

Perthes, Volker

**Research Report**

## America's "Greater Middle East" and Europe: Key issues for the transatlantic dialogue

SWP Comments, No. 3/2004

**Provided in Cooperation with:**

Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP), German Institute for International and Security Affairs, Berlin

*Suggested Citation:* Perthes, Volker (2004) : America's "Greater Middle East" and Europe: Key issues for the transatlantic dialogue, SWP Comments, No. 3/2004, Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP), Berlin

This Version is available at:

<https://hdl.handle.net/10419/255897>

**Standard-Nutzungsbedingungen:**

Die Dokumente auf EconStor dürfen zu eigenen wissenschaftlichen Zwecken und zum Privatgebrauch gespeichert und kopiert werden.

Sie dürfen die Dokumente nicht für öffentliche oder kommerzielle Zwecke vervielfältigen, öffentlich ausstellen, öffentlich zugänglich machen, vertreiben oder anderweitig nutzen.

Sofern die Verfasser die Dokumente unter Open-Content-Lizenzen (insbesondere CC-Lizenzen) zur Verfügung gestellt haben sollten, gelten abweichend von diesen Nutzungsbedingungen die in der dort genannten Lizenz gewährten Nutzungsrechte.

**Terms of use:**

*Documents in EconStor may be saved and copied for your personal and scholarly purposes.*

*You are not to copy documents for public or commercial purposes, to exhibit the documents publicly, to make them publicly available on the internet, or to distribute or otherwise use the documents in public.*

*If the documents have been made available under an Open Content Licence (especially Creative Commons Licences), you may exercise further usage rights as specified in the indicated licence.*

# America's 'Greater Middle East' and Europe

## Key Issues for the Transatlantic Dialogue

*Volker Perthes*

**Within the next few years, if not over the next few decades, the Middle East will become the focus of international geopolitics and thereby largely determine relations between Europe and America. The US administration has embraced the cause of bringing a 'new order' to the region and has underscored this by announcing a 'Greater Middle East Initiative' (GMEI), for which it will seek transatlantic approval at the forthcoming June 2004 NATO and G8 summits.**

The content of that initiative comprises a series of political, military and economic programmes. These will include multilateral and bilateral measures to democratise Middle Eastern countries, offers of free trade made to individual countries, the geographical extension and deepening of the OSCE-Mediterranean partnership and a programme of military co-operation akin to NATO's Partnership for Peace. The initiative reflects a growing awareness in Washington, in the wake of the war in Iraq, that in the fight against terrorism and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD), it is not enough to make military threats to unfriendly regimes or to topple them. Belatedly, Washington has also realised that structural problems in the region need to be tackled. Europe should expect quite assertive demands from Washington to take part in a reorganisation or restructuring of the 'Greater' Middle East. This will be the case not only under a

Republican administration. Even a Democratic administration is likely to make the reform and re-making of the Middle East part of its own, as well as a transatlantic agenda.

At the same time, America's GMEI is still far from worked out to the last detail. In fact, the grandiose geopolitical concept embodied in the title of the initiative partly conceals a lack of fresh ideas. This situation constitutes an opportunity for Europe: instead of merely tagging along with (or rejecting) US initiatives, it can – and should – play a prominent role in shaping the debate about a comprehensive transatlantic strategy towards its southern neighbourhood. Europe's approach will differ, at least in part, from the American one. This has been hinted at by Germany's Foreign Minister, Joschka Fischer, in his speech at the Munich Security Conference. This paper outlines some of the key issues that will dominate the debate about a common

policy on the Middle East and describes what it sees as the German and European positions in this transatlantic discussion.

### **The democratisation of Arab and Middle Eastern countries**

The US and the EU agree that a democratic transformation of the Arab world or the wider Middle East is a goal that should be pursued. Europeans will likely remind their US counterparts that Europe has pursued this goal even before September 2001, and has not merely “discovered” the lack of democracy in the Arab world in the context of its struggle against international terrorism. As a matter of fact, democracy-building, the support of civil society, the rule of law, and human rights have been key elements of the political and security chapter of the “Barcelona process” (the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership) both in its multilateral and bilateral dimensions (Barcelona Declaration and individual association agreements). From a European viewpoint, therefore, what is needed is not a “forward strategy of freedom” (George W. Bush), but a common perspective for political, economic and social change in Europe’s neighbourhood that builds on the potentials in these countries and takes their societies on board, respects their dignity, and realises the linkages that exist between political and economic underdevelopment on the one hand and unresolved territorial conflicts on the other.

### **Complex processes**

In the transatlantic debate, Europeans may also have to point out that democratisation is not a linear process, but rather a lengthy, complicated undertaking full of contradictions, political battles and setbacks. Somewhat simplified, the differences between the American and European approaches can be described as follows: whereas the United States tend to cite the democratic deficits of governments that oppose Western interests in the region and threaten

them with punitive measures, sanctions and maybe even the possibility of an externally imposed regime change, European policy-makers will likely try to support reform-minded forces within the countries in question and nudge existing regimes towards the path to reform through dialogue, material support, and forms of conditionality. These different approaches become particularly obvious with regard to Iran. Despite shared transatlantic interests (not the least of which is the abandonment of Iran’s nuclear weapons programme), the United States and Europe continue to regard Iran through fundamentally different prisms, and this will no doubt continue to stand in the way of any joint policy. Washington still considers Iran to be a ‘rogue state’ whose regime refuses to adapt the country’s domestic and foreign policy to Western (and, probably, popular) demands. Europe, in contrast, sees Iran as a problematic partner, but also as a complex society with enormous possibilities for progressive domestic policy developments. It also views it – as may occasionally be pointed out – as currently the most pluralistic system in the Gulf.

Europe’s pragmatic efforts to foster democratisation often entail embracing the unsatisfying principle of ‘taking countries from where they are’ and rather banking on good examples set elsewhere (best practices) and dialogue than on threats of regime change. In other words, European policy-makers may well be prepared to support even minor reform steps (education, administrative reform, or economic policies) in a country like Syria, even if the speed of political development in that country lags way behind what Europe would like to see, while criticising countries like Tunisia, Palestine, Lebanon or Israel for deficiencies of democratic development or human rights violations that may be comparatively less serious. One of the lessons of the Barcelona process is that it may be wise to break up the concept of “democracy” into its constituent ele-

ments, such as: the rule of law, independence of the judiciary, transparency, accountability, strengthening of civil society, etc. This may make it easier to take the elites of these countries along, and create common interests rather than fears of externally enforced regime change.

However, shortcomings in Europe's policy of trying to further the cause of democratisation should not be ignored. Indeed, neither Berlin nor Brussels have discussed the issue of the conditionality of economic aid and political relations in satisfactory depth, let alone operationalised it.

### **Democracy as an objective, not a prerequisite for action by the West**

While the democratic transformation of the Arab states is clearly a goal, it cannot from a European perspective be considered a precondition for political engagement, especially not for a serious engagement in the Middle East peace process. Occasionally, American or Israeli commentators claim that only democratic states can make peace; it would be premature, therefore, to resume serious peace efforts in the Middle East unless major Arab states turn democratic. Practically, this claim serves as a pretext for those who do not want to resume serious peace talks; and it is certainly empirically wrong. The first Arab state that made peace with Israel, Egypt, is not exactly a model democracy – and yet, the Israeli-Egyptian peace agreement has been stable for a quarter century. The reverse, however, is true: peace between Israel and its Arab neighbours would enhance regional and external efforts to bring about a democratic transformation (see below). Tying Western attempts to broker peace to the democratisation of Arab countries, however, would merely exacerbate the lack of credibility of US and Western policies in the region.

### **Where is the 'Greater Middle East'?**

To develop policies for a particular region of the world, it is important to know which countries one is actually talking about. A sensibly targeted policy can only be developed if sufficient consideration is given to regional conflicts and their linkages, to the self-perception of individual states and societies, and to those transnational political, socio-cultural and economic relations that make people feel that they actually belong to a particular region. Participants in the US debate on the 'Greater Middle East' as well as some of their European colleagues associate the concept with very different geopolitical notions. Phrases like "from Marrakech to Bangladesh" sound good, but they are not particularly clear. In a preparatory working paper for the June 2004 G8 Summit, the US administration has defined the 'Greater Middle East' as including the Arab states, Israel, Turkey, Iran, Pakistan and Afghanistan. Some pundits go further and include all of Central Asia or the Caucasus. Yet, at the same time analysts often refer to the Arab countries alone when they start identifying specific problems.

To find a definition that is useful for Europe's foreign and security policies, the aforementioned factors – transnational relations as well as the reach of regional conflicts – will have to be taken into consideration. On this basis, it makes sense to define the wider Middle East as including the Arab countries, Israel, Iran and Afghanistan, but not to extend it beyond these countries.

Of course, regions are never sharply delimited, and some political dynamics link the countries mentioned here with others, like Turkey, Pakistan, the Caucasus or Central Asia. However, an excessively broad definition of the region hinders the development of political strategies. Thus, European policy-makers should consider *Turkey* to be a NATO partner and potential EU member. A conceptional "Middle-Easternisation" of Turkey could have undesired political consequences, including its

turning away from Europe. Also, unlike Afghanistan, the *Caucasus* countries (much the same as Bosnia-Herzegovina) cannot be viewed within a Middle Eastern framework; they should rather be seen within a post-Communist European setting. Not without reason did the Georgian opposition rely on Serbia's experience as a role model: the examples of Arab or Iranian protest movements would have been of little help to it. *Pakistan* is involved in Afghanistan, and its nuclear programme has benefited from Saudi financial aid. But if a suitable policy vis-à-vis Pakistan is to be developed, one has to fully appreciate the centrality the conflict with India has for the country. Middle Eastern developments, in contrast, have little relevance for Pakistan's policies. Likewise, Pakistan's nuclear arsenal, unlike the potential arsenals of Iran or Libya, has nothing to do with the Gulf or with conflicts with Israel and should also play no role if one day the creation of a WMD-free zone in the Middle East is on the agenda.

The populations of the former Soviet republics of *Central Asia* are mostly Muslim; however, in political terms Russia remains far more important to these countries than the Near East or the Arabian Peninsula. And while *Afghanistan* does not like being treated as a 'post-Soviet' region (a fair number of the Afghan elite studied and lived in Cairo, Riyadh or Jeddah), *Central Asia's* elites have largely been socialised in a Moscow-centred environment. Western policy-makers will have to take into account such backgrounds if they want to build partnerships with these countries, convince their societies of the value of such relations, and support the establishment of regional structures.

### **The EU as a reference framework**

German Middle East policy is embedded in a European framework. Consequently, co-ordination with the European partners should – in case of doubt – take precedence over transatlantic co-ordination. Having said that, it would be advisable to improve

the exchange between the EU and the United States regarding initiatives associated with the region and the practical problems arising from them. For instance, in many respects the *US Middle East Partnership Initiative* launched by the US administration's foreign policy team at the end of 2002 resembles a geographically more extensive, but less extensively funded and more bilaterally inclined version of the Barcelona Process (Euro-Mediterranean Partnership) that has existed since 1995. Admittedly, the fact that 'Barcelona' and Europe's experience with this long-term, multilateral and multidimensional process was barely acknowledged and responded to by Washington has partly to do with the fact that the EU has shown no interest in allowing the United States, whose role as a security policy actor in the Mediterranean cannot be ignored, any form of participation, not even as an observer.

The EU, in fact, already has a defined and well instrumentalised common policy in place regarding a large part of the region. In addition to the Barcelona Process, which led to the conclusion of association agreements with most southern and eastern Mediterranean states, and a *common strategy* for the Mediterranean region, Europe's approach also includes numerous *common positions* vis-à-vis the Arab countries, Israel and Iran, the *Wider Europe – Neighbourhood Programme* vis-à-vis the EU's neighbouring regions in Europe, North Africa and the Near East, a co-operation agreement with Yemen, regular consultations between the EU and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and the still unfinished, highly politicised negotiations concerning a trade and co-operation agreement with Iran. The European Security Strategy adopted in December 2003 also defines the risks that could emanate from the region from Europe's point of view, as well as European principles of action, and delimits a common approach regarding the use of military force.

At the same time, the only existing transatlantic framework for political initiatives towards parts of the 'Greater Middle East' is

NATO co-ordination with regard to Afghanistan. The NATO and OSCE 'Mediterranean dialogues' are of limited relevance in practice, and certainly do not constitute a framework within which joint initiatives with or vis-à-vis these countries could be developed.

### **Complementarity rather than competition**

The Arab-Israeli conflict and peace process in particular have shown how important it is for the USA on the one hand, and the EU and its member states on the other, to co-ordinate their positions, preferably – as has been the case with the 'Middle East Quartet' – together with the United Nations and Russia. No progress will be made in the peace process as long as regional parties can play the Americans and Europeans off against each other. In this context, the EU speaks quite rightly about complementarity, which is shorthand for saying that both parties have specific comparative advantages which enable them, with their respective instruments, to perform certain tasks better than others, and than the other party.

Thus, to give but two examples, Washington holds greater sway with Israel, while the Europeans enjoy greater credibility among the Palestinians. Also, the USA is in a better position to bring military pressure to bear and to offer security guarantees, while Europe can hold out the prospects of association and integration, which also exert a normative force at the political level. This being the case, Europe and the US should use this range of different political resources to achieve common objectives, including peace in the Middle East, the strengthening of democracy and human rights, the fight against terrorism and the limitation of regional arms races. This does not imply that Europe simply follow the US lead, but rather calls for close co-ordination in major policy areas.

### **Multilateralism and American leadership**

The Middle East Quartet and its 'road map' for the Middle East peace process clearly exemplify this multilateral approach, even though the plan has not yet been implemented. Multilateralism allows for full use to be made of the specific relations and instruments at the disposal of the individual actors in their relationship with Middle Eastern countries. The road map was drawn up in Berlin and other European capitals, but Europe has good reason not to claim ownership. Its adoption by Washington and its labelling, in US media, as the 'American road map for the Middle East' is just fine from a European viewpoint. What really matters is whether the plan is implemented or not.

US leadership in this context is indeed vital, not least so because of Washington's greater influence over Israel and the fact that Israel trusts the United States – but does not trust Europe. The EU, on the other hand, enjoys much more trust among the Palestinians. Indeed, Europe made its influence show by providing energetic assistance when the Palestinian Authority conducted its – largely successful – internal reform.

### **The centrality of the Arab-Israeli conflict**

The European Security Strategy quite rightly stresses the key importance that a peaceful settlement of the Arab-Israeli (and above all Israeli-Palestinian) conflict would have for the political, security policy and economic development of the region. It has therefore defined the resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict as "a strategic priority for Europe." Without such a resolution, the *Strategy* continues, "there will be little chance of dealing with other problems in the Middle East," i.e., such European goals as democratisation and liberalisation, regional economic co-operation, the establishment of a free trade zone, and regional security co-operation will likely not be

achieved. The US debate, in contrast, all too often ignores the centrality of the Arab-Israeli conflict and peace process for developments in the wider region.

There are several reasons why the unresolved conflict constitutes a barrier to positive processes of political and economic change in the region. Among other things, several Arab regimes are continuing to hide behind the conflict with Israel, with the elites in power rejecting internal reforms by pointing to the state of war and conflict. Were the conflict resolved, this pretext would no longer apply and authoritarian structures would be delegitimised and weakened. The continuation of the conflict is also underpinning the role of the military – in the Arab states as well as Israel – and bolstering the acceptance of military solutions. The ongoing conflict legitimises a continued misallocation of resources, with defence budgets taking precedence over such matters as educational reform. Peace between Israel and its Arab neighbours, in contrast, would most likely help the spread of democratic values, strengthen the civil societies and reduce the appeal of religious and nationalist extremists.

These are not the only considerations that US policy occasionally overlooks. It also often fails to acknowledge the extent to which the West's credibility in the region depends on the seriousness of American and European efforts to find a fair peaceful solution of the Middle East conflict. And while Europe may enjoy somewhat more credibility in this context, that credibility does have its limits. A large proportion of the general public in Arab countries and Iran have become convinced that Europeans only put on a friendlier face – while ultimately hiding behind the United States so as to avoid any concrete action in practice.

### **Building regional structures versus re-ordering the region**

Conditioned by Europe's colonial experiences, European policy-makers tend to be

somewhat sceptical about wide-ranging plans to bring a 'new order' to the Middle East. They tend to favour the establishment of regional structures that can help to reduce the potential for conflict, and institutionalise co-operative relations that would enhance security for all parties and facilitate the processes of transformation in the countries in question. Lessons learned within the CSCE process can provide useful points of departure.

One should be aware that not only authoritarian regime elites, but important segments of the societal elites in the Middle East consider the perspective of a "re-ordering" of the region from abroad a serious threat. At the same time, these same elites have an interest in containing regional conflict potentials and enhancing regional security. The idea of a Conference on Security and Cooperation in the Middle East (CSCME) was first raised by regional actors such as Jordan's former crown prince Hassan bin Talal. Most probably, it is still too early to launch and implement such a comprehensive project. Ultimately, a CSCE-type process will only be crowned with success if the territorial conflict between Israel and its neighbours is resolved, or if a solution is within sight.

Even before a process involving all the relevant countries and all the respective problems in the region is launched, however, there are good prospects for establishing certain more limited forms of regional security policy co-operation in which the United States, the EU and other actors from outside the region should also be involved. For example, it would make sense to set up a '6 plus 4 plus 1' contact group for Iraq (comprising Iraq's neighbours, the members of the Middle East Quartet, and the new Iraqi government) both as an instrument of co-ordination and as a confidence-building measure whose very existence might prompt the regional parties to sort out their legitimate interests with regard to Iraq in a constructive way.

### **Structures versus persons: the example of Palestine**

In dealing with the Middle East, as well as other regions, Europe generally puts more emphasis on institution-building, while the US focuses more on the persons in charge. This is partly a reflection of the different structures of both political entities. In the US, politics is much more personalised, and the prime decision-maker is much more important; in Europe, with its complicated institutional structure, individual persons do not make so much of a difference (consider the difference between a presidential phone call from the White House, and a call from the president of the European Commission). The clearest example for this difference in approaches can be seen in the EU-US debate about how to deal with Palestinian president Yasir Arafat. US and EU policymakers may agree in what they think of Mr Arafat's personality. But while the US administration has decided to boycott him, the EU maintains relations, stressing the importance of maintaining institutions which Europe and the US have themselves helped to create – notably, the Palestinian presidential elections in 1996 were supported and monitored by EU and US officials. Rather than demanding a change in the Palestinian leadership, the EU concentrates on strengthening the Palestinian legislative branch and supports wide-ranging administrative reforms. Arafat, after all, is not an unelected official, but the most democratically elected Arab leader. The European approach does not necessarily reflect sympathy for Arafat or the Palestinians, but certainly the conviction that one cannot ignore the choice of the Palestinian people if one wants one's calls for "Arab democracy" to be taken as credible.

### **Turkey's integration into the EU**

In principle, the German federal government and the US Administration agree – albeit for somewhat different reasons – that Turkey needs to be given the prospect of EU

membership. European and German policymakers should be aware that the way in which the EU and Europe deal with Turkey and its desire to join the Union will be of great importance for Europe's mid- and long-term relations with Middle Eastern countries.

Turkey's membership in the EU would radically alter the geopolitical parameters of Europe, as Syria, Iraq and Iran would then become direct neighbours of the EU. But one need not consider Turkey as part of a 'Greater' Middle East to reach the conclusion that its internal developments and the manner in which it is treated by Europe will have a considerable impact on political debates and developments in the countries of the Middle East. Offering Ankara a serious prospect of EU accession would also bolster the credibility of European policy vis-à-vis other Muslim countries.

Whether or not the EU will allow the integration of a big Muslim-populated state into its constitutional space will have an enormous bearing on the general perception of Europe in other Muslim countries. Forget the intra-European debate about a reference to God in the European constitution – Turkey's ruling AKP would have no difficulty in subscribing to such a formula. The question is rather whether or not European policy-makers would refuse an integration of Turkey on the grounds of the EU's supposedly Christian identity.

A successful integration of Turkey would clearly indicate that Islam can really be a part of Europe's culture, and would at the same time destroy the myth of an inevitable clash of cultures. Moreover, Turkey's integration into the EU (and even the process leading to it) will have an impact on domestic political developments in other Muslim countries, if only because it will show that democracy and pluralism, the rule of law, political modernity, and so forth are not exclusively "Western" characteristics or properties. Eventually, the impact of a successful Turkish EU accession process will probably be greater than the 'domino effects' which some US quarters



expect from American transformation experiments in Iraq.

### **Shared interests in Iraq**

Irrespective of the differences regarding the need for and the legitimacy of the war in Iraq, as well as the analysis of threats that was used to justify it, the EU and the United States share a keen interest in seeing a stabilised Iraq and the establishment of a sustainable pluralistic regime in Baghdad that is based on the rule of law and, preferably, on democratic participation. For reasons of geographical proximity, Europe's interest in the transformation of Iraq into a participatory, pluralist state is probably even greater than that of the United States. Anyone who doubts this should be aware that the territorial integrity of Iraq – a key prerequisite for regional stability – can only be maintained today if the new Iraq has federal structures and a representative political system that guarantees participation and minority rights.

### **Not an object of transatlantic relational therapy ...**

For Europe, this interest translates into a European responsibility for promoting the economic and political reconstruction of Iraq. That responsibility will also have to be reflected in financial commitments, including the willingness to cancel debts and provide financial support for the country's economic and social reconstruction. Bearing in mind Iraq's potential economic clout, a kind of new Marshall Plan will be required under which the country, once back on its feet again, passes on the subsidies it receives today.

At the same time, decisions on Germany's and Europe's policy on Iraq – regardless of whether they pertain to financial and technical support, police training or military contributions – should not be measured in terms of whether they help to heal transatlantic wounds, but rather in terms of whether they serve

Europe's interests in Iraq and the broader region: not least, as already mentioned, the stabilisation and democratisation of Iraq itself. Regarding a possible NATO role in Iraq, this means that requests for such a role can hardly be turned down if they originate from an independent Iraqi government and are based on a clear UN mandate. Whether and how individual NATO member countries will become involved will in such a situation cease to be a matter of principle, and becomes a question of possibilities, capacities and the acceptance of the troops of particular nations by the Iraqis. Dispatching Turkish troops would remain a bad idea, even if the Alliance was called upon for help by Baghdad and New York.

A NATO deployment could hardly be justified, however, if all it did was to reduce the burden on US troops. Unless the political context in which an international force operates changes, NATO units would hardly be regarded any differently from an American or coalition occupation force.

### **... and not a role model**

Finally, it is particularly important not to overburden the Iraqi experiment. Iraq should be treated neither as a model (e.g. for Middle Eastern democracy), nor as a bridgehead for external projects to re-order the region. Deposing a regime by military force and even putting a new government in place is relatively easy; building a model is far more difficult and the attempt to do so would probably be asking too much of the Iraqi actors. Moreover, making Iraq a bridgehead for regional projects would be a sure-fire way of prompting unfriendly reactions on the part of its neighbours – instead of including them in efforts to stabilise the country.

© Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, 2004  
All rights reserved

**SWP**  
Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik  
German Institute for International and Security Affairs

Ludwigkirchplatz 3-4  
10719 Berlin  
Telephone +49 30 880 07-0  
Fax +49 30 880 07-100  
www.swp-berlin.org  
swp@swp-berlin.org