

# The EU and the Arab Peace Initiative: Promoting a regional approach

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by Eduard Soler i Lecha<sup>1</sup>  
Barcelona Center for International Affairs (CIDOB)

***In her tour in the Middle East, the recently appointed High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and Vice-President of the European Commission, described the EU's as a "strong supporter" of the Arab Peace Initiative and expressed the message that "by working together, with determination and partnership there can be peace.***

A comprehensive peace, including Syria, Lebanon and the implementation of the offer in the Arab Peace Initiative. A deal that provides sustainable security for everyone<sup>2</sup>. Her predecessor, Javier Solana, also praised the initiative as illustrated by his address to the European Parliament of February 2009 where he stated that the initiative was crucial arguing that "solutions and proposals should be locally inspired but, at the same time, deeper international engagement remains essential"<sup>3</sup>.


Yet, how solid and homogeneous this support is? And, more specifically, which are the effects of this support? This paper will attempt to respond to both questions, linking them with the EU's efforts to promote regional integration in the Mediterranean and Middle East areas. In its final part, it will also analyse how the Spanish EU Presidency (first semester 2010) has tackled this issue from its double perspective: firstly, through its attempts to restart the Peace Talks and, secondly, attempting to give a boost to regional integration projects such as the "UfM" - Union for the Mediterranean. As we will see, both issues are deeply connected and the Spanish case is particularly relevant, not only because it is holding the EU Presidency in the first semester of 2010, but also because it has been one of the EU countries that has more vocally and since the very beginning, backed the Arab Peace Initiative.

## THE ARAB PEACE INITIATIVE IN THE CURRENT INTERNATIONAL CONTEXT

The Arab Peace Initiative has widely been seen as an important step on the part of the Arab countries. As it is widely known, this initiative emanated from the Peace Plan proposed by the then Saudi Prince Abdullah, proposing the recognition of Israel by all members of the Arab League as long as this country would withdraw from all the territories occupied in 1967, including East Jerusalem which would become the capital of a Palestinian sovereign state. The Beirut summit represented a quantum leap compared with previous messages of disunity and/or inflexibility towards the recognition of Israel. In that sense, several commentators have compared this summit with the 1967 Karthoum summit where the Arab countries rejected the possibility of establishing peace with Israel, recognising the country and negotiating with it.

***In general terms, the international community but particularly the EU reacted positively to the Arab League proposal as a point to restart negotiations after the Second Intifada.*** Yet, for the US it took longer than for the EU to grasp the added value and the potentiality of this offer. In addition, it is worth pointing out that the Arab Peace Initiative has also been backed by the countries belonging to the Organisation of the Islamic Conference, including Iran. In parallel, the Arab Peace Initiative also mentioned the role to be played by the international community and asked "to pursue the necessary contacts to gain support for this initiative at all levels, particularly from the United Nations, the Security Council, the United States of America, the Russian Federation, the Muslim states and the European Union".

***In general terms, the last two years have not been very promising for peace in the Middle East as illustrated by the intensity of the Gaza crisis in 2008/2009, the subsequent suspension of the indirect talks between Israel and Syria***



***sponsored by Turkey, the lack of unity in the Palestinian camp or the growing weight of hard-liners in the Israeli government after last year elections.***

Nonetheless, there have been more positive factors too. This is the case of the renewed activism of the US administration on the Middle Eastern affairs, its willingness to improve the image of the US among the Arab public and the need of Arab support to confront a defiant Iran. All these elements have pushed the Obama administration to urge for the resumption of Peace talks, seeking the support of the regional actors, including the Arab League.

In fact, the Arab League and specifically its Ministerial Committee for the Arab Peace Initiative, gave support in its early March meeting to the restart of indirect talks between the Palestinian National Authority and Israel, thus responding to the demands expressed by the US government. However, the announcements of authorisation of settlement construction in East Jerusalem, coincided with Joe Biden's visit to Israel and Netanyahu visit to Washington, both in March, almost paralysed the process.

The Arab leaders met, once more, in Sirte (Lybia) and, obviously, the Middle East Peace Process ranged high in the agenda. Besides strong condemnations directed to Israel and the demand to the international community "to shoulder its responsibly", the Arab ministers decided to "give the US mediator an additional card among the many previous cards" underlying that "the Committee will support any hope attached by any of the mediators to help attain peace"<sup>4</sup>.

This final remark evidences that the US and not the EU is often seen as the key international power able to effectively mediate among the parties in conflict and then, able to revamp the idea of a "regional peace deal" as the one offered by the Arab Peace Initiative. However, it is also widely accepted that the US can more effectively succeed this endeavour if it counts with the complicity of other international actors and, among them, the EU and its member states in a first front position.

## **THE ARAB PEACE INITIATIVE AND THE EU POLICIES TOWARDS THE MIDDLE EAST PEACE PROCESS**

The Middle East and specifically the Arab-Israeli conflict have always been present in the foreign policies of the main EU member states. This topic has ranged high in the agenda of the EU's foreign policy. Even when the Europeans lacked a proper common foreign policy, they were able to agree on the Venice Declaration of 1980, which did not totally coincide with the view of the US at that time. More recently, the European Security Strategy pointed out that the "resolution of the Arab/Israeli conflict is a strategic priority for Europe" and said that "the European Union must remain engaged and ready to commit resources to the problem until it is solved. The two-state solution - which Europe has long supported- is now widely accepted. Implementing it will require a united and cooperative effort by the European Union, the United States, the United Nations and Russia, and the countries of the region, but above all by the Israelis and the Palestinians themselves"<sup>5</sup>.

***Despite all the efforts deployed to influence Middle Eastern affairs and promote the Peace Process, the EU's has been blamed, on the one hand, for the existing gap between the amounts of financial aid devoted to the process and the scant political influence on the parts and particularly on Israel.*** On the other hand, commentators have also criticised the lack of unity and coherence among the member states. The widely known coexistence of different diplomatic traditions, historical engagements and foreign policy positions have often resulted into too slow and too ambiguous reactions when crisis such as Lebanon 2006 or Gaza 2008-2009 have erupted.

Nevertheless, in the case of the Arab Peace Initiative the EU has been united in welcoming the proposal of the Arab League as it is coherent with the positions and priorities of the EU (two-state solution, multilateralism and engagement of regional actors) and as is widely seen as a positive step forward to a long-lasting peace. While some countries and leaders have been more enthusiastic than others, for instance Spain has been since the beginning one of the countries that has more

vocally backed the Arab League proposal, this has not undermined a general 'positive approach' of the EU towards the initiative.

In fact, reading some of the European Council conclusions we can easily find references to the initiative recognising that conflict requires a regional approach. Thus, in the December 2003 European Council, it is stated that "The European Council recalls that a comprehensive peace must also include Syria and Lebanon and the relevance of the Arab Peace Initiative adopted by the Beirut Arab League Summit of 28 March 2002"<sup>2</sup>. In 2007, the relaunch of the Initiative by the Arab League was warmly welcome by the EU which in the External Relations Council Conclusions of 23rd April 2007, stated that it supported the initiative "as a major element in moving the Middle East Peace Process forward" and also welcomed "the positive reaction of the Israeli Prime Minister" hoping "that a constructive dialogue between Israel and the Arab side on the Initiative will start soon".

Finally, it also declared the EU ready "to work closely with the special committee and working groups to be established by the Arab League"<sup>7</sup>. Later on, the Europeans also appreciated the wide participation of Arab delegations in Annapolis and the announcement of the Israel-Syrian talks, urged the parts to "take confidence building measures" and have since then, reiterated the need to build on the Arab Peace Initiative.

All this declaratory policy has been accompanied by high-level participation of EU leaders in several Arab League summits - the latest in the Libyan city of Sirte, by strengthened links with the Arab League itself and by individual member countries support to the Arab Peace Initiative. It is difficult to calibrate which has been the impact of this support. In any case, one can see that the EU, as part of the Quartet, has contributed to the Quartet own support to "dialogue among all states in the region on the Spirit of the Arab Peace Initiative" and has vocally expressed the need to include Syria and Lebanon in the Peace efforts<sup>8</sup>.

***However, it needs to be said that the EU welcomes the ideas of the Arab Peace Initiative but does not***

***understand the proposal as a "take it or leave it" deal to Israel but rather as a complement to the terms of reference of the Madrid Summit, the UN resolutions and the Quartet Road Map in order to achieve a fair, durable and region-wide peace deal.*** In that sense, EU diplomats and politicians have urged the Israelis to react positively to the Arab offer and have suggested the Arab countries to be flexible.



## THE REGIONAL DIMENSION

The emphasis on the Arab Peace Initiative coincides with the EU policy of promoting regional integration and trying to promote regional solutions for regional problems. It is common place to argue that the EU has favoured regional integration, even outside the European continent, as a mean to prove that the so-called European model is successful. In the same spirit, bi-regional frameworks for cooperation have also been launched and the EU has particularly emphasised the virtues of establishing cooperation mechanisms with its neighbours.

In the early seventies, coinciding with the first steps of an embryonic cooperation on foreign policy, the EEC launched two initiatives that attempted to intensify the relations with several Arab partners: the Euro-Arab Dialogue and the Global Mediterranean Policy. One, the Euro-Arab dialogue, was initiated in 1973, right after the Oil crisis and took form of a dialogue between the EEC and the Arab League in order not to specifically recognise the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO). The Dialogue laid the basis for cooperation vast range of topics (political, economical and social) but it soon became evident that the interest of both parts were different (the EEC focused on energy security and Arab countries were seeking European political support on Palestine).

As it is well known, the first framework, the Euro-Arab Dialogue, entered into a declining phase after the Camp David agreements between Egypt and Israel and the attempts to resuscitate at the end of the eighties proved unsuccessful. Yet, more recently the Dialogue has gained momentum, on the one hand, with the expressed willingness on the part of the EU to strengthen cooperation with all Arab countries<sup>9</sup>, but also with a greater visibility of the Arab League in international affairs as the Arab Peace Initiative itself shows. Thus, in the last years, there have been several EU-Arab ministerial meetings in Slovenia, Vienna or Malta, incorporating the Arab Peace Initiative as a ground for common understanding<sup>10</sup>. The intensification of meetings

as well as the creation of “Liaison office for Euro-Arab dialogue” in Malta, jointly sponsored by the European Commission and the League of Arab states, may announce the willingness of some actors, both in Europe and in the Arab countries to give a third chance to the Euro-Arab Dialogue. However, this possibility it is far from becoming an alternative to the EU’s main regional focus: the promotion of Euro-Mediterranean cooperation in both its bilateral and multilateral tracks.

As said before, the EEC’s Mediterranean Policy started to be defined as such since 1972. At this point in time, it focused on trade liberalization and was strictly bilateral. Thus, it was not a format allowing the EU and its Mediterranean partners to discuss the MEPP and envisage confidence-building measures. This kind of actions was only possible with the launch of the “Barcelona Process” in 1995, right after the Oslo Agreements.

***The Barcelona Process, with its hybrid multi and bilateral structure bringing together Israelis, Palestinians, Syrians and Lebanese, and with a political and security basket of cooperation became a forum where the Middle East Peace Process has been debated despite the fact of not having been designed with this purpose.*** In fact, the founding stone of this partnership, the Barcelona Declaration stated that the “Euro-Mediterranean initiative is not intended to replace the other activities and initiatives undertaken in the interests of the peace, stability and development of the region, but that it will contribute to their success” implying that the MEPP is not the aim of the Barcelona Process.

As it is widely known, the MEPP has always interfered with the Euro-Mediterranean framework. The escalations of the conflict have prevented substantial progress in many spheres of cooperation, especially in the field of security, as illustrated by the impossibility of reaching a consensus on a Euro-Mediterranean Charter for Peace and Stability in the year 2000 or agreeing a shared definition of terrorism in 2005. Actually, the effects of the conflict go well beyond the area of security cooperation and can undermine any attempt to advance in the multilateral track. That is why many observers and even EU documents have stated that without resolving the conflict there is “little chance of dealing with other problems” in the region<sup>11</sup>.

Taking into account all these difficulties, the Barcelona Process has experienced a two-fold transformation. On the bilateral track, new formulas, based on the principle of differentiation, have been explored. This is the case of the Advance Status for Morocco or the upgraded relations with Israel. However, the latest has not been fully deployed due to the intensity of the Arab-Israel conflict and the reluctance of several EU countries to move forward unless Israel has a more collaborative attitude. On the multilateral track, since 2008 the Barcelona Process metamorphosed into the Union for the Mediterranean. Despite the initial goal of “de-politising” the Union has also proved exposed to the ups and downs of the Arab-Israeli conflict. This has been due to a tragic coincidence of a worsening of the regional context, a more visible political dialogue and a new institutional structure (especially with a system of co-presidencies currently held by France and Egypt).

**Several episodes illustrate the increased vulnerability of the UfM. The most evident one being the Gaza crisis towards at end of 2008 paralysed the works for five months. It is also worth noting that the second UfM summit was postponed from June to provably November 2010 in order to allow the indirect talks give some results and trying to avoid the interference of a not yet mature resumption of the negotiations into a young and fragile UfM.** In fact, the postponement of the summit was only the culmination of a series of facts that evidenced that it was impossible to move forward in Euro-Mediterranean cooperation unless there is any real progress in the Peace Process. Among others, one may cite the suspension of Istanbul’s meeting of Foreign Affairs Ministers’ (scheduled in November 2009), arguably due to the rejection of most Arab Ministers to sit next to Avigdor Lieberman or even the failure of the Ministerial conference on Water to agree on the Mediterranean Water Strategy in their meeting the 12th and 13th April 2010 due to a disagreement on the terminology to name the Palestinian territories.

**References to the Arab Peace Initiative can be found in the terminology of both the Barcelona Process, where Israel is a full member since the very beginning and in the Union for the**

**Mediterranean, where the Arab League has become fully involved.** To give only two examples, in 2002, in Valencia, the Presidency stated in its conclusions that “The Ministers warmly welcomed Saudi Crown Prince Abdullah’s peace initiative, as endorsed in Beirut by the Summit of the Arab League, as a significant framework towards a comprehensive peace”. Six years later, in the Marseille Ministerial Meeting, in November 2008, the declaration approved by all participants, which was object of negotiation with Israel and the Arabs until the very last minute, stated that “Ministers reaffirm their commitment to achieve a just, comprehensive, and lasting solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict, consistent with the terms of reference of the Madrid Conference and its principles, including land for peace, and based on the relevant UNSC resolutions and the Road Map. Ministers also stress the importance of the Arab Peace Initiative and underline their support for efforts to promote progress on all tracks of the Middle East Peace Process”.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that bi-regional and sub-regional dialogues have also tackled the issue of the MEPP and, specifically the Arab Peace Initiative. To give also two examples, this is the case of the EU-Gulf Cooperation Council, where the support of the two sides for the Arab Peace Initiative, repeatedly appears in the Ministerial conclusions. The same can be said regarding a less known format, the 5+5 Dialogue, which reunites ten countries of Western Mediterranean, whose last meeting took place the 15th and 16th April 2010 and where, in contrast with the UfM, Libya fully participates. This sub-regional dialogue is particularly interesting as in its previous meeting in Cordoba, the ten ministers (and this includes representatives of Portugal, Spain, France, Italy and Malta) accepted the Arab Peace Initiative as one of the terms or reference for the MEPP. This could herald the possibility that in a near future, the Arab Peace Initiative could become part of what the EU contemplates as terms of reference.



## 2010: THE SPANISH PRESIDENCY

Spain is a country that has a record of more or less successful attempts to contribute to the MEPP: it hosted the Madrid Peace Conference, launched the Barcelona Process which reunites Israel, Palestine and other Arab neighbours and that tried, together with other countries such as France and Italy, to push for a greater European involvement in the Peace Process, trying to come up with innovative ideas.

A distinctive feature of the Spanish foreign policy has been its continuous support to the goal of Arab unity, perceived as an asset to achieve prosperity and security in the region. In that sense, Spain has put efforts in keeping an intense cooperative relation with the Arab League and has always seen this organisation as an actor that could play a positive role in the international and regional arena. Thus, Spain followed with interest the developments of the 2002 summit in Beirut and since then has believed that the Arab Peace Initiative could become an important part of the Middle East Peace Process. Next to this “Arab policy”, Spain is a country that has promoted regional cooperation in the Mediterranean and has always asked for a more ambitious European policy in this area. As far as Israel is concerned, Spain has tried to develop the bilateral relations since the establishment of diplomatic relations (1986) and the current Spanish administration has stand out, in EU circles, as an advocate for upgrading relations with Israel. However, during the last few months it has been extremely difficult to convince other member states on the convenience of making of moving forward in such a tense context.

This Presidency is making the Mediterranean and the Middle East a priority, counting among many other assets, with the expertise of the Foreign Affairs Minister, Miguel Ángel Moratinos. However, the efforts of Spain in this area have had to adapt to both the unpredictable regional context and a very singular Presidency. In other words, not only has Spain had to face the defiant attitude of the parties but it has had to adapt to a very complex institutional setting at the EU level as the Treaty of Lisbon has entered into force and Catherine Ashton is progressively assuming all her powers.

In any case, one of the main priorities during the Spanish EU Presidency has been a double-edged attempt, on the one hand, to contribute precisely to the consolidation of the Union for the Mediterranean through the summit that was expected to take place in June reuniting 43 heads of state and government in Barcelona. On the other, the Presidency, in close coordination with the US and specifically with the special envoy, George Mitchell, has tried to contribute to the resumption of the Peace Talks in the Middle East, mainly between Israel and the PNA but not forgetting Syria and Lebanon. More in detail, we can note the support given to the Fayyad Plan and the common statement by France and Spain Foreign Ministers in favour of the creation of a Palestinian state, which also includes a reference to the Arab Peace Initiative<sup>2</sup>. Madrid is also trying to profit from its excellent relations with Damascus to remember the thesis that Syria should become part of the solution instead of being seen as part of the problem and, consequently, has called for the resumption of conversation between Israel and Syria. In the case of Lebanon, Spain’s awareness for stability is very much connected with the strong Spanish contribution to UNIFIL.

***With a broader perspective, we could say that the spirit of the Arab Peace Initiative is coherent with Spain’s goal to achieve both, regional peace and regional integration. In fact, the course of the events in the first half of 2010 proved the strong linkages between these two priorities.*** On the one hand, a summit that was foreseen to be one of the main milestones of the EU Presidency has been postponed due to well-spread fears that the events in the Middle East could jeopardise its results and put in danger the whole project of the UfM. On the other hand, if the proximity talks produce results and the parties enter into a direct negotiation process, it will increase the attractiveness of the rendez-vous next fall in Barcelona, the capacity of this summit to produce concrete results and even the contribution of the UfM in supporting regional peace.

## POLICY-RECOMMENDATIONS

These pages have shown that the EU has perceived and still perceives the Arab Peace Initiative as a positive contribution for the Middle East Peace Process that is coherent with its goal of promoting peace in the neighbourhood and fostering regional cooperation. References to the Arab League initiative appear in almost every statement by the EU on the Peace Process and compared to other issues that create division among Europeans, in this particular issue the EU appears united. The EU can transform its support to the Arab Peace Initiative into a European contribution to the Middle East Peace Process as follows:

1. Emphasizing the regional incentives: ***The urgency to obtain rapid results in the Peace Process can tempt the negotiating parts and the mediators to opt for “West-Bank first” or “Palestine first” strategies neglecting the importance of the regional dimension.*** The EU, by supporting the Arab Peace Initiative should recall that recognition of Israel by all Arab and Muslim countries is a powerful incentive for Israel to move forward in the negotiating process. It should also insist that, in the future, a more integrated Middle East, where Israel would play an important role, could become one of the fastest growing regions in the world benefiting all parts
2. Propose a more structured cooperation between the Quartet and the Arab League Committee for the Arab Peace Initiative: ***The EU could persuade the other Quartet members on the convenience of establishing regular contacts and even a working relationship between the two structures which, of course, should be complemented with a parallel structured coordination with Israeli representatives.***
3. Use the Union for the Mediterranean Summit in Barcelona. If the regional context does not deteriorate and on the contrary the parties have made progress in the negotiation process, this summit could stand as a regional backing the peace process, could propitiate bilateral meetings among different leaders and, following the very goals of the UfM project, could contribute to the goal of peace

by launching concrete regional cooperation.

4. Introduce the Arab Peace Initiative in the EU-Israel agenda. The EU is willing to substantiate the idea of upgrading relations with Israel. Yet, some actions undertaken by the Israeli government have impeded any progress during the last months. If the EU would be able to persuade the current Israeli administration to take the Arab offer seriously and declare so, it would increase the chances of moving forward in the bilateral EU-Israel cooperation.
5. ***Explore the added value of sub-regional dialogues. The 5+5 and the EU-GCC could serve as laboratories to test ideas and start building compromises that could later be proposed to larger Euro-Mediterranean or Euro-Arab frameworks.***

The author is the sole responsible for the content of this article which do not reflect the opinion of the coordinators of the IEPN project or the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung.

## Footnotes:

- 1 Research Fellow at the Barcelona Center for International Affairs (CIDOB)
- 2 Catherine Ashton "A Commitment to Peace – the European Union and the Middle East The League of Arab States", Cairo, 15 March 2010
- 3 "Javier Solana, EU High Representative for the CFSP, addresses the European Parliament on the Middle East" Brussels, 18 February 2009, S044/09
- 4 "Prime Minister Chairs Arab Peace Initiative Committee's Meeting" Qatar Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 26 March 2010.
- 5 A Secure Europe in a Better World, European Security Strategy, Brussels, 12 December 2003
- 6 Presidency Conclusions, Brussels, 12/13 December 2003, point 62.
- 7 Council Conclusions on Middle East Peace Process, 2796th External Relations Council meeting, Luxembourg, 23 April 2007
- 8 Quartet Statement, Trieste, 26 June 2006
- 9 This willingness is best illustrated by the approval of the document "strengthening the EU's partnership with the Arab World" 4 December 2003.
- 10 See, for instance, "Malta Communiqué" (EU- League of Arab States Foreign Affairs Ministerial Meeting), 11 February 2008.
- 11 A Secure Europe in a Better World, European Security Strategy, Brussels, 12 December 2003. See also Muriel Asseburg & Paul Salem (eds.) No Euro-Mediterranean Community without Peace; Paris / Brussels, September 2009 (EU Institute for Security Studies / European Institute for the Mediterranean IEMed, 10 Papers for Barcelona 2010, No. 1
- 12 La Vanguardia, 22-02-2010

### **IEPN coordinators and editors of the working paper series:**

Ralf Hexel:  
ralf.hexel@fes.org.il

Christoph Moosbauer:  
moosbauer@concilius.com

Roby Nathanson:  
roby@macro.org.il

Stephan Stetter:  
stephan.stetter@unibw.de



**FRIEDRICH  
EBERT  
STIFTUNG**

Israel Office:  
Tel: +972 9 9514760  
Fax: +972 9 9514764  
fes@fes.org.il  
www.fes.org.il

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MACRO**  
The Macro Center  
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der Bundeswehr  
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