

EuroArab Forum

PROMOTING INNOVATIVE AND INVENTIVE IDEAS

Event report

“After Obama’s Cairo speech and Iran’s elections: High time to act for Europe and the Arab World?”

25 June 2009, 20h00-21h30 at the „Cercle des Voyageurs”
(18, Rue des Grands Carmes)

Speakers

European perspective: **Rosa Balfour**, Senior Policy Analyst, European Policy Centre

Arab perspective: **Adel Atieh**, Counsellor, General Delegation of Palestine to the EU



I. Introduction

Alex: Though we chose the date and topic thinking that the result of the 2nd round of the Iranian elections would be known by now on the 25th of June the daily news coming from Iran show us that the result still is an open question. The West seems furthermore unsure how to react. A response by Europe seems even more important after the US president Obama gave his already famous speech in Cairo University on the 4th of June 2009. This speech gave new attention to the Arab League Peace Initiative of 2002.

The Euro Arab Forum likes to ask the present speakers the following questions:

To Rosa Balfour:

1. Are The Europeans following the initiative of Obama -who gave the speech- with something similar or something different?

2. The concept of the 'Union of the Mediterranean'. Where is it standing now and how far did it progress. Is it a tool for reaching out?

To Adel Atieh:

The Arab foreign ministers met recently. What was their reaction on Obama's speech and on the speech of Netanyahu (on the 14th of June 2009 in Bar Ilan University)

II. Keynote speeches

Rosa:

Obama dealt during the speech with a whole list of diverse issues. Of those democracy, the Palestine-issue and women's rights were important examples. Dealing with those issues two ideas were always central in his approach: where to situate the responsibility of the states or governments of the Islamic world. The other idea was more the role of the individual in all this and where his own rights and responsibilities played a role.

The major change of approach, according to me, is the fact that Obama gave so much attention to the rights of the individual. The right of each person to have his own vision about society, conviction... is, in a framework where visions seem to lack, 'an important vision anyway.'

President Obama dealt in his speech a lot with the idea of rights and responsibilities and he seemed willing to hold the US to account in view of its own (past) failings and continuous responsibilities. This view goes back to the pre-Bush ideas of partnership and dialogue. Since the US government takes this into account it seems only logical that other governments can be held to account likewise.

This would mean for the EU, since the EU is already since many years involved with the Middle East region and the Israel-Palestine conflict, the task to formulate a common foreign policy. For this speech challenges the EU again to come out with at least a similar approach than Obama. This is, to say the least, troublesome for the EU since it has often a problem in transforming its vision into a coordinated and practical external policy. This explains the waiting attitude of the European Union during the Bush years and now also in the months till the speech of president Obama.

Important for the EU in the speech was the partnership idea and the focus on dialogue initiatives (like the dialogue of the Mediterranean). Another important aspect was the attention Obama gave to rights and freedoms. For in the last years the EU seemed to be moving away from a policy which gave full attention to rights and freedoms. During the last years the European Union seems to deal mostly with top government officials in the Middle East.

This shows that the USA is maybe more innovative than the EU and that the EU keeps things mostly extremely technical and that it, as a consequence runs after events.

Adel:

One of the conclusions of Obama's speech is that the Israeli-Arab conflict constitutes a major obstacle between the Western World and the Middle East. Obama should not only mention this in words as he mentioned issues such as women's rights, human rights... but he should take concrete action as well.

The US president chose in the speech to talk with the public at large and as such he goes beyond the given alliances with the regimes. It shows that it understands the real needs of the people in the region.

As a Palestinian it is hard to be optimistic about any good outcome. For the Palestinians are always the first ones who are asked to change things or accept something at the outset of new realities. It is hard to believe that Obama will really change something. It is true that things are changing in the US but we need to see things changing on the ground. On the other hand the EU does not come out with any new declarations or policies coming yet. This could mean that the US administration finds itself alone and with a congress which is supportive of Netanyahu's political vision and no support among Middle Eastern regimes. This would mean that it is probable that Obama will turn back on his promises.

On the meeting of the Arab foreign ministers the officials requested that the EU would come out with something new (e.g. declare Jerusalem a shared capital to two states). But Netanyahu turned back this hopes. That while there is only one basic condition in the Arab Peace Initiative which is that in exchange for the normalization of relations between Arab countries and Israel that Israel should return to the green line. In order to give the Arab Peace Initiative ("which always can be taken off the table") a chance to work there should be a military embargo and trade restrictions imposed on Israel.

Europe has a big influence on Israel being its first trading partner. It could pressure them to stop settlement policies. It also clear

that without European help the US can not change things.

The Union of the Mediterranean and the Barcelona Process failed because of the upside down logic which says 'first recognize Israel and then we will discuss peace'. How can countries like Lebanon and Syria trade forcefully with Israel while parts of their territories are still under Israeli occupation?

Obama gave an important speech in a time when some individuals think in function of the clash of civilizations. There is a need for Obama though to build further on the perspectives/content of the speech. Netanyahu undid much of Obama's speech and Israel is not moving in the right direction. So Europeans have to push their respective governments.

III. Discussion and Q&A

Q (Olaf) Obama relies on giving the people more individual rights but the situation in Iran show the dynamic/threat (to governments) of individual initiative.

A (Adel) If Iran is central in the news it shows the extent of Israeli propaganda. How can a country that up till 1979 was such a good friend of Israel is considered now such a threat? Iran is not really an obstacle but has its geopolitical interests. The only real problem with Iran is its support for Hamas. The nuclear issue is only so much central in the media because Israel on one side and president Mahmoud Ahmedinejad on the other side talk so much about it.

Q (from Rosa) A real policy change in Iran might affect Hezbollah's standing because in such a case Israel cannot justify itself anymore in blaming its hard-line enemies as convenient 'rough elements'.

A (Adel) Hezbollah should not be resistance anymore after the occupation ends but a partner for peace. US policies are furthermore determined by Israeli viewpoints. Where is for example the relation between Iran's attempts to become

a nuclear power and the settlement policy while it is really clear that the insecurity of Israeli's is determined first and foremost by the settlement policies of the Israeli governments.

Q (for Rosa)

A (Rosa) A change in Iran will not really change things between Hezbollah and Israel. Obama, because of the way he got elected and his campaign got funded, is the president least connected to Israeli pressure groups. Within the EU there is no consensus on how to search peace.

Q (Olivier) Has the EU leverage? Not to buy Israeli or rise import taxes can start a trade war. It furthermore demands coordination which does not exist in the EU. The economic importance of the EU-Israeli relation (e.g. in IT advances) is just to big.

A (Adel) EU-Israel relations are a historic issue for Europe with which it did not come clean. The EU has means to put pressure on Israel (e.g. ratification of economic agreements) but it does not do it because of historic reasons. Some economic relations EU-Palestinian Territories are important also.

A (Hatim) Hatim is introduced as director general of the Ministry of Finance of the Palestinian authority. Israel and the EU are members of the WTO where there are rules according to which economic relations between the member states are organized. No change in the rules possible as such. What the EU can do is not allowing products from factories in settlements, have settlers with European (2nd) passports paying taxes in Europe, finally to implement a trade agreement which was passed in 1997. EU is upgrading relations with Israel (incentives attached to this) while the Palestinians are not offered a role and not have perspectives on the implementation of their own trade agreement with the EU. The Palestinians can furthermore not import nor export in any independent way.

Q (Francesco) It is getting harder for Palestinians to push their issues because the European politics are changing.

Q (Rosa) There is a general pessimism. Does Israel really care? They seem always to have the green light to do whatever they want.

A (Adel) It is important to be optimistic. Obama's speech was great and innovative on terminology. While the EU-Israel history is very varied the European institutions in recent times are very positive towards Israel.

A (Rosa) Leverage of EU on Israel is not big and EU is internally divided. Ideas launched are mostly about image and not about impact. Within the EU it is hard to tie economic realities to political pressure. When looking at the EU Neighborhood policy you can see no progress except for procedural elements. Furthermore all upgrades of relations with Israel are frozen.

A (Adel) I am optimistic about Palestinian independence one day. Collective efforts of people in Europe help the Palestinian case. Besides Israel was always rewarded with treaties even when building settlements while a country like Syria was punished for its presence in Lebanon. Why is Israel not punished? Why are Syria's political prisoners, rights abuses, weapons an issue and Israel's prisoners, weapons, war crimes not? Is that not double standards?

A (Hatim) It are all tactical issues and not strategic issues. Because for strategic issues actions are needed. Sanctions will have effect on Israel beside pushing the settlers with European passports that don't pay taxes in Europe or canceling the buying of Israel products from settlements.

Q (Iran prof.) Looking into the history of relations of Iran (military, economically...) what is the role of foreign interference in the events after the elections and what is the role of the media?

A (Rosa) There is always foreign interference (Lebanon, Ukraine...) and a role played by intelligence agencies. But the discourse that opposition voices are foreign meddling should be broken down and concrete indications given.

A (Adel) Please do not help the settlement industry for some international companies already do such as Dexia (bank), Volvo, Pizza Hut. EU should give the guaranties that no treaty with Israel should apply in the settlements or on institutions that are present in both (such as some educational institutions).

IV. Conclusions by the EuroArab Forum

While the aim of our event was to focus on possible European and Arab world reactions to Obama's speech and Iran's elections the discussion was focusing almost exclusively on the question of Palestine.

The EAF thinks that:

1. Europe could be more outspoken in support of Obama's policy and offer concrete areas where they would like to share work and responsibility.

2. The Arab World should relaunch the Arab Peace Initiative and attach a time frame to it to make it more urgent for the world to react. Also further incentives for Israel could be added that will be sponsored by the US and Europe.

3. The EU is missing charismatic figures such as Obama to make a comparable speech. Could it be done on the national level? By whom? How would Europe defines its relation and approach to the Arab World? (EU should play a credible and powerful key-role in the peace- and nation-building-process in this conflict- area and not just being an onlooker in the shadow of the US-Administration)

4. The EU and the Arab World are stuck in institutional and diplomatic bits and pieces rather than daring a fresh, innovative approach.

5. Based on Obama's speech the EU should propose support to the Arab World for a comprehensive institution/state building plan for Palestine.

Report by the EAF core team
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