European Elites and the Middle East

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The intention here is to examine what contemporary European policies and engagements in the Middle East reveal about European elite assumptions, interests and intentions. Four facets or ‘policy areas’ of contemporary European relations with the Middle East are examined: two initiatives for the Mediterranean; the Iraq invasion crisis and the Middle East Peace Process. To varying degrees the policies adopted were intended to effect change in Europe’s neighbourhood. All had to do with regional and Western security cooperation. Together they reveal a dichotomy between the advocacy and projection of assumed European values on the one hand and the dictates of European security interests and safeguarding of those values on the other.

Before proceeding to these case studies, however, it is necessary not only to define the elites of Europe, for the purposes of this discussion, but also to say something about the broader context of European relations with the Middle East in terms of geography, culture, history, economic interdependence and identity.

Examination of this context reveals that contemporary relations between Europe and the Middle East are but the latest phase in a saga dating back many centuries and that the emergence of a European identity in recent times cannot be understood in isolation from European interactions with neighbours in North Africa and the Middle East.

European elites

The definition of European elites adopted here mirrors that chosen and discussed by Max Haller in Chapter 5 of this book, with some additions. Included in the definition are both national or member-state elites and the relatively small number but nonetheless powerful elites operating at the collective EU level. The political elites are thus taken to mean national politicians, MEPs, EU commissioners and EC bureaucrats. Business elites are broadly defined to include those in the energy, finance and manufacturing sectors.

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Of less significance for present purposes, but not to be forgotten, are also the senior echelons of the armed forces of member states. Also significant in policy formulation and presentation are the European media elites and interest groups, including NGOs and intellectuals in think tanks and academia. Religious leaders and spokesmen (or women) for ethnic minorities are not singled out specifically here, though the more religion and race feature in debates about European identity, migration and policies to combat terrorism they do deserve mention.

Clearly the interests and preoccupations of these different sector elites vary somewhat, both within member states and at the EU level. Yet, as documented in the other chapters, the most noteworthy distinctions are between elites at the national and EU levels and above all between the political and business elites on the one hand and the general public or national populations on the other.

For present purposes the focus will be on the intentions, assumptions and efficacy of the political and bureaucratic elites of Europe, both collective and national, as revealed in the case studies discussed below. They are assumed to be the main architects of European policies and interventions in the Middle East, informed by their interpretations of what public opinion and in particular the pressures of the media and interest groups will tolerate or demand.

**Context: a shared and divided heritage**

The European neighbourhood encompasses both states to the east of the EU and those to the south, around the eastern and southern shores of the Mediterranean. The latter includes the Arab states of North Africa (the Maghreb) as well as the Levant or Near East (including Israel). In EU parlance this grouping has been designated the Middle East and North Africa region, which includes Jordan but not the Arabian Peninsula states or Iran, except when referred to simply as ‘the Middle East’ or ‘wider region’.

Europe and the Middle East, however subdivided, are adjacent geographically, economically interdependent and linked by a shared history. Cultural interchange, migrations, imperial conquests and wars between the two regions have informed their respective identities for centuries. Consequently, contemporary debates about the defining characteristics and boundaries of Europe are in many respects just the latest phase in a process that has involved the Middle East as a reference point for what distinguishes Europeans from others.

Successive empires – among them the Greek, Roman, Byzantine, Umayyad, Ottoman, French and British – have straddled the shores of the Mediterranean. The three great monotheistic faiths – Judaism, Christianity and Islam – originated in the Middle East and share the same prophets and heritage, while each has also evolved in distinction and sometimes conflict with the others.