeli bargain enabled them to further improve their relations with the Arab world. Thus, as the first actor outside the so-called Third World, the EU declared in Venice that the “Palestinian question” is qualitatively different from a mere refugee problem. Not only did the EU acknowledge the Palestinians as a people, but also demanded the PLO be integrated into negotiations on a comprehensive peace in the Middle East. Although it took the EU almost two more decades to meet the expectations of the Arab actors by openly declaring its recognition of the Palestinian right of statehood in Berlin 1999, the gap between it and the U.S. was obviously huge in 1980.

U.S. versus European Views on the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

The analysis presented above on the roots of the transatlantic tensions in Western policy towards the Near East reveals strategic reasons were behind the divergent policy approaches of the Western actors. There can hardly be any doubt that these strategic factors are still valid. On the one hand, the U.S. are for strategic reasons still interested in maintaining Israel as an ally. On the other hand, it is mainly due to the different positions that Europe and the U.S. have towards the Israeli occupation of Palestine that prevents widespread anti-Americanism in

the Middle East from becoming a general anti-Western attitude. However, there are also strong indicators that beyond strategic interests, the U.S.'s and EU's divergent views on the conflict over Palestine have become rigid and inflexible.

On May 12, 1977, Jimmy Carter referred to the American-Israeli alliance as a "special relationship"— a formula that has thereafter never been challenged by any U.S. administration.² Although the Israeli-American relations are far from being free of tension, they are truly special. Despite the fact that the U.S. occasionally put pressure on Israel to alter certain aspects of its occupation policy (with minor success in most cases), they have always avoided denying Israel's right to continue occupation as such.

Several factors have contributed to the transformation of the U.S.'s strategically motivated decision to ally with Israel to the development of a fixed perspective of it being a "special relationship". First, pro-Israeli actors in American society have proved to be rather influential. Second, the "rediscovery" of the holocaust by the American public in the 1970s facilitated a process according moral legitimacy to the U.S. support for Israel. Also the democratic polity of Israel made it easier for the U.S. Administration to receive social support for its policy in the Near East.

Not only the U.S. but also the EU has continuously stressed the aim to secure Israel's existence within safe borders. Yet, in the course of the 1970s and 1980s, the EU pointed out that this aim cannot to be played off against the Palestinian right of self-determination. Especially in comparison to the US policy towards the Near East, the declared policy of the EU towards the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is "very consistent."³ In the light of the oft-quoted weakness of the EU to find a common position in foreign affairs, this finding seems to be remarkable. Moreover, when the EPC started, the members of the EU were shaped by fairly different policy traditions and current positions towards the Near East. Therefore, it is not surprising that the EPC had to deal with significant start-up difficulties. Yet, on the basis of shared values, step by step, the EU members managed to get over their internal differences and to develop a fairly coherent declarative policy towards the Israeli-Palestinian conflict which managed to balance out the legitimate rights of Israel and the Palestinians. Thus, the EU countered the U.S. "special relationship" approach by adopting a policy of "fair balance."⁴

The development in the 1990s

By the 1980s, the diverging views held by the Europeans and Americans on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict were at their strongest. However, due to the EU's relative power inferiority, it could not openly compete with the U.S. for influence in the region. Nevertheless, in the 1990s the EU took advantage of its improved relations with the Arab world by launching its "European Mediterranean Partnership," which was initiated in November 1995. Further, a favourable pre-condition of renewed European efforts towards the Mediterranean area was the fact that in 1993 the Oslo Peace Process temporarily overshadowed the American-European divergence on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Mainly

² Bernard Reich, "The United States and Israel. The Nature of the Special Relationship," in David W. Lesch (ed.), *The Middle East and the United States. A Historical and Political Reassessment* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview, 1996), p.233.

³ Muriel Asseburg, "The EU and the Middle East Conflict. Tackling the Main Obstacle to Euro-Mediterranean Partnership," in Annette Jünemann (ed.), *Euro-Mediterranean Relations After September 11. International, Regional and Domestic Dynamics* (London: Frank Cass, 2004), p.183.

⁴ "Ausgewogenheit" in Annette Jünemann, *Italiens Nahostpolitik von 1980 bis 1990. Handlungsspielräume einer national eigenständigen Interessenpolitik unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der Achille-Lauro-Affäre* (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 1993), p.63.

this was because both the U.S. and Israel wanted to get the EU involved in the cost-intensive peace process that according to the West should facilitate firstly, the building of a liberal if not democratic Palestinian state, and, secondly, the provision of the Palestinian society with a peace dividend in order to strengthen support for the Oslo process within society.

The international community, including the EU, failed to accomplish both tasks. Despite heavy external donations, Palestinian society did not receive a peace dividend. Rather, the living standards in the Palestinian territories significantly declined in the 1990s; mainly because Israel established a closure policy inhibiting the mobility of Palestinian people and goods to Israel and inside the occupied territories. The continuation of major aspects of occupation, especially booming Israeli settlement activities, further exacerbated the negative reputation of the Oslo Process in Palestinian society. Although the international community was fairly successful in establishing an infrastructure run by a proto-state, the peace process could only be stabilized by tolerating an authoritarian regime headed by late President Yasser Arafat.⁵

When the peace process failed, as became manifest with the outbreak of *Al Aqsa Intifada* in September 2000 and the Israeli military reaction, the diverging Western views on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict became virulent once again. Due to the failure of his predecessor Bill Clinton to mediate a peace between Israel and the PLO, US President George W. Bush was hesitant to get involved in the conflict to the same degree. Instead, Bush focused his Middle Eastern agenda on Iraq. When the EU half-heartedly tried to put pressure on both parties in the Near East to resume negotiations, the U.S. largely adopted the Israeli perspective, as became apparent in June 2002 when President Bush declared that Israel should not be expected to go back to the negotiation table as long as President Arafat was in charge of Palestinian affairs. Since Arafat refused to relinquish any of what was left of his power, the peace process remained frozen until his death in November 2004. Although the EU had insisted on an external impetus for resuming the peace process, the so-called Quartet (U.S., EU, United Nations and Russia) established in 2002 did not achieve much more than the official release of the so-called "Road Map," whose impact on the ground has been insignificant to date. It remains to be seen whether the summit held in Sharm al-Shaikh on 8 February 2005, during which the Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon and the newly elected Palestinian President Mahmud Abbas agreed upon a mutual renunciation of force, will turn over a new leaf in the history of Israel and the PLO.

Towards a Common Transatlantic Strategy for Democratizing the Middle East?

In the last decade of the previous century, both the EU and the U.S. paid lip service to promoting a policy facilitating the worldwide spread of democratization. However, both actors actually pursued foreign policies whose basic principles contradicted the aim of democratizing the Middle East. The U.S. carried on favoring the creation and cultivation of strong bilateral ties with strategic authoritarian allies in the region. Although the EU in the framework of its Mediterranean dialogue was emphasizing the establishment of multilateral relations to a significantly higher degree than the U.S., even European policies targeting the Middle East were not appropriate to promoting democracies. Rather, the Middle Eastern policies both of the U.S. and the EU fostered the existing authoritarian regimes and structures. Therefore, *if* implemented, the BMENA would revolutionize the Western policy approaches towards the Middle East. Two questions arise from these findings: First, are there any

⁵ Martin Beck, "The External Dimension of Authoritarian Rule in Palestine," *Journal of International Relations and Development*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (2000), pp.47-66.

indicators that the game set in motion by releasing BMENA could be more than another round of lip service to the aim of democratizing the Middle East? Second, in what specific way are Western policies towards the Israel-Palestinian conflict relevant for BMENA?

The BMENA: A Promising Strategy for the Middle East?

Due to the huge gap between the lip service paid to promoting democracy and the actual policies pursued by the West in the past, widespread scepticism among scholars and the public in general about BMENA is understandable. However, past experience does not always determine the future, especially if general circumstances have been undergoing severe change. In the case under consideration, general conditions indeed have changed following the events of 11 September 2001, which came as a shock to the Western world. Since then, there are few doubts that transnational Islamist terrorism is one, if not the, major challenge for international security policies in the foreseeable future.

In the late 20th century, Western engagement towards democracy in the Middle East was motivated by the belief in the political superiority of a democracy in comparison to all other kinds of polities. Thus, in this period the egoistic self-interest of the West of democratizing the Middle East was fairly small since, according to the perspective held then, the main benefits would have been yielded by Arab societies. Yet, after the events of 11 September, the motivation behind BMENA has been totally different. The explicit reason for the Western actors to help establish democracies in the Middle East is determined by genuine security interests. According to the theorem of “Democratic Peace,” democracies refrain from waging war against each other.⁶ From a moral point of view, it would be preferable if actors in the international system would pursue their policies for moral, altruistic reasons. However, the likelihood of a policy program being implemented is, under the terms of the present international system, much higher if it is motivated by blunt self-interest.

However, even if the genuine interest of the West in promoting democracy in the Middle East favors the implementation of BMENA, the question whether such a program can be successful under the present circumstances in the Middle East still arises. To date, contrary to other world regions such as sub-Saharan Africa or East Asia, the Arab Middle East has been resistant to democratization. Yet, since the past does not always determine the future, it is necessary to explore why exactly the Middle East has resisted democracy in order to find out whether and how the circumstances that prevented the Arab Middle East from participating in the worldwide processes of democratization could be changed.

Why are there no democracies in the Middle East? In attempting to answer this question, some scholars cite the cultural approach, claiming that the main reason is that Islam as a cultural system does not lend itself to democratization. There is without any doubt a strong correlation between the two Islam and rejection of democracy since, with the exception of Turkey⁷ that has been undergoing a process of democratization since 1950; no Islamic country today has witnessed a durable process of democratization. But correlations are not explanations. Among the main problems of focusing on Islam in order to explain the lack of democracies in the Middle East are, that it is difficult to clearly define the term “Islam” because there are so many Islamic sub-cultures. Also, in attempting to provide an explanation there is a strong tendency to go round in circles: Islam is presented as a rigid or backward

⁶ Michael E. Brown, Sean M. Lynn-Jones and Steven E. Miller (eds.), *Debating the Democratic Peace* (Cambridge/Mass.: MIT Press, 1996).

⁷ Metin Heper, “The Consolidation of Democracy versus Democratization in Turkey,” in Barry Rubin and Metin Heper (eds.), *Political Parties in Turkey* (London: Frank Cass, 2002), p. 138.

cultural system that accounts for Middle Eastern resistance to structural change (e.g. democratization); at the same time, evidence of the “rigidity” or “backwardness” of the Middle East is very often based on factors derived from Islam. Thus, the scope of the cultural approach is limited by severe methodological problems.

Other explanations for the lack of democracies in the Middle East are based on factors which avoid the methodological problems of the cultural approach. The most convincing of these is the the Rentier State approach. Most states in the Middle East are recipients of rents, i.e. an income that does not accrue from labour or investment and, henceforth, is at the free disposal of the recipient. Obviously, the oil-producing countries are rentier states par excellence since the bulk of their income is the result of the gap between the low production costs of oil in the Middle East and cost-intensive oil production beyond, especially in Alaska and the North Sea. Moreover, most Arab oil-importing countries are rent recipients as well since their budgets are heavily subsidised by foreign aid donated by the Gulf states, the U.S. and/or the EU. A high rent share of the state budget has a profound impact on the relationship between the state and the society. Instead of being forced to (heavily) tax its citizens, a rentier state tends to subsidise strategic groups of the population by granting monopolies to the business sector, providing jobs for the urban middle classes in the public sector, subsidising bread for the urban poor etc. Consequently, the principle of the American War of Independence “no taxation without representation” is not effective.⁸

It is extremely difficult to change a cultural system. But since the analysis presented above ascertained that the (main) reason for the lack of democracies in the Middle East is structural rather than cultural, the chances of democratizing the countries in the region are in principle much higher. Although structural change is difficult to achieve, too, the prospects for success are much better for the following reasons: firstly, the factors inhibiting democratization are clearly identifiable, and, secondly, deeply rooted mentalities are not the issue.

Thus both the U.S. and the EU have a genuine interest in democratizing the Middle East, and Middle Eastern resistance to democracy is not rooted in cultural but in structural problems (which are, in principal, subject to change). Nevertheless, although effective democratization of the Middle East should not be ruled out per se, this aim is certainly difficult to achieve. The main reason for this is that neither the ruling elites of rentier states nor the main opposition groups in the Middle East have an intrinsic interest in establishing a democracy. Since state elites are the primary recipients of rent income in the Middle East, they are in a position to use their income in order to maintain their privileged setting in the political system. Moreover, also main opposition groups will not develop an ideology focussing on freedom, i.e. a liberal political program demanding the state’s non-interference in social issues and the prerogatives of the individual. Rather, oppositional ideologies in rentier states are based on the idea of distributional justice, i.e. a program demanding that the state allocate the rent income to groups that are or claim to be discriminated against. To put it in a nutshell, opposition groups in rentier states tend to demand a “fair” authoritarian state rather than a democratic polity. Thus, the strength of Islamist movements in the Arab political systems is not primarily a result of religious affiliations but inequality as a result of the discriminatory allocation policies of rentier states.

So, how is it possible to achieve “Democracy without Democrats?”⁹ A promising approach would be that Western donors of rents break with their history and take the opportunity to

⁸ Hazem Beblawi and Giacomo Luciani (eds.), *The Rentier State* (London: Croom Helm, 1987).

⁹ Ghassan Salamé (ed.), *Democracy without Democrats? The Renewal of Politics in the Muslim World* (London: IB Tauris, 1994).

establish a link between the donation of rents and democratization in the Middle East. Obviously, this approach is much more feasible in cases of states receiving political aid than in the cases of oil rentier states (unless the West starts to get serious about substituting oil as its primary source of energy). Yet, also in the cases of oil-producing countries, certain benefits such as military aid, preferential trade agreements and membership in prestigious international organizations could be linked to certain conditions promoting democratic change.

Now why should the non-democratic political elites of the Middle East commit political suicide by agreeing to the conditions that make the granting of political aid (or other benefits) dependent on their moving towards democratization? In other words, at first glance it would seem irrational for them to agree to pro-democracy measures even if they are in need of foreign aid. Yet, this is not necessarily true. Although there are some exceptionally hard cases such as Saudi Arabia and Libya, most regimes in the Middle East have shown that they are willing to implement far-reaching liberalization policies. While liberalization is not entirely equal to democratization, it may trigger the process leading to it. What motivates authoritarian regimes to liberalize their political and/or economic systems is the prospect of being able to manage political and economic crises. These occur periodically as a result of the inefficiencies of the rentier systems and the restrictions on participation in them. Thus, authoritarian elite that implements liberalizing measures does so with intentions that are in fact opposed to democratization. However, in a complex world even rational actors are not able to predict all the repercussions of their actions. For instance, democratization processes in Eastern Europe in the 1990s were predominantly the result of failed attempts to salvage authoritarian regimes. Moreover, such regimes were not always toppled by pro-democratic social forces. Of course, while strong democratic actors are an asset for establishing a democracy, they are neither essential nor sufficient in themselves. In many cases, democracies are the result of a “democratic pact” between moderate elements in both a non-democratic government and a non-democratic opposition.¹⁰ If these actors come to the conclusion that power-sharing is preferable to a fight for survival, with potentially dangerous implications for both sides, a democracy may be the outcome.

Thus, although democratization without democrats is possible, it is also obvious that it is difficult to achieve. Furthermore, to promote a process of democratization is also far from being risk-free. The theorem of democratic peace only holds true of democracies but not democratizing systems. Rather, aggressive authoritarian groups may take advantage of the dynamics and freedom induced by democratization processes. In other words, since a process of democratization does not necessarily result in a democracy, in the worst case external attempts to promote democracy do trigger growing insecurity rather than enhancing security.

Therefore, promoting democracy by implementing BMENA is only *one* option for the U.S. and the EU in order to enhance their security. Not surprisingly, the rationality of other recent American-European initiatives, especially NATO’s “Istanbul Cooperation Initiative,” are based on cooperation with existing regimes in the Middle East rather than democratization. The perspective of ICI is to combat Islamic fundamentalism by stabilizing authoritarian Arab regimes that are also targeted by Islamistic terrorism.¹¹ If successful, ICI would strengthen the apparatuses of authoritarian regimes in the Middle East. Yet, the deeper reasons behind the

¹⁰ Adam Przeworski, *Democracy and the Market. Political and Economic Reforms in Eastern Europe and Latin America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

¹¹ Martin Beck, “The Future Role of NATO in the Middle East. Five Scenarios,” in Jean Dufourcq and Laure Borgomano-Loup (eds.), *Looking to the Future. Common Security Interests and Challenges in the Mediterranean and the Middle East* (Rome: NATO Defense College, 2005), pp.67-73.

growth of Islamistic ideologies and violence would not be eliminated. Thus, from a rational point of view, the West has to deal with a trade-off between, firstly, a strategy with a nearly perfect outlook in the long run but dangerous implications in the short run (democratization), and, secondly, a strategy with an imperfect outlook in the long run but a less dangerous strategy in the short run (cooperation with authoritarian regimes in the Middle East).

BMENA and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

In the light of the Western initiative to democratize the Middle East, the Palestinian territories occupied by Israel are an especially interesting case. In comparison to other candidates of the Arab Middle East, democratic potentials are fairly well developed in Palestine. Firstly, prolonged occupation produced social resistance becoming manifest in a fairly strong civil society. Secondly, since contrary to all other Arab countries Palestine never witnessed a state considered legitimate, values of freedom, personal liberty and defensive rights vis-à-vis the state, i.e. the Israeli occupation regime, have become deeply embedded in the political culture. Thirdly, due to the financial dependence of the PLO and the Palestinian Authority created in the framework of the Oslo Peace Process, Western actors dispose on a particularly strong leverage point to promote democratization.

Since Palestine constitutes a comparatively promising case for establishing a democracy in the Arab Middle East, the question arises whether there are indicators that BMEI could dissolve the divergent views of the U.S. and the EU on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, thereby promoting democracy in this country. There can be hardly any doubt that, on the declaratory level, a tendency of harmonization between the U.S. and the EU is observable. Especially, BMENA assigns major prominence to a peaceful regulation of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict whereas the Palestinian issue was not even mentioned in GMEI. However, also the formulations agreed upon by the U.S. and the EU are flexible enough to be integrated into the divergent perspectives. Thus, it cannot be excluded that the Western actors once again fall into a trap as experienced in the 1990s: In the last decade of the previous century, the U.S. and the EU were torn between their aim of stabilizing the Near East and their goal to create a democratic Palestinian state. As has been argued above, mainly as a result of Israeli reluctance to terminate major elements of the occupation policy, the peace process turned to be very unpopular among Palestinians. When it became obvious that the aims of democratizing Palestine and stabilizing the Oslo peace process got increasingly incompatible, both the U.S. and the EU opted to go for the latter aim. Although the U.S. rediscovered the goal of democratizing Palestine again after the outbreak of *Al Aqsa Intifada*, Washington was not ready to tackle the problem of occupation by putting pressure on its major ally Israel in order to terminate occupation. At the same time, the EU proved to be unable to do more than to increase financial aid including the resumption of direct support for the authoritarian Palestinian Authority.

Conclusion

In the 1970s, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict became the focal point of rivalry Western policies towards the Middle East. When, in the light of the East-West conflict, the U.S. decided to establish close ties with Israel, the EU took advantage of the U.S. disregard of the "Palestinian question" by embracing this issue. Both policies were successful insofar as the U.S. decided the East-West Confrontation in the Near East ten years before it managed to do so on a global scale; the Europeans were able to improve their relations with the Arab world which by then was distorted by the legacy of European colonialism. At the same time, although transatlantic tensions on the dealing with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict grew, superior U.S. capabilities prevented an escalation and confined the success of the European Middle Eastern policy on the declaratory level.

Originally motivated by strategic motives, the different European-American perspectives on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict gradually transformed into fixed divergent views. The U.S. built a "special relationship" with Israel, whereas the EU cultivated a policy of "fair balance" towards the two conflict parties in the Near East. In the 1990s, the divergent perspectives were eclipsed by the common transatlantic interest in providing the Palestinians with a peace dividend whose financing the Europeans shared in. Yet, the terror attacks of 11 September 2001, shattered the fundamentals of both the U.S. and European policies towards the Middle East. When Anglo-Saxon war preparations towards Iraq were launched, transatlantic tensions grew up to a degree that cracks in the European-American relationship became obvious. Yet, after the war the U.S. and the EU attempted to develop common strategies towards the Middle East. Most prominent among transatlantic initiatives became the program of democratizing the Middle East. If implemented, BMENA would revolutionize both the American and European policy approaches towards the Middle East. Since 11 September, the West is genuinely interested in democratizing the Middle East which is why, on the one hand, the success of the initiative cannot be ruled out *per se*. However, the establishment of fully-fledged democracies in the Middle East is certainly a very difficult task to achieve. Therefore it cannot be excluded that BMENA just opened another round of paying lip service to the aim of external democracy promotion by the West.

Apparently, on the declaratory level, BMENA also overcame transatlantic tensions how to deal with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. By all means, the Western policy towards the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is crucial for the chances of success of BMENA. Without a regulation of the conflict over Palestine providing the Palestinian people with true self-determination, BMENA will hardly gain touch with reality. At the same time, basic conditions for democratization are better in Palestine than in any other Arab country. Thus, since democratic occupation is an oxymoron, an essential promotion of BMENA would be to terminate occupation. Yet, to date there are no strong indicators that the actors, especially the U.S., walk the talk.