The Western "Alliance" and the Middle East in the Early 1970s

John Sakkas*

RÉSUMÉ

Le moment décisif de l'implication de la Communauté européenne au Proche Orient s'inscrit dans le sillon de la 'Guerre d'Octobre' et des déclarations de Bruxelles et de Copenhague de 1973. Ce serait le début du dialogue dit Euro-Arabe. L'article présente l'évolution de l'approche collective de la communauté envers le monde arabe au debut des années 70 et la réponse négative de la part des Américains, qui ne souhaitaient attribuer aux Européens de rôle indépendant dans cette région. La réaction européenne au défi venant de Washington exemplifie le manque d'unité interne et externe de la Communauté européenne.

ABSTRACT

The watershed for the European Community's involvement in the Middle East came during the aftermath of the 'October War' and the Brussels and Copenhagen declarations of 1973, which marked the beginning of what was subsequently called the Euro-Arab Dialogue. This article examines the development of the Community's collective approach to the Arab world in the early 1970s as well as the negative response of the Americans, who did not encourage any independent European role in the Middle East. The European reaction to this challenge from Washington was characteristic of the lack of sufficient unity both internally and externally.

The 2003 war in Iraq represents the latest in a whole series of intra-Western controversies over the Middle East. In fact, the issue of how to deal with the Middle East has constituted a major source of European-American tension since the beginning of the transatlantic partnership in the late 1940s[1]. The October War of 1973 in the Middle East and its aftermath constitutes only one of the most prominent examples of an apparently dominant pattern of allied conflict about the right kind of policies and approaches towards the Middle East. Moreover, as most of the major security risks today relate somehow to crises in the southern Mediterranean and

* University of the Aegean

Persian Gulf region, the Middle East will likely remain uppermost in the minds of Western policy-makers and crucial in European-American relations for the foreseeable future.

When the European Economic Community (EEC or Community) was founded in 1957, its principal aim was to achieve economic and then political integration among member-states. For this reason, up to the 1970s, the Community's attention was directed inwards rather than outwards.

In other words, the focus was on such activities as removing trade barriers among the members, building up agricultural policy and improving living standards for its citizens. With the advent of the 1970s, the Community managed to achieve remarkable economic growth and hence enjoyed an influence in world economic affairs. This increase in importance generated the desire to consider both an enlargement and the development of political integration through foreign policy coordination.

The Middle East was one of the first regions to which the Community turned in the early 1970. This area was for historical and geographical reasons of vital interest. The timing coincided with general growth of Middle East oil revenues and the concomitant increase of power which further highlighted the region's strategic significance[2].

Background to Europe before the October 1973 Arab-Israeli War

At the end of World War II, European power in the Middle East began to diminish. The Suez adventure in 1956 not only signaled the end of European colonialist influence in the region but underscored differing European and American policies and antagonized emerging Arab nationalism. After the crisis, British influence was reduced to almost nothing, except in certain positions east of the Suez and the French concentrated on the Algerian crisis. The power vacuum in the region was filled by the United States.

When the Six-Day War erupted in June 1967, the six countries of the European Community reacted differently according to their national interests. This was a result of a lack of a common strategy in the field of foreign policy. Consequently, France condemned the aggressor and leaned

towards favoring the Arab position at the United Nations. West Germany and Holland strongly supported Israel, Italy was divided, and Belgium tried to take recourse in the United Nations institutions. Overall, despite the Community's divergent attitudes towards the conflict and lack of a joint position at any official level, from that time West European-Middle East relations entered a new era, one based on economic interaction and diplomacy between sovereign entities rather on control, domination and occupation. Furthermore, this interaction soon took on a multilateral rather than bilateral guise as the EEC and League of Arab States assumed responsibility for transforming the relationship into a truly interregional one[3].

At the Hague Conference in December 1969, the European heads of state and government decided to establish the European Political Cooperation (EPC). This new instrument of policy was given two primary tasks: the conference for security and cooperation in Europe, known as the Helsinki Conference, and the Middle East[4]. The most noticeable result of the EPC deliberations in the early 1970s was a report on the Arab-Israeli conflict in May 1971, which marked the beginning of coordinated EPC positions on this problem. The report was known as the Schumann Paper, after the French foreign minister, Maurice Schumann, who played a major role in producing it[5]. Never published, the paper's contents were later leaked to the press. It contained the following suggestions: 1) establishment of demilitarized zones between Israel and the Arab states; 2) stationing of United Nations troops to separate the conflicting parties; 3) Israeli withdrawal from all occupied territories with minor border modifications;

4) internationalization of the city of Jerusalem; solution of the refugee problem by either repatriation in stages or compensation under the supervision of an international commission; and regulation of shipping in the Gulf of Aqaba and the Suez Canal[6].

The Schumman paper represented the Community's first joint stand on the Middle East dispute. In the following months, the attitude of the EEC as a whole continued to develop toward a positive reassessment of Arab demands. It was evident that the Community stood on the threshold of launching a major political move. That was what happened in the aftermath of the October War of 1973[7].

American global concerns and European oil interests

On October 6, 1973, war broke out in the Middle East between Egypt and Syria, on the one hand, and Israel, on the other. Fighting quickly spread and took the shape of a major confrontation between the two superpowers. From the outset, the United States sided with Israel, stepped up its aid and initiated an airlift of weapons. The Soviet Union gave support to the Arab side. Initially, the Arabs were victorious, but the tide of the war turned in the early days of the second week. The Israeli army advanced into enemy territory inflicting heavy casualties on the Egyptians, encircling one of its armies, and advancing in the north to within artillery range of Damascus. A cease fire was declared on October 22, at the insistence of both the United States and the Soviet Union, followed by a separation of forces agreement eventually signed with the active intervention of former US Secretary of State, Henry Kissinger[8].

In the wake of the October war, two separate yet interconnected developments took place: first, the decisions adopted by the Arab oil-producing countries to impose a general production cut-back and a selective embargo on exports to specific countries; secondly, the decision taken unilaterally by members of OPEC to increase the price of crude oil[9]. These Arab initiatives came as a severe shock to the Europeans, who, as a result, agreed to proceed with cooperation treaties that represented an extension of the Mediterranean policy to the Arab countries, and to establish the Euro-Arab dialogue. For their part, the Arabs were more interested in politics than in trade, their aim being to separate Europe from US policy towards Israel, and ultimately to weaken that policy.

The Americans were particularly obsessed with West-East relations and the Soviet threat in the Middle East. Kissinger portrayed Israel as a US strategic asset in the global struggle against the Soviet Union. Israel's interest in holding onto Arab territory and in retaining 'ascendancy' over the Arabs was presented as an American interest to exclude Soviet influence from the Middle East. Kissinger thus married America's global concerns to Israel's local ambitions. Moreover, he wanted to put the USA in sole control of the peace process by excluding not just the Soviet Union but also Western Europe which he judged too friendly to the Arabs[10].

Like the Americans, the Europeans were preoccupied with global and

geopolitical considerations, but were also conscious of their heavy dependency on Middle Eastern oil. Despite the fact that the economic structures (standard of living, level of industrial development and of technology, rate of economic growth, and quality of life and culture) of Europe and the United States were all based on oil energy, the degree of this reliance was different. Although the United States was the largest oil consumer in the world, its need for Middle East oil, was small. The Community, on the other hand, depended on oil coming from the Middle East for almost 80 per cent of its total energy requirement. France, in particular, imported 85 per cent of her needs in oil from that area (21 per cent from Saudi Arabia alone)[11].

The initial reaction of the Community to the war and its development was confused, chaotic and uncoordinated. The disarray within the EEC was reflected in the positions taken by each of its member states. These stances ranged the French, a relatively pro-Arab stance, to the Dutch and Danish clearly anti-Arab attitude. However, the three key countries within the Common Market (France, Britain and West Germany) chose a policy of neutrality with a pro-Arab tilt. It seemed to them that it was imperative for the Community to overcome its internal differences and adopt a joint position on the Middle East problem[12].

The Euro-Arab dialogue

The decisive common response, which is considered to be a watershed in the Community attitude towards the Middle East crisis, came on November 6, 1973. The speed with which the Nine adopted their new policy reflected the urgency of menace looming over their economies. Even though the oil ban struck only Holland fully, both Belgium and Western Germany were seriously affected since much of their oil supply was routed through Rotterdam and Dutch refineries. Moreover, a prolonged reduction in oil supplies would entail a decrease in the EEC's gross national product and an increase in unemployment. The rise in oil prices would also endanger the Community's trade balance, forcing it to try to restore surpluses by deflating or devaluating[13].

For the EEC, the November declaration represented a major move

forward in foreign policy co-operation and a significant effort to reaffirm European influence in the Middle East. The tragedy in Palestine, an area so close to Europe geographically, historically and culturally, was a challenge to the continent. What went on in the Middle East affected Europe directly, and Europe should therefore contribute to solving the problem. The declaration was important for three main reasons. First, it removed the ambiguity from Resolution 242 by demanding the withdrawal of Israelis from "all the occupied territories"; secondly, it recognized the necessity of taking into account the "legitimate rights of the Palestinian people"; and thirdly, it underlined clearly the role of the Security Council and the necessity of international guarantees in the peace settlement. Moreover, whereas the United States argued for limited agreements reached in bilateral negotiations between Israel and individual Arab states, in which Israel stood a better chance of retaining territory, the declaratory statement reflected the European emphasis on a balanced and comprehensive approach, effectively equating Israel security needs and Palestinian rights as parallel objectives of the peace process[14].

The pro-Arab stance of the EEC was confirmed at the Copenhagen Summit of December 1973. The heads of the Community member-states "confirmed the importance of entering into negotiations with oil-producing countries on comprehensive arrangements comprising co-operation on a wide scale for the economic and industrial development of these countries, industrial investments, and stable energy supplies to the member countries at reasonable prices"[15]. On March 4,1974, the nine foreign ministers, meeting within the context of European political co-operation in Brussels, announced a decision to start the process that would lead to the establishment of long-term Euro-Arab co-operation in all fields, notably in economy, technology and culture[16]. After intensive deliberations, a joint conference was held in Paris at the end of July, in which both sides decided to form a Permanent General Commission, which would represent the highest level in the Euro-Arab Dialogue[17].

Because of many difficulties (American reaction, Euro-Israeli trade agreement in May 1975, European objections to the PLO's participation in the Dialogue) the first meeting of the General Commission occurred in Luxemburg as late as May 1976. In the following years, the Dialogue concentrated on economic and trade issues; but the exclusion of contentious

energy and political issues from its formal structure served to limit its utility to its European and Arab participants. Moreover, the Arab side encountered great difficulty in forming a unified regional stance on many issues. By late 1979, the Camp David negotiations had rendered the problem of Arab unity insurmountable, and in April 1980 the Arab League requested that the Dialogue be suspended.

The United States, the October 1973 War and Euro-Arab dialogue

When fighting started in the Middle East, it was obvious that Europe would react differently from the United States. The EEC opposed American policy on two issues: first, it declined to cooperate with the United States in its airlift to Israel (the supplies reached Israel via the Azores); and second, it criticized the American decision to put its nuclear weapons on alert on October 25, without having sought prior advice from its European allies. The Americans were both hurt and surprised by the European attitude. United States officials complained that the European allies (with the single exception of that last hold-out of pre-war fascism, Portugal) divorced themselves from American policy and were submitted to the Arab blackmail over oil supplies. Defence Secretary Schlesinger raised the idea of withdrawing from Europe: "West German protests over the shipment of the US tanks to Israel might force the USA to store the tanks elsewhere"[18]. The State Department spokesman, Robert J. McCloskey, said on October 26: "We were struck by the number of our allies going to some lengths in their efforts to separate themselves publicly from the United States"[19]. In a major policy speech made in London on December 12, 1973, Kissinger spoke of the "uneasiness" of the United States concerning "some of the recent practices of the European Community in the political field" and pointed out that "to present the decisions of a unifying Europe to us as *faits accomplis* not subject to effective discussion is alien to the tradition of US-European relations". He went on to say that there was danger of a gradual erosion of the Atlantic Community, which for 25 years had guaranteed peace and prosperity to its nations. The revitalization of the Atlantic relationship seemed to be crucial and inevitable[20].

In December 1973, the EEC agreed on an overall strategy for long-term talks with the Arab countries on economic and energy matters. At the same

time, the United States announced the holding of a conference in Washington the following February for industrialized countries. The conference would discuss the energy problem and lead to the formation of a united consumer bloc, consisting of the United States, West Europe and Japan, against the producers' cartel[21]. The European response to the American invitation oscillated between co-operation with OPEC and siding with the United States. France rejected the multilateral approach as the solution for the energy problem and evinced interest in a bilateral deal with the oil-producing countries. West Germany, on the other hand, sided with the United States, arguing that it was in the best interest of the industrialized countries to have broad measures of consumer co-operation based on a recognition of interdependence[22]. The rest of the Community agreed with West Germany and supported the specific proposals advanced by the USA (a commitment to conservation, demand restraint, development of alternative energy sources, co-operation in research and development, creation of the International Energy Agency). Moreover, the American government linked the Community's agreement on the oil issue to the broader question of security and the maintenance of the United States commitment to Europe. In President Nixon's words to the conference, "Security and economic considerations are inevitably linked and energy can't be separated from either"[23].

The French government not only protested against the outcome of the conference, but it pressed hard for the Community to go ahead with its plan for long-term economic co-operation with the Arab world. But the European agreement of 4 March provoked a fierce American reaction. The United States saw it as a challenge to its energy program, and a form of "meddling" in an area where the Europeans were unlikely to achieve much by themselves. Furthermore, the European Council's decision to approach the Arab countries without prior consultation with Washington, drew angry reactions from most of the American officials. Kissinger had been "deeply incensed by the European Community's decision to deal directly with the Arab oil-producing countries as a bloc", stressing the view that this deal had been "done behind his back"[24]. In a speech at a press conference in Chicago on March 15, Nixon complained that the Community had connived against the United States: "we can not have in Europe, for example, confrontation on the economic and political front and co-operation on the security front". The American president threatened that if the United States was going to be faced

with hostility from the Nine, then he would find it difficult to convince Congress to give full support for a continued American presence at a reasonable level on the security front, adding that the American government "would no longer permit itself to be faced with a situation where the nine countries in Europe gang up against the United States." Nixon asserted that the time had come for the United States and Europe to decide whether they were going to go along together or go separately[25]. Further criticism was also made by the president on March 19 at a press conference in Houston, Texas. In a reference to American-European relations, the president stated, *inter alia*, that discussions about such relations in the economic and political fields had not gone well. This was, he said, because the American allies had not consulted with the United States fully, or on time, and had in some areas taken a position that was hostile to the Unites States at a time when the USA provided the security shield for the Community. "We can at least expect from our European allies that they will consult with us and not work actively against us in the political field or the economic field"[26].

The American strategy of linking security in Europe and energy policy forced the Europeans to become more conciliatory towards the United States. During their meeting at Gymmich in April, the Community's Foreign Ministers consented to a formula according to which consultation with the United States would be accomplished through creating an "organic consultative relationship". This would guarantee that the Nine would not pass any important resolutions that might affect American policy or interests in the Middle East, without prior consultation with the United States[27]. The question of prior consultation, as well as the energy problem, were further considered during the Martinique summit meeting in December 1974 between the French president, Giscard d'Estaing, and Nixon. In the course of the meeting, the French leader assured his interlocutor about the importance he attached to prior consultation between the Western allies[28].

Despite the strong American opposition to the Middle East initiatives of the Community, neither the Euro-Arab Dialogue not the evolution of the EEC's positions on the Arab-Israeli conflict were reversed. The Europeans were determined to increase their freedom of maneuverability independent of the United States, and to distance themselves from some American policies, especially in the Middle East. At the same time, however, they were conscious of the fact that their ability to act effectively and in union to

influence events in the region and serve as catalysts in the peace process was indeed very limited. The predominant outside actor in the Middle East since the mid 1950s had been the United States; and Western Europe only recently succeeded in playing a more active role in the Arab-Israeli conflict and in disputing US primacy in the area.

NOTES

1. For a general review of this tension see L. T. Haddar, "Meddling in the Middle East? Europe Challenges U. S. Hegemony in the Region", *Mediterranean Quarterly*, 7/4 (1996), pp. 40-54.

2. The bibliography on the European policy in the Middle East and on Euro-Arab relations is voluminous. See, for example, J. Bourrinet (ed.), *Le Dialogue Euro-Arabe*, Paris, Economica, 1979; B. Khader (ed.), *Coopération Euro-Arabe*, Louvain-la-Neuve, Cermac, 1982; D. Allen and A. Pijpers (eds), *European Foreign Policy-Making and the Arab-Israeli Conflict*, the Hague, Martinus Nijhoff publishers, 1984; P. Ifestos, *European Political Co-operation: Towards a Framework of Supranational Diplomacy?,* Aldershot (UK)-Brookfield (USA), Avebury, 1987; H. A. Jawad, *Euro-Arab Relations. A study in Collective Diplomacy*, Reading, Ithaca Press, 1992; E. Laipson, "Europe's Role in the Middle East: Enduring Ties, Emerging Opportunities", *Middle East Journal*, 44/1 (1990), pp. 7-17; the special issue of the *Middle East Journal* 48/2 (1994); and, more recently, B. Roberson (ed.), *The Middle East and Europe: The Power Deficit*, London, Routledge, 1998; S. Behrendt and C.-P. Hanelt, *Bound to Cooperate - Europe and the Middle East*, Gutersloh, Bertelsmann Foundation, 2001.

3. I. Greilsammer and J. Weiler, "European Political Co-operation and the Palestinian-Israeli Conflict: An Israeli Perspective". In D. Allen and A. Pijpers (eds), *op. cit.*, pp. 131-2.

4. D. Moisi, "Europe and the Middle East". In S. L. Spiegel (ed.), *The Middle East and the Western Alliance*, London, George Allen and Unwin, 1982, pp. 18-32.

5. S. J. Artner, "The Middle East: A Change for Europe?", *International Affairs*, 56/3 (1980), p. 430.

6. Ibid., p. 431; H. Maull, "The Strategy of Avoidance: Europe's Middle East Policies after the October War". In J. C. Hurewitz (ed.), *Oil, the Arab-Israeli Dispute, and the Industrial World: Horizons of Crisis*, Boulder-Colorado, Westview Press, 1976, p. 118.

7. Greilsammer and Weiler, *op.cit.*, p. 133.

8. On the 1973 October War see especially H. Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, Boston, Little Brown, 1982, pp. 581-601 and *Years of Renewal*, New York, Simon and Schuster, 1999; R. L. Garthoff, *Détente and Confrontation: American-Soviet Relations from Nixon to Reagan*, Washington, Brookings, 1985, pp. 376-80; A. H. Cordesman and A. R. Wagner, *The Lessons of Modern War*, vol. 1 (The Arab-Israeli Conflicts, 1973-89, pp. 14-116), Boulder, Westview Press 1990; P. R. Kumaraswamy (ed.), *Revisiting the Yom Kippur War,* London, Frank Cass, 2000; W. B. Quandt, *Peace Process. American Diplomacy and the Arab-Israeli Conflict Since 1967,* Berkeley, 2001; V. Israelyan, "The October 1973 War: Kissinger in Moscow", *Middle East Journal*, 49/2 (1995), pp. 248-268.

9. R. J. Lieber, *Oil and the Middle East War: Europe in the Energy Crisis*, Cambridge-Mass., Harvard University Press, 1976; H. Maull, *Europe and the World Energy*, London, Butterworths, 1980; A. Y. Sayigh, *Arab Oil Policies in the 1970s*, London, Croom Helm, 1983; Kohl, W. (ed.), *After the Oil Price Collapse: OPEC, the United States and World Oil Market*, John Hopkins University Press, 1991.

10. For Kissinger's diplomacy in the Middle East see his above mentioned memoirs (n.8). For the US-Israeli "special relationship" see R. J. Lieber, "US-Israeli Relations Since 1948", MERIA journal, 2/3 (1998), meria.idc.ac.il/journal/1998; S. W. Lewis, "The United States and Israel: Evolution of an Unwritten Alliance", *Middle East Journal* 53/3 (1999), pp. 364-78; A. Ben-Zvi, *Decade of Transition: Eisenhower, Kennedy, and the Origins of the American-Israeli Alliance*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1998.

11. Even a small and pro-western country like Greece, with a military regime at the time,declared itself neutral in the Arab-Israeli conflict. The Greek dictators even refused to acceed to an American request for the extention of US facilities in the country, including the use of the military airport at Elefsina, near Athens. See J. Sakkas, "The Greek Dictatorship, the USA and the Arabs, 1967-74", *Journal of Southern Europe and the Balkans*, 6/3 (2004), pp. 245-57.

12. Maull, "The Strategy…", p. 117; I. Sus, "Western Europe and the October War", *Journal of Palestine Studies*, 3/2 (1974), pp. 65-83.

13. Sus, *op. cit.*, p. 77.

14. For the text of the November statement see Y. Lukacs (ed.), *The Israel-Palestinisn Conflict. A Documentary Record, 1967-1990*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1992, pp. 13-14.

15. *Bulletin of the European Communities*, 6, no. 12, 1973, p.11.

16. D. Allen, "The Euro-Arab Dialogue", *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 16 (1977-78), p. 328.

17. A. R. Taylor, "The Euro-Arab Dialogue: Quest for an International Partnership?", *Middle East Journa*l, 32/4 (1978), pp. 429-43.

18. *International Herald Tribune*, 10 Nov. 1973.

19. *Keesing's Contemporary Archives*, p. 26,294.

20. Ibid., p. 26,293.

21. Lieber, *op.cit.*, p. 40.

22. Ibid., p. 22.

23. Ibid., p. 23.

24. *Keesing's Contemporary Archives*, p. 26,430.

25. Ibid., p. 26,457; *NewYork Times*, 16 March 1974.

26. *New York Times*, 20 March 1974.

27. The content of the agreement was given by the German foreign minister, Hans-Dietrich Genscher, at his press conference on 11 June. *New York Times*, 12 June 1974.

28. Ifestos, *op.cit.*, pp. 181-183.