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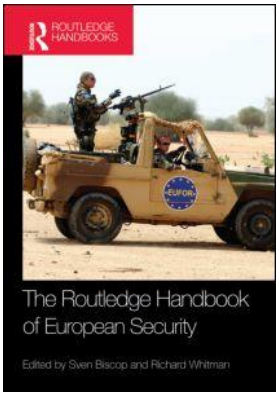

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Europe, the Southern Neighbourhood and the Middle East

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EUROPE, THE SOUTHERN NEIGHBOURHOOD AND THE MIDDLE EAST

Struggling for coherence

Costanza Musu

Europe's relations with the broader Mediterranean area are complex and deeply affected by the legacy of intricate historical ties.[1] Several members of the European Union have a past as colonial and Mandate powers in the region; World War II and the Holocaust cast a long shadow on relations with Israel; and the Mediterranean Sea has long been both the meeting point of the 'North' and the 'South' and the fracture line dividing three continents: Europe, North Africa and Asia.

Since the end of the Cold War the European Union (EU) has attempted to systematically identify and conceptualize its ties and interests in the region, and to elaborate a comprehensive and coherent policy that would reinforce its relations with the 'Southern Neighbourhood' and promote at the same time the EU's values and interests. However, while in developing its relations with Eastern Europe and former communist bloc countries the EU has been able to utilize the prospect of accession as a powerful tool of negotiations, no such possibility is on the table for the Southern partners, and this has left the EU struggling in its attempts to build effective and comprehensive initiatives. Relations have been further complicated (at times to the point of paralysis) by the unresolved Arab–Israeli conflict, which has been and continues to be a constant source of tension.

It is important to underline that for Europe, Middle East policy overlaps with Mediterranean policy. The EU considers the Mediterranean as a coherent geo-strategic region, and in this perspective it sees political instability in the Middle East as a potential danger to the political stability of the whole region. As Volker Perthes put it:

> [T]he European discourse alternatively emphasises Europe's common destiny with the peoples of the region and its responsibility for furthering peace, democracy and development among its neighbours, or European security and economic interests which require both socio-economic development and political progress in the region including, prominently, the peaceful regulation of the Arab–Israeli conflict.
>
> (Perthes, 2000: 43)

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There are several reasons that explain why and how the Mediterranean matters to Europe: its potential for political and social instability; the uncontrolled migration flows generated by the scarcity of jobs and North–South economic disparity; the dependence of Europe on the energy resources of the Southern Mediterranean region (particularly gas); the possibility that countries in the Southern Mediterranean region might prove to be a fertile breeding ground for terrorism; the importance of the Mediterranean's transit points (the Straits of Gibraltar, the Dardanelles/Bosporus Straits, the Sicilian Channel and the Suez Canal), all critical both in terms of the energy security of the West and the general stability of maritime trade routes; and, as mentioned, the unresolved Arab–Israeli conflict, which is a constant source of tension.

The European Union has tried to build regional initiatives that would create positive linkages around common interests, and has attempted to improve South Mediterranean economies and thus prevent uncontrolled migration flows towards Europe. It has also endeavoured to organize relations along the guidelines of basic shared European values, such as the spread of democratic values, the rule of law and respect for human rights. Parallel but connected to these efforts have been the EU's attempts at cutting for itself a significant role in the Arab–Israeli peace process, attempts that in fact date back to the early 1970s and have become more consistent and systematic since 1991.

The EU's record of success with these initiatives is at best mixed. As this chapter will show, a number of factors have weakened the incisiveness of Europe's policies, including the persistence of sometimes conflicting European national agendas, the inherent contradictions of some aspects of the EU's strategy towards the region, the reluctance of several Southern Mediterranean governments to carry out significant reforms and the constant interference of the Arab–Israeli conflict that has severely hampered progress towards regional integration.

This chapter first analyses the strategic documents and official declarations that have defined the guidelines of the EU's policy towards the Mediterranean region. It then critically assesses and evaluates the EU's concrete policy initiatives. The analysis then focuses on the EU's policy towards the Arab–Israeli peace process. Finally, the conclusion offers a discussion of the way forward, especially in light of the political evolution in the EU's Southern Neighbourhood after the sudden regime changes in Tunisia and Egypt at the beginning of 2011.

Defining a strategy: milestones of EU policy towards the Mediterranean region

From the Barcelona Declaration to the Union for the Mediterranean

After the end of the Cold War, and with the intensification of the EU's relations with Eastern Europe, the southern EU member states increasingly requested a rebalancing of the Union's commitments towards Central and Eastern European countries and the South, as well as a revaluation of the Mediterranean region as a foreign policy priority. The so-called Mediterranean lobby (mostly Italy, France and Spain) within the Union became a 'vociferous advocate of a new approach' (Gomez, 1998: 140), and their pressures eventually led to the organization of a conference in Barcelona in 1995 to discuss ways of promoting a regional dialogue and co-operation, with the aim of reducing economic, social and demographic imbalances existing between the two shores of the Mediterranean.

The EU's long-term strategic approach to the Mediterranean region was focused on four objectives:

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- first, to promote democratization, since – in the European experience – democratic structures have proven to be efficient instruments of conflict resolution within states, and also effective in diminishing the risk of conflicts erupting between states;
- second, to promote economic development and integration, an objective based on the assumption that free-market economies and liberalized international trade relations improve overall standards of living;
- third, to contribute to the construction of a framework of effective regional institutions, which could provide mechanisms for the peaceful resolution of conflicts;
- fourth, to favour a broader cultural dialogue underpinning all levels of political, economic and social interactions, in order to promote a Mediterranean identity on which more stable cross-regional relations could be based (Behrendt and Hanelt, 2000: 13).

The 1995 Conference approved the Barcelona Declaration, which endorsed the creation of a Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP) between the then 15 EU member states and 12 Mediterranean Partners: Algeria, Cyprus, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Malta, Morocco, Syria, Tunisia, Turkey and the Palestinian Authority.

To use the words of former Commission Vice President Manuel Marin, 'The Euro-Mediterranean Partnership provided for the first time a clear geopolitical and economic scenario for a priority region in the Union's foreign policy, and it designed a far-reaching double structure at both the multilateral and bilateral level.'[2]

The EMP (also known as the Barcelona Process, BP) had three main declared objectives or pillars: to establish a common Euro-Mediterranean area of peace and stability, to create an area of shared prosperity through the establishment of a free-trade area and to promote understanding between cultures and rapprochement of the peoples in the Euro-Mediterranean region. It was designed to operate both at the bilateral and multilateral levels.

At the bilateral level, the BP's strategy consisted of concluding Euro-Mediterranean Association Agreements between the Union and its Mediterranean partners,[3] and establishing national indicative programmes for financial assistance under the Community's MEDA program.[4] In the multilateral or regional track, the EU and its Mediterranean Partners developed an architecture of regularly meeting co-ordination bodies including Euro-Mediterranean foreign ministers' conferences.

The Barcelona Process was meant from the beginning to be independent from but parallel to the Middle East peace process: the peace process would achieve the political breakthrough; the BP would set up the real conditions for long-term stability and economic development. It would also offer a forum for the parties involved in the peace process to meet in a different context from that of the difficult and controversial negotiations on political and security issues. However, it soon became apparent that the formal separation between the Partnership and the peace process could not serve to prevent the de facto linkages emerging between the processes, and that any progress in the field of Mediterranean regional co-operation was continuously hampered by the difficulties encountered by the peace process. In other words, the EU's aspiration to be able to keep the process of economic co-operation and development isolated from the spill-over of the political consequences of the stalemate in the peace process proved to be an illusion (Musu, 2010).

In June 2000 the EU adopted a 'Common Strategy for the Mediterranean Region'. The Strategy built on the EMP and restated the European Union's goal of helping to secure peace, stability and prosperity in the region. It also acknowledged the inevitable link between any possible progress in the field of regional co-operation and a successful outcome of the Middle

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East peace process, stating that 'The EU is convinced that the successful conclusion of the Middle East Peace Process on all its tracks, and the resolution of other conflicts in the region, are important prerequisites for peace and stability in the Mediterranean.'[5]

The same concepts were picked up and repeated in the 2003 European Security Strategy[6] and later in the 2006 Regional Strategy Paper for the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership,[7] which again underlined the strategic importance of the Mediterranean region to the EU in both economic and political terms, and identified three priority objectives for the EU:

- a common Euro-Mediterranean area of justice, security and migration co-operation;
- a common sustainable economic area, with a focus on trade liberalization, regional trade integration, infrastructure networks and environmental protection;
- a common sphere for socio-cultural exchanges.

Despite the political and economic commitments on the part of the EU, the Barcelona Process failed to yield any significant progress in these areas. In 2008 the French EU Presidency launched a new initiative and announced the creation of a 'Union for the Mediterranean', with the objective of infusing new life into the faltering Euro-Mediterranean Partnership. The initiative met initially with some resistance from within the EU itself, especially because it was not clear how it would fit with the existing structures of the Barcelona Process and whether it would end up adding another layer to the already complex picture of the EU's policies vis-à-vis the region (Emerson, 2008). Internal EU negotiations transformed the 'new' project into the official policy of the EU towards the Mediterranean, so that all future EMP initiatives would be implemented through the Union for the Mediterranean, but per se the Union for the Mediterranean offered little if any new substance to the pre-existing frameworks.

The bilateral dimension: the European Neighbourhood Policy and the Action Plans

In 2004, in the context of enlargement to ten new countries, the EU developed the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) with the objective of 'avoiding the emergence of new dividing lines between the enlarged EU and its neighbours, and of strengthening the prosperity, stability and security of all concerned'.[8] The ENP applies to the EU's immediate neighbours and includes the Mediterranean partners of the Barcelona Process. The objective of the ENP is to deepen the EU's bilateral relations with neighbouring states, partly as a means of using the bilateral approach to overcome the blockages inherent in region-wide policies such as the Barcelona Process. In fact with the introduction of the ENP the Barcelona Process essentially became the multilateral forum of dialogue and co-operation between the EU and its Mediterranean partners, while complementary bilateral relations were managed mainly under the ENP and through Association Agreements signed with each partner country.

The central elements of the ENP are the bilateral Action Plans (APs) agreed between the EU and each partner, which set out an agenda of political and economic reforms. At the beginning of 2011 the EU had signed Action Plans with several Mediterranean partners: Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Morocco, Tunisia, the Palestinian Authority and Lebanon. While the Barcelona Process (in its revamped format of Union for the Mediterranean) remains the cornerstone of the partnership with the Mediterranean, the Neighbourhood Policy is supposed to give the EU the chance to work more flexibly to meet the interests of each Southern Mediterranean country, also through the new European Neighbourhood

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and Partnership Instrument, which in 2007 replaced the already mentioned MEDA programme, until then the principal financial instrument of the EU for the implementation of the Barcelona Process.

From the above analysis it appears clear that the EU has both recognized the importance of building good relations with its Southern Mediterranean neighbours and dedicated a large amount of resources, both political and economic, to the task. At the same time it is difficult to claim that the EU has been able to achieve its objectives, primarily those of bringing about significant economic development and introducing deep democratic change.

One major obstacle hampered European strategy for years: the persistence of authoritarian governments in the region. The EU has tried to build a strong civil society in the Southern Mediterranean countries, introduce the rule of law, promote transparency and accountability in the armed forces and improve economies. At the same time, however, its main partners in the introduction of these profound changes have been authoritarian governments and regimes that had a lot to lose from the introduction of these very reforms, since their survival was guaranteed by the absence of a strong and politically aware civil society and by an alliance with the armed forces that perpetuated their grip on power and the economy. Furthermore, the introduction of a Euro-Mediterranean free-trade area has been hampered by the almost complete absence of South–South commercial and economic relations. The introduction of ENP and the shift of the focus to bilateral relations underline the continued presence of insurmountable obstacles in the development of an effective regional framework.

The events of early 2011, which brought about the downfall of the authoritarian regimes in Tunisia and Egypt, were received with a mixture of hope and apprehension in Europe's capitals. While enthusiasm for these popular revolutions opened the door to the hope of a new democratic phase in the region, there was a marked preoccupation with the transitions' final outcome, compounded by the uncertainly with regard to the role that Islamic parties would play in the new governments. At the time of writing events are still unfolding at a very fast pace, and popular demonstrations are starting to shake Algeria and Jordan. While the final outcome in each country is still unclear, it appears evident that these protests signal a deep change in these countries' societies, where millions of educated but impoverished citizens have ceased to be scared of their regimes and taken to the streets in an attempt to take their destiny back in their hands.

EU policy towards the Middle East peace process

Shaping the guidelines of a common European policy

The Arab–Israeli conflict and the subsequent peace process have been among the most strongly debated issues by EU member states, not only since the creation of the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) in 1991, but since the establishment of European Political Co-operation (EPC) in 1970. The peace process has been the subject of innumerable joint declarations and joint actions on the part first of the European Community and later of the European Union, and as such it has always remained a high priority issue on Europe's foreign policy agenda.

Many of the key principles of the EU's strategy toward the conflict have been laid out already in the 1980 Venice Declaration, and are still valid today. They include the centrality of the Palestinian question, the need to achieve a two-state solution, the importance attached to UN resolutions and to the principles of international law and the insistence on the need

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for all the relevant issues to be taken on simultaneously through the convening of an international peace conference where regional actors could meet in a multilateral framework.

While the member states of the European Union have found a basic agreement around these fundamental principles, the EU has struggled to cut an important role for itself in the peace process. The reasons for this difficulty lie in the contradictions of different member states' positions and agendas, in the United States' desire to maintain control over the peace process and in Israel's reluctance to accept the EU as a mediator.

Since 2002 the EU has been an official member of the so-called Quartet for Peace in the Middle East, alongside the USA, the UN and Russia. An initiative heralded by the US State Department in the wake of the 9/11 attacks, the Quartet represents a – limited – attempt on the part of the United States to advance the stalled Middle East peace process pursuing a multilateral approach, with co-operation with European governments as a key factor. The Quartet elaborated a 'Roadmap to a Permanent Two-State Solution to the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict', partially based on European ideas, that laid out a phased plan for the resolution of the conflict. While the Quartet has clearly failed to bring about a resolution to the conflict, the EU's participation in this initiative has arguably marked an important qualitative shift in Europe's role in the peace process, tying it to that of the USA and reinforcing the EU's credibility as an official mediator.

The 2003 European Security Strategy mentioned the conflict in the Middle East among the key threats that impact on European interests directly and indirectly. It restated the EU's commitment to its resolution while also underlining that 'regional conflicts need political solutions but military assets and effective policing may be needed in the post conflict phase. Economic instruments serve reconstruction, and civilian crisis management helps restore civil government. The European Union is particularly well equipped to respond to such multi-faceted situations.'[9] The words of the ESS underline Europe's desire to cut for itself a prominent role in the peace process, a role that could require not only economic instruments, but also military instruments and the specific civilian crisis management expertise that the EU has accumulated since the creation of the Common Foreign and Security Policy.

The policy initiatives: economic aid

For a long time Europe's role in the peace process has been mostly economic, a fact that has led many to call the EU 'a payer but not a player'. In the past two decades the EU's direct economic support of the peace process has indeed been enormous: the EU is the largest donor of non-military aid to the MEPP, and it's also the first donor of financial and technical assistance to the Palestinian Authority (PA).[10] The PA is also a full partner within the European Neighbourhood Policy, and a joint EU–PA Action Plan concluded in 2005 sets the agenda for economic and political co-operation with the EU. In 2008 the EU created PEGASE (Mécanisme Palestino-Européen de Gestion de l'Aide Socio-Économique), which channels EU assistance to support a Palestinian Reform and Development Plan prepared by the Palestinian Authority.[11] EU support has been a lifeline for the Palestinian people, providing much-needed economic support meant to prevent a complete collapse and humanitarian catastrophe in the occupied territories; on the other hand, the PEGASE mechanism has focused EU efforts more on crisis management and less on institution building and development, two goals that remain crucial to ensure the viability of the future Palestinian state.

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The policy initiatives: diplomacy

Arguably one of the most significant steps taken by the EU in its policy towards the peace process has been the creation in 1996 of the position of EU Special Envoy (now Special Representative, SR) to the Middle East Peace Process through the adoption of a CFSP joint action.[12] The main objective of this appointment was to pursue better co-ordination of individual member state policies; undeniably Mr Moratinos first and later Mr Otte have not only contributed significantly to the preparation of common positions and the development of European initiatives aimed at promoting progress in the peace negotiations, but have also participated directly in many stages of these negotiations, earning the trust and respect of all the main actors involved. The problem, however, is that their activities have been hampered by the very terms of their mandate, which is formally quite broad but still provides that their action must take place in a strictly intergovernmental framework.[13] The SR is guided by and reports to the Presidency and the Council of the European Union; as a result, his scope for autonomous initiative is very limited and tightly bound to the indications he receives from the Council. He cannot officially commit any member state to any step which has not been previously agreed upon, and it is therefore hard to envisage for him a role beyond that of 'facilitator' of the peace talks.

The policy initiatives: CSDP missions

In June 2004 EU leaders declared their readiness to support the Palestinian Authority in taking responsibility for law and order and, in particular, in improving its civil police and law enforcement capacity. In January 2005 the EU Co-ordination Office for Palestinian Police Support (EU COPPS)[14] was established within the office of the EU Special Representative Marc Otte. In November the Council established the so-called EUPOL COPPS mission, a civilian mission in the framework of the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) which builds on the work of EU COPPS and aims at contributing to the establishment of effective policing arrangements under Palestinian ownership in accordance with international standards. The mission was set to start operating in January 2006, but was largely paralysed after Hamas' electoral victory and started operating – and only in the West Bank – after the Hamas–Fatah split of June 2007. EUPOL COPPS is rather small, with 32 unarmed members of staff, of whom 27 are seconded from EU member states and 5 are local. The Head of Mission receives guidance from the High Representative for CFSP, through the Special Representative Mr Otte. The mission also co-ordinates EU member states' and international assistance to the Palestinian Civil Police and advises on police-related criminal justice elements, activities in line with EU's efforts in building and reinforcing Palestinian institutions.

In November 2005 the Council of the EU agreed to establish another civilian mission under the CSDP. The mission, called EUBAM Rafah (EU Border Assistant Mission Rafah), was tasked with monitoring the operations of the Rafah border-crossing point between Gaza and Egypt, in accordance with the 'Agreement on Movement and Access' signed by Israel and the Palestinian Authority following the unilateral withdrawal of Israel from the Gaza Strip. The operational phase of the Mission began on 30 November 2005 and was meant to last 12 months. In 2007 the Council adopted another joint action extending the mandate of the mission by a year. The operations of EUBAM, however, were suspended in June 2007 due to the Hamas takeover of the Gaza Strip. Since the closure of the crossing point the mission has maintained its operational capability, and the European Union has announced that it is prepared to redeploy its personnel at the border as soon as conditions permit.

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There are two ways to look at this operation. On the one hand it can be seen as a qualitative step forward in EU's involvement in the security dimension of the peace process. For the first time a small group of EU military personnel (90 police and custom officers) were called in to supervise a check point previously under Israeli control and to monitor the compliance of the Palestinian Authority with the principles of the 'Agreement on Movement and Access'. The initiative was limited, and Israel maintained the right to close the crossing point; nevertheless the EU had for the first time visible 'boots on the ground'. On the other hand EUBAM turned out to be largely a failure: while it did succeed in facilitating the crossing of almost half a million people, it was also constantly hostage to the developments on the ground. As Colonel Faugeras, the Head of EUBAM, put it in an interview in 2009, '[The] EU's job was limited when it came to security. It has monitors at Rafah … but it is not an enforcement body; its role is to report observations to Israel and the Palestinian Authority.'[15] The consequences of this limited mandate are that EUBAM was unable to really control the security situation or the building of tunnels between Gaza and Egypt (used to smuggle everything from arms and explosives to food and cigarettes) and, when Hamas took power in June 2007, it could do nothing but suspend operations and wait in hope that an agreement would be reached between Israel, the Palestinian Authority, Hamas and Egypt. All this resulted in no real improvement or consolidation of the EU's credibility as a security actor in the eyes of both the Palestinians and the Israelis.

Essentially, after years of efforts to gain political influence, and having poured huge sums of money into the peace process, the European Union still finds itself today in a secondary role. It is however worth underlining two crucial issues. First, the basic principles that have guided Europe's policy since 1980, i.e. the centrality of the Palestinian question and the pursuit of a two-state solution, have now become accepted by all the actors involved in the peace process, including the United States and, albeit reluctantly, Israel. Second, there are limits to how much any external actor, including the United States, can aspire to influence the outcome of the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians. As the European Security Strategy underlined, 'Implementing [the two-state solution] 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.'

Conclusion

In early 2011 the situation in the Southern Mediterranean countries is in turmoil. Winds of change are sweeping several partners of the Euro Mediterranean Partnership, including Tunisia, Egypt, Jordan and Algeria. The EU and its member states, like all other Western countries, have had mixed reactions to the unfolding events. Hope for a democratic future for the region is intertwined with fear for the uncertainty that these sudden regime changes are bringing about. Questions about the type and length of the democratic transition, the role of the armed forces, the space that political Islam will have in the new governments and the stability of the region are being raised. The EU's reaction to regime change in Tunisia and, even more, in Egypt has been extremely prudent, and support for the 'hopes of the people' has been mixed with calls for calmness, peaceful transitions and the maintenance of regional stability.

While the role of external actors in these fundamentally national transformation processes is, and should be, limited, the EU has a duty to indicate its support for democratic change, but also an opportunity to favour it, by offering for example support for the organization and monitoring of new elections, and by relaunching programmes for the consolidation of civil society, democracy and the rule of law.

Notes

1 This chapter will refer to the broader Mediterranean as an area that includes North Africa (Algeria, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, Tunisia) and the Levant (Egypt, Israel, the Palestinian Territories, Jordan, Lebanon and Syria).

2 See 'The Role of the European Union in the Middle East Peace Process and its Future Assistance', Executive Summary of the Communication to the Council of Ministers and the European Parliament made by Manuel Marin, Vice President of the European Commission, European Commission, 26 January 1998.

3 The provisions of the Euro-Mediterranean Association Agreements governing bilateral relations vary from one Mediterranean Partner to the other but have certain aspects in common: (a) political dialogue; (b) respect for human rights and democracy; (c) establishment of WTO-compatible free trade over a transitional period of up to 12 years; (d) provisions relating to intellectual property, services, public procurement, competition rules, state aids and monopolies; (e) economic co-operation in a wide range of sectors; (f) co-operation relating to social affairs and migration (including readmission of illegal immigrants); (g) cultural co-operation.

4 Until 2007 the MEDA (mesures d'accompagnement financières et techniques) programme was the principal financial instrument of the European Union for the implementation of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership. The Programme offers technical and financial support measures to accompany the reform of economic and social structures in the Mediterranean partner countries.

5 The Common Strategy for the Mediterranean, available at http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cmsUpload/mediEN.pdf.

6 Available at http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cmsUpload/78367.pdf.

7 Available at http://ec.europa.eu/world/enp/pdf/country/enpi_euromed_rsp_en.pdf.

8 http://ec.europa.eu/world/enp/policy_en.htm.

9 'A Secure Europe in a Better World'. European Security Strategy. 12 December 2003. Available at http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cmsUpload/78367.pdf.

10 See http://europa.eu.int/comm/external_relations.

11 See http://www.delwbg.ec.europa.eu/en/funding/pegas_documents.htm.

12 The first Special Representative appointed was Mr Miguel Angel Moratinos, who was succeeded in 2003 by Mr Marc Otte.

13 The annual mandate, successively prolonged by the Council of Ministers until today, gives wide-ranging responsibilities (see http://consilium.europa.eu/cms3_fo/showPage.asp?id=452&lang=EN), which include among others:

- to establish and maintain close contact with all the parties to the peace process, and all other key regional and international countries and organizations;
- to observe negotiations and to be ready to offer the EU's advice and good offices should the parties request this;
- to contribute, where requested, to the implementation of agreements reached between the parties, and to engage with them diplomatically in the event of non-compliance with the terms of these agreements;
- to engage constructively with signatories to agreements within the framework of the peace process in order to promote compliance with the basic norms of democracy, including respect of human rights and the rule of law.

14 See http://www.consilium.europa.eu/ueDocs/cms_Data/docs/pressData/en/declarations/84603.pdf.

15 See 'EUBAM head: Keeping Rafah open is the trick', *Jerusalem Post*, 6 February 2009, at http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cmsUpload/090206JerusalemPostEUBAMHEADKeepingGazabordeopenisthetrick.pdf.

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