

We Believe in Change: Europe, the Middle East, and the Future of Transatlantic Cooperation

By Almut Möller

The remarkably dense media coverage in Europe on the pre-election campaign in the United States is a tell tale sign: America is voting and Europeans are fascinated. Ask any average European these days and you will be surprised to hear him commenting on details of Ohio's electoral system or the role of the superdelegates, and he will most likely have watched Barack Obama's speech on Pastor Jeremiah Wright and Hillary Clinton's tale of sniper fire in Tuzla on YouTube. But the real interest lies in the outcome. The November 2008 presidential election in any case will mark the end of the George W. Bush era. "Europeans realize that whereas they have no vote, the outcome of the U.S. election could in some ways impact them nearly as much as it does Americans themselves," Philip Gordon of the Brookings Institution recently stated.¹

Looking back, for many Europeans President Bush's second election into office was bad news. So Europeans today want to believe that the new president *will* make a difference, and, furthermore, could indeed—depending on who will eventually win the race—make a *real* difference. It seems that by obsessing over the details of the candidates' campaigns, Europeans believe they can better calculate the risks and prospects of the next presidency, and they want to forecast *how much* change they can actually expect.

Average Europeans know and also tend to like Hillary Clinton, because they know and liked her husband. Europeans seem somewhat surprised at Barack Obama's rise. They do not know exactly how to place him yet, but he seems to personify really good news from a country that Europeans—especially young Europeans—judged based on Michael Moore's films from the past few years. In any case, the average European will most likely conclude: a Democrat would mean more of a difference than a Republican. But how would a young Arab see this, being more affected by U.S. policies in his region than any European?

I am not an expert on U.S. foreign policy, and even less on U.S. domestic policy. So far, I have worked *in* Europe and *on* Europe, and when it comes to the 2008 U.S. presidential election campaign, I consider myself one of these average Europeans. Having worked on EU-Mediterranean and Middle East relations in Washington during the election campaign and therefore having had the chance for a temporary change in perspective, I would like to offer some reflections on what I have observed.

Middle East Policies at the Forefront

U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East, in particular the war in Iraq, is at the forefront of hopes for change, both for citizens in the U.S. and in Europe. Five years after the invasion, the war in Iraq is the top foreign policy issue in the run-up to the presidential elections. In a wider regional perspective, the Iranian nuclear program is also a top issue in debates. With a new attempt currently underway to negotiate a two-state solution by the end of 2008, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and its regional dimension have also found a place on the agenda. Three years after the freedom agenda was laid out by President Bush in his Second Inaugural Address², the

¹ See Philip H. Gordon: Europeans and the U.S. Election, March 24, 2008 ([UDownload hereU](#)).

² George W. Bush: Celebrating Freedom, Honoring Service, Second Inaugural Address, January 20, 2005 ([UDownload hereU](#)); Secretary Condoleezza Rice: Remarks at the American University in Cairo, June 20, 2005 ([UDownload hereU](#)).

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candidates have also made statements on the topics of fighting terrorism and democratization in the Middle East.

However, it is arguably questionable whether the candidates' foreign policy speeches and declarations during the election campaign will be of any relevance for actual policies once the new president starts his or her term in office. The same is true for the question of where European-U.S. relations in the Middle East will be moving in the future. But I believe that observing the campaign is nevertheless useful, as it gives added insight into how the candidates look at the Middle East, which issues they address, and in what way they do it. What kind of policies this will translate to later on is another question which must be addressed after January 2009.

Now, looking at their positions in more detail, what are the candidates' stances on Iraq, Iran, the Arab-Israeli conflict, democratization, and terrorism? As a starting point, the statements of Hillary Clinton, John McCain, and Barack Obama in *Foreign Affairs* in the summer and fall of 2007 gave a comprehensive insight into their foreign policy programs.³ As the primaries and caucuses were accelerating in the beginning of 2008, the candidates' speeches, interviews, press statements, and websites became additional sources of information. Once the Republican nomination was de facto decided in March 2008 in favor of Senator McCain and the Democrats were getting closer to the nomination, the campaign again gained in substance. The fifth anniversary of the invasion in Iraq in March 2008 created widespread public attention and pressured the candidates to further elaborate on their positions. As his nomination had already been decided, McCain had a competitive advantage: he actually started to *do* foreign policy instead of just talking about it. So as McCain traveled to Iraq, Israel, France, and the UK in mid March 2008—criticizing President Bush's Iraq policy⁴ while President Bush gave a speech in Washington commemorating five years of war in Iraq⁵—Clinton and Obama sketched their plans for Iraq in respective speeches on the home front.⁶

The future of U.S. policy in the Middle East is also widely discussed in Washington's government, academic, and think-tank community. These days you will find books like Michael Scheuer's "Marching Toward Hell: America and Islam after Iraq"⁷ or former State Department official Aaron D. Miller's "Much Too Promised Land." Tamara Wittes of the Brookings Institution has just published on the future of the freedom agenda; Carnegie's Middle East experts have presented a report on "The New Middle East"; Robin Wright traveled to the Middle East again and came back with "Dreams and Shadows"; Dennis Ross' book "Statecraft And How to Restore America's Standing in the World" with chapters on Iraq, Iran, and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is in stores; and a new study, based on Gallup polls, by John Esposito and Dalia Mogahed adds an empirical

³ Hillary R. Clinton: Security and Opportunity for the Twenty-first Century, in: *Foreign Affairs*, No. 6 (November/December 2007), pp. 2-18; John McCain: An Enduring Peace Built on Freedom. Securing America's Future, in: *Foreign Affairs*, No. 6 (November/December 2007), pp 19-35; Barack Obama: Renewing American Leadership, in: *Foreign Affairs*, No 4 (July/August 2007), pp. 2-16.

⁴ McCain geißelt Bushs Irak-Politik, Spiegel Online, 19 March 2008.

⁵ President Bush Discusses Global War on Terror, Speech at the Pentagon, March 19, 2008 ([UDownload hereU](#)).

⁶ Iraq: Hillary Clinton's Remarks at The George Washington University, Washington D.C., March 17, 2008; The World Beyond Iraq, remarks of Barack Obama in Fayetteville, North Carolina, March 19, 2008.

⁷ Compared to Washington, European language is terribly sober. Washington is entertaining, and entertainment, as I have observed arriving in the week of the Super Bowl and Super Tuesday, means a lot in this country.

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perspective to “What a Billion Muslims Really Think.”⁸ My impression, however, was that while these debates were all rich in criticism about the current administration’s failures in the Middle East, they were lacking in policy proposals about how to do things better in the future. Those usually remained on a rather abstract or declaratory level.

Some Distinctive Features of the Candidates and What They Could Mean for the Future of Transatlantic Cooperation in the Middle East

The following synopsis offers a comprehensive overview on the candidates’ stances. I will briefly discuss the main findings in the next paragraph.⁹

See next page for chart

⁸ Michael Scheuer: *Marching Toward Hell: America and Islam after Iraq*, Free Press 2008; Aaron D. Miller: *The Much Too Promised Land. America’s Elusive Search for Arab-Israeli Peace*, Random House 2008; Tamara Wittes: *Freedom’s Unsteady March. America’s Role in Building Arab Democracy*, Brookings Institution Press 2008; Marina Ottaway, Nathan Brown, Amr Hamzawy, Karim Sadjadpour, Paul Salem: *The New Middle East*, Carnegie Endowment Report, February 2008 ([Download here](#)); Robin Wright: *Dreams and Shadows. The Future of the Middle East*, The Penguin Press 2008; Dennis Ross: *Statecraft and How to Restore America’s Standing in the World*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux 2007; John L. Esposito and Dalia Mogahed: *Who Speaks For Islam? What a Billion Muslims Really Think*, Gallup Press 2008.

⁹ This paper is only the starting point to a comprehensive study on the future of EU-U.S. relations in the Middle East. My intention is to contrast the findings of my research in Washington with the current debates centered on the Middle East in Europe’s capitals. This paper is only a preliminary attempt to illustrate some lines of potential convergence and divergence.

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Synopsis: The Candidates' Positions on the Future of U.S. Policies in the Middle East

	John McCain	Hillary Clinton	Barack Obama
<i>Iraq</i>	Iraq is the central front in the war against radical Islamist extremists; mismanagement and failure in Iraq, but no other choice than winning this war; more U.S. troops needed to give the Iraqis the capability to govern and secure their own country; pressure on Iran and Syria	"End this war responsibly"; well-planned withdrawal (two brigades each month) from early 2009; diplomatic initiative (key allies, other global powers, neighbors); regional stabilization group (incl. Iran and Syria); humanitarian initiative; special units to target al Qaeda and to protect Kurdish north	"Bring the war to a responsible end"; phased withdrawal of troops (16 months from 3/2008 on); minimal military presence; no permanent bases; comprehensive regional and international diplomatic initiative for Iraq (neighbors and UN)
<i>Iran</i>	Military option must remain on the table; directly confront the threat with tougher political and economic sanctions, if necessary outside the UN framework	Talk to Iran, but all options must remain on the table; be prepared to offer carefully calibrated package of incentives if Iran ends its nuclear weapons program	Military force not ruled out, but talk directly to Iran (sustained, direct, and aggressive diplomacy); international coalition to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons
<i>Israeli-Arab Conflict</i>	Peace must be a priority; Hamas must be isolated as the U.S. intensifies its commitment to the negotiations	Facilitate negotiations for the two-state solution; engage in regional diplomacy to gain Arab support	Strong commitment to the security of Israel; lasting settlement of the conflict through two-state solution; diplomacy combined with pressure toward Syria
<i>Democratization</i>	Nourishing a culture of hope and economic opportunity to prevent a new generation from joining the terrorist fight	Ensure that democracy delivers on its promises (making people's lives better rather than pushing for civil and political rights)	Commit to strengthening the pillars of just society; export opportunities (access to education and health care, trade and investment)
<i>Terrorism</i>	Defeating radical Islamist extremists is <i>the</i> national security challenge	Reinforce engagement in Afghanistan and Pakistan; better intelligence and a clandestine service "out in the streets"; rebuild alliances	Refocus efforts on Afghanistan and Pakistan in fighting al Qaeda; minimal military presence in Iraq to root out al Qaeda; 21 st century military and partnerships; intelligence reform
<i>Multilateralism</i>	"League of Democracies" that acts when the UN fails; revitalize the transatlantic partnership; welcome the rise of a strong EU; no unconditional dialogue with Iran and Syria	Make international institutions work and use them when possible; reestablish relationship of confidence and trust with Europe; bring India and China into the international arena	Rebuild and strengthen alliances, partnerships and institutions

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The candidates' positions on Middle East policies, as displayed in the synopsis, reveal that there are lines of convergence, but also a number of differences between their approaches, in particular between McCain on the one hand and Clinton/Obama on the other hand. This is significant when it comes to their proposals on how to deal with Iraq (withdrawal versus more troops) and Iran (willingness to talk versus rigid sanction policies), and also in the way the candidates address the problems of the region in more general terms. Here, one pervasive characteristic of John McCain's is that he tends to see the whole region through the prism of terrorism and Islamist extremism.

Another noticeable aspect is that despite a growing role as a regional player in the Middle East,¹⁰ Europe and the European Union are nonexistent in the U.S. debates. However, on the level of declarations there is a commitment to multilateralism, in particular from the Democratic candidates. They stress the importance of the existing international institutions as well as the constructive role that countries in the Middle East can play when they are willing to cooperate. McCain on the other hand supports multilateralism, but at the same time challenges the role of the UN by pushing the idea of a "League of Democracies."

Against this background, the Annapolis process, meant to lead to a peace treaty between Israel and the Palestinians by the end of 2008, is an interesting case. It is highly unlikely that it will be successfully concluded as envisaged by the end of President Bush's term (I know that many people would even disagree that there actually *is* something like an Annapolis process). There is a high risk of the process failing because it will not be handed over smoothly to the next administration. As far as I can see neither McCain nor Clinton or Obama offer ideas on how to deal with the moment of "rupture" that will occur once the U.S. has to pull out of its negotiation monitoring for a while. Here, the international community and in particular the EU could play a crucial role. In my view, the failure of the Annapolis process would be a fatal sign to Israelis, Palestinians, and their Arab neighbors. Support for negotiated solutions will further diminish in the Middle East.

But let's turn back to the candidates' positions. There seems to be a greater convergence between the Democratic candidates and Europe than between McCain and the Europeans. European states have either been against the war in Iraq from the beginning or, if once supportive, have started to withdraw their troops. Europe is actively engaging in the 'EU-3 plus Javier Solana plus 3 (U.S., China, Russia) format,' in which it is leading the talks with Iran. Europe is hesitant about keeping the military option for Iran on the table. Europeans tend to see the region through a wider lens than McCain's 'terrorist prism,' and therefore they are closer to Clinton's and Obama's policies of "enhancing opportunities for the people in the region" (in fact the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership initiated in 1995 precisely builds on this idea).

But the question is whether at the end of the day we will see a real change in U.S. policies in the Middle East from 2009 on. Once a new president enters into office he or she will have to face tough realities in the region, in particular in Iraq. It is highly questionable that a Democratic president will be able to withdraw troops as planned. Therefore, Europeans shouldn't expect too much change in Washington's Middle East policies, regardless of who eventually wins the race. But without any doubt tough topics will have to be discussed. Surprisingly, *the* foreign policy

¹⁰ Almut Möller: Securing the Future: Europe's Agenda for a More Peaceful Neighbourhood. Discussion Paper to the XIth Kronberg Talks "Europe and the Middle East", Bertelsmann Stiftung, 17-19 January 2008. *AICGS would like to thank the German American Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) for the support of this essay. This essay appeared in the May 30, 2008, AICGS Advisor.* <http://www.aicgs.org>

issue, Iraq, hasn't been seriously discussed in the transatlantic arena for quite some time. It will be extremely difficult to get Europeans and the U.S. back on track and talking to each other about Iraq. It appears that working with McCain may be difficult for the Europeans because of his positions. On the other hand, Clinton or Obama could make life even more difficult for the Europeans; a Democratic president with a more determined stance on multilateralism could ask for greater European involvement than a Republican. Also, it would be more difficult for Europe to deny support to a Democrat asking for greater European engagement.

Americans should, on the other hand, expect changes in Europe's Middle East policies, too. The EU and its member states have increased their engagement in the Middle East since the 1990s. Also, the EU has further developed the instruments of its foreign, security, and defense policy, most recently with the Treaty of Lisbon, that is anticipated to enter into force in 2009. The European agenda has shifted, too. Economic opportunities, in particular in the Gulf region as well as questions of energy security, have started to rank higher on the European agenda. Just now the European Union is discussing whether to reorganize its Mediterranean and Middle Eastern policies under the umbrella of a "Union for the Mediterranean." This is meant to be adopted by July 2008.¹¹ The next U.S. president should take the new European agenda in the region into account and make it a topic of a joint discussion. This is also relevant when it comes to the question of how the new rising powers such as China, India, Russia, and eventually Iran can be engaged in international and regional affairs.

Finally, it would be interesting to examine more closely how the countries and citizens *in the Middle East* are looking at Washington's 2008 presidential elections. Philip Gordon might be right in making the point that the Europeans have no vote in the U.S. elections, but that it will affect their future almost as much as the future of Americans. Even more so, it will affect the future of citizens in the Middle East. But I doubt that the same assumption that Gordon makes for Europe is true for the Middle East: of course the Middle East does not have a vote either. But some forces in the region have understood quite well that to an extent the race for who will become the next president of the U.S. will be decided and shaped by developments in their region in the months to come.

Almut Möller is an Associate Fellow at the Austrian Institute for European Security Policy in Maria Enzersdorf, Austria, and was a DAAD/AICGS Fellow at the American Institute for Contemporary German Studies (AICGS) at Johns Hopkins University, Washington, D.C. in February and March 2008. The author wishes to thank Jack Janes, Lily Gardner Feldman, and the whole AICGS team for their support.

¹¹ Almut Möller: Why Europeans Should Embrace the Idea of a Mediterranean Union, AICGS Advisor, March 21, 2008 ([Download here](#)U). AICGS would like to thank the German American Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) for the support of this essay. This essay appeared in the May 30, 2008, AICGS Advisor. <http://www.aicgs.org>