

## Europe and the Arab world: divided souls

► [Pierre Schori](#)

23 - 5 - 2007

**An intransigent western policy towards radicals in the Arab world, typified by the boycott and isolation of Hamas-led Palestine, is of benefit only to extremists. Europe must follow a better way, says Pierre Schori.**

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Can we Europeans continue to use the language of democracy promotion in the Arab world and, at the same time, pursue policies that negate in practice that which we advocate in theory? At a meeting of the [Arab Reform Initiative](#) (ARI) in Amman on [18-19 April 2007](#), Prince Turki al-Faisal outlined the new, [proactive](#) Saudi foreign policy: "Reform is imperative, not optional for the Arabs." The prince backed the ARI programme but rejected "external offerings... which present us with preconceived diagnoses and prescription...and perspectives that are very far from the regional reality."

Turki al-Faisal offered as an example of this promotion of "[democracy by force](#)" the project imposed on Iraq, which he described as an effort to "dress up this country in clothes made in Washington, in an attempt to transform the country from one day to the next into a different society which could serve as model for a new Arab world." For the prince, who is director of the [King Faisal Centre for Islamic Studies and Research](#), the failure of this policy is evident; "Democracy has become odious sectarianism, the government of the majority has become domination of the minority, justice has become oppression, the rule of law has given ground to domination by the militias and human rights have given way to the death sentence."

Al-Faisal, who was the Saudi [ambassador](#) in London and Washington between 2002 and February 2007 (and had been head of Saudi intelligence, 1977-2001), also had some hard words for the western boycott of the [Hamas](#) government of Palestine elected in January 2006; and for the war on terror, "an initiative which aims its arrows at the Arab and Muslim world." This policy, he concluded, had been instrumental in the deterioration of conditions in the Arab world and has "incited extremism and excesses and had encouraged some of our young people to look for a saviour, including a totalitarian and autocratic one."

The prince's speech was supported, especially in its references to the actual policies of the European Union and the United States

against the Palestinian government, by the ten representatives of the [research institutes](#) from the several countries in the region who make up the ARI.

## **Words and actions**

It's obvious that we Europeans who support reform in Arab countries are facing a problem. Not to speak up against the current EU position, the effects of which are very negative, makes us vulnerable to accusations of double standards. The combination of a refusal to recognise the democratically elected government of the occupied territories of Palestine and the economic punishment of this government makes it evident that Europeans do not take seriously our own declarations and calls for democracy in the Arab world. The failure is compounded by the fact that at the level of high diplomacy Washington and Brussels are showing signs of looking for a [rapprochement](#) with Damascus and Tehran.

For many participants in the Amman meeting, as for millions of people in the region, the European position demonstrates a desire for regime change in Palestine - an approach unaffected by the [transition](#) to a Palestinian unity government on 17 March 2007, or the internal tensions that have followed.

## **The Arafat precedent**

Others highlighted a more enduring contradiction in western policies. European governments used to call on Palestine's then president [Yasser Arafat](#) to define clearly and separately the constitutional powers of the president and the government; today, when we do not like the results of the separation, we ask the Palestinian president to use powers that he no longer constitutionally possesses. What's more, it can be argued that foreign military [support](#) to reinforce the presidential guard will contribute to the risk of current [disputes](#) developing into full-scale civil war.

[Henry Siegman](#), a well-known American expert on the middle east, affirms that in 2002, it was thanks to the relaunch of the Beirut peace plan by the Saudi king and the Arab League that a civil war was avoided in Palestine. Another view expressed in Amman was that the Palestinian unity government is an example of what the Arab world really needs - the integration of Islamism into the political context; this perspective has also been offered by former Israeli foreign minister and vice-president of the [Toledo International Peace Centre](#), Shlomo Ben-Ami (see "*Los cambios de regimen en el mundo árabe*", [El País, 12 April 2007](#)).

I would add that, thanks to the inclusion of the PLO and its president

in political dialogue, as a result of a process which I witnessed [directly](#), Yasser Arafat and his organisation finally agreed to renounce violence and recognise the state of Israel. In this process, the role of leading European statesmen - such as [Willy Brandt](#), [Bruno Kreisky](#), [Olof Palme](#) and [Felipe González](#) - was very important.

The Arafat precedent suggests that ending the boycott and beginning a debate of principles with the Palestinian national-unity government is a much [better recipe](#) for the European Union than passively to observe the growing anguish and desperation, the poverty and the rage in the occupied territories.

The Finnish presidency of the European Union, with foreign minister [Erkki Tuomioja](#) in the vanguard, [tried](#) unsuccessfully to change the EU's common position. The debate should continue. A common position adopted after an initiative can be modified after a further initiative. [Norway](#), although not a member of the EU, has shown the way to recognition of the Ismail Haniya-led government and the beginning of a serious political dialogue with Hamas; at the ARI meeting, the former Norwegian prime minister Kjell Magne Bondevik, currently a member of the [Club de Madrid](#), elaborated on this theme. The middle east has nothing to gain by boycotts and isolation. It is only the extremists who benefit. The extremists do.

*This article was translated by [Isabel Hilton](#).*