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ISRAEL-PALESTINE

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What Is the Problem?

When a problem seems to have no solution, you do not try to find one. You change the nature of the problem by modifying its environment. This has been an old European Union method, and, with a little bit of euro-centrism, I could even say that the Bush Administration tried to apply this old European method to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict more than a year ago. This method implied, for the U.S. administration, to fix a new order of priorities after the failure of Camp David and Taba: “let’s democratize the Middle East, starting with Iraq, and then we will look at the peace process in the region”. We all know too well what has happened to this strategic vision.

If in my background contribution written from a European perspective, I emphasised the centrality of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in the search for a new and stable order in the region. If I stressed that we could not make the economy of this conflict, it is essentially for three reasons that are not only linked to the immense suffering that Palestinians and Israelis inflict on each other. Unfortunately, there are many other tragic places in the world. But in this specific conflict I mention three reasons for action, which are as follows: first, the nature of the new challenge facing the international system; second, the sad evolution of transatlantic relations; and, third, the challenge faced by the European Union itself in the definition of its international identity. And I would say that a safer world, a better alliance and a more confident Europe require an attempt to go back to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Regarding the first point—the challenge to the international system—it cannot be described as a “war between Islam and the West,” but it is, if you want to use the word “war,” a war which pits fundamentalist Islam against the West and the rest of the Muslim world. The fundamental challenge for us, therefore, consists in containing successfully the fundamentalists without losing and alienating the majority of the Muslim world. It is an ideological war for the hearts and minds of the less and less moderate majority within the Arab Muslim world. In this context, I believe there is an emotional centrality in the core Israeli-Palestinian issue. For there will be no stability in the region and no long-term solution to the conflict between Islamic fundamentalists and the West if this issue is allowed to continue to fester and poison the climate of the international system.

It is also—and this is my second point—the most divisive issue in emotional terms between Europe and the United States, with the Americans largely on the Israeli side and the Europeans largely on the Palestinian side. As the situation in the region at large has changed so much for the worse during the last year, with the risk of chaos spreading, America and Europe should do their utmost to stop quarrelling with each other in the way they have. That supposes the attempt to define a common approach to the Middle East quagmire that must include centrally the Israeli-Palestinian issue.

Third, this problem is also about Europe, about ourselves, not only because this conflict is geographically next to us, but also because it is demographically within us and historically about us since we created the problem through colonialism and anti-Semitism. But it is also, a test of Europe’s international identity because it asks us one question: “what is our role when we do not have the ultimate weapon of the
enlargement carrot, when we do not have the soft-arm power of saying to others, "behave, and then you will become part of our club." This is not a card that we have at our disposal at the present time.

What Can We Do About It?

So if this is the challenge, my second question will be “what can we do about it?” In that process, I underline in my paper a few specific points. The first one is to re-emphasise the inevitability of a two-state solution at a time when it is being challenged. What I find most perverse and diabolical in the present evolution is that somewhere the most radical parties, both in Israel and in Palestine, seem to have prevailed in their opposition to a two-state system, each side negating the legitimacy of the existence of the other as a separate national identity. I believe this is the most dangerous trend that is taking place in the region, because a two-state solution, like the democratic system according to Winston Churchill, is probably the worst but still also the only acceptable solution.

The second principle that should be the base for European action is that the European Union must be seen in the region as an impartial and united voice, and above all as an honest broker. In fact, there is a comparative challenge for the United States and Europe. The challenge for the United States is to restore its credibility with the Arab Muslim world—a tough challenge after the images we have seen in the last few days in Iraq. The challenge for Europe is to restore its credibility vis-à-vis Israel. I think, for the Israelis, Europe is something like in between a lost paradise, to describe the words of Amos Oz in his last novel, and a continent that has failed them, betrayed them, and cannot be counted upon. It is essential for Europe to try to change that image. The timing for such a reinvention of Europe in Israeli eyes may not be so badly chosen because there are many who are feeling that the close association which has existed between the Bush and the Sharon Administrations has created a very negative environment, leading to an association between anti-Americanism and anti-Zionism, if not blatant anti-Semitism. So there is a role for Europe to play. There is an alternative that should be presented in a very modest way.

In conclusion, I would like to say that for the West globally, there are two dangers facing us today. The first one is a too fractured West, with Europe and the United States quarrelling openly and in a suicidal mode in the eyes of the world. The other danger is that of a West that would seem united against the rest of the world in a message that could be read by others as “civilization versus barbarism.”.

For Europe, our goal—as beautifully phrased yesterday by Georges Berthoin—was to repatriate the American dream in Europe. Today, if I were to phrase our goal, especially after the success of the Enlargement, I would say it would be to export the European model to the world, a model of reconciliation. I’m too realistic not to realize that the Europe I describe is much closer to the world of Corneille than to the world of Racine, i.e., to a Europe as it should be, not a Europe as it is. But it’s worth trying to make an effort to restore the sense of a European dream, and that has to be applied foremost to the Middle East.

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