

## **On events in the wider Middle East**

### **The Background Context**

Nowhere around the globe is there a region at the moment with as many violent conflicts as in the wider Middle East. Nowhere are more people being killed or forced to flee their homes. An unprecedented level of violence, chaos and unpredictability is engulfing entire countries in the region, while threatening others. While these crises are making the daily headlines, their roots run deep in a long historic legacy.

Human rights violations that went unpunished, kleptocratic authoritarian regimes, unfair economic development, impacts of climate change, notably droughts, pervasive corruption, sectarianism, political and religious extremism, marginalisation and discrimination against entire groups, all that has contributed to the toxic mix that is visible today. There has also been a long history of dependency, external manipulation and geopolitical intervention from different powers. Western countries have been party to that. After decades of destructive colonialism, European countries have supported regional dictatorships and authoritarian regimes for many years, and they still do for example in the Saudi, Qatari and Bahraini cases. More than three years after the hopes and dreams of the Arab Spring, political Islamic movements, notably the Muslim Brotherhood, have failed politically, while secular and progressive forces have mostly been unable to establish themselves as credible political alternatives, except for a few examples like Tunisia or Rojava (Kurdish enclaves in Syria) which give reason for hope. Against this negative picture, the remarkable, albeit fragile, progress made by Tunisia in its democratic transition is all the more to be valued and supported.

The Middle East is Europe's next-door neighbour, but as different European Union Member States have a long legacy of economic and political meddling in the region, including military interventions and arms trade, while others have hidden behind third actors and not followed any strategy of their own at all, the EU has found it very difficult to come together in any common effort. The EU has been seen as hesitant and split, speaking louder with words than with deeds, vacillating, applying double standards, pretending that it could possibly achieve real solutions without getting earnestly involved. Humanitarian reasons alone should convince Europe to act more energetically and coherently, but it does not. Thus the fire that is consuming major parts of that region puts Europe at risk of getting burned also.

Egypt tumbles between Islamic movements and a military dictatorship that brutally represses its opponents, but cannot control terrorist groups. In Libya civil war today is costing more victims than right after the overthrow of Gaddafi. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict just saw more Gaza citizens killed than ever before, while Israel also paid a higher price than in the past. In Syria the civil war goes into its 3<sup>rd</sup> year. Half of all Syrian citizens have been forced to flee their homes while the death toll has surpassed 190.000. In Iraq sectarian violence explodes and large stretches of the North-East have already come under the rule of the most ruthless Islamist military movement to date (Islamic State), severely endangering the very existence of the Iraqi unitary state. The former Iraqi government has contributed to this situation by marginalising Sunnis for years, thereby providing fertile ground for sectarian violence. The new Government needs to radically reverse course towards an inclusive policy that allows the different ethnic groups in Iraq to bring their political influence to bear in a peaceful way, avoiding further radicalism and fighting the expansion of IS. Yemen is experiencing new violence and upheavals. Repression has been heavy in the Gulf States including Saudi Arabia while their continuing boost of jihadist ideology adds heavily to the destabilisation of the region. Turkey is under strain of the great influx of refugees. While Turkey has done a tremendous job by letting in almost 2 million people, improvements need to be done, notably letting humanitarian aid organisations help refugees. The citizens of Turkey are experiencing a degradation of democracy. Lebanon and Jordan are carrying the additional burden of hosting a very large number of refugees but so far have escaped the worst of the conflicts. Against the backdrop of the on-going struggle between Saudi Arabia and Iran about influence in the region, the issue of finding a compromise with the repressive Iranian regime over its nuclear programme in order to prevent a nuclear arms race in the region and to avoid further destabilisation has not been resolved.

The EU presently does not stand up to this culmination of crises. In the past, the missing coherence between individual member states' policies was responsible for insufficient European answers even under less difficult conditions. But Europe must not allow itself to give up vis-à-vis its international responsibilities. The fact that an increasing number of European citizens have been joining jihadist groups in the Middle East in their fights only increases our common challenge. Europe must come together to provide better answers. And we as European Greens want to contribute to the search for better answers even though we know that there are no readymade solutions.

## **Help the Refugees**

The first and most pre-eminent responsibility for European leaders and European societies is to help the millions of refugees. So far Europe has not been accepting its obligations in this regard. Officially only about 125.000 refugees from Syria have been allowed to enter the European Union. Sweden has accepted at least 60.000 refugees from the region so far. Germany, the EU's most populous country, pledged to resettle 50.000, but to date has accepted only about 20.000 whereas during the Yugoslav wars the country hosted almost 400.000 refugees. Other countries in the EU are tightening up even more. In Greece many refugees are held under inhuman conditions. According to Amnesty International more than 2.500 refugees that have tried to reach Europe by crossing the Mediterranean have drowned since the start of 2014.

In parallel the UN World Food programme is running out of money. Food supplies to the 6 million Syrians who are in desperate need inside the country and in neighbouring countries will be cut by 60% in November. School feeding programs for about 12.000 children in Iraq have already stopped. Europe must help also those countries that bear the biggest burden with regard to the Middle-East refugee crisis namely Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey. Greens therefore urge EU Member States and the European Commission to significantly and immediately increase funds available for relief of the precarious situation of displaced persons/refugees in these countries and resolve once and for all the payment crisis of European humanitarian aid.

We Greens welcomed the Italian rescue operation Mare Nostrum that has saved thousands of lives and object to the decision of the Italian government to end it. The Frontex operation Triton, aimed at protecting the borders rather than people cannot replace Mare Nostrum. Instead of Frontex, we need a European effort to rescue people, supported by all Member States and a completely different border regime, based on Human Rights.

Europe must open its doors to refugees and treat them as human beings in need of protection. There must be legal and safe ways to enter Europe in order to look for international protection as well as legal ways to migrate to Europe. We need more solidarity in dealing with the reception of refugees and handling their asylum claim. We cannot leave the southern countries like Malta or Italy alone with this task. The Dublin regulation needs to be reformed urgently to ensure solidarity and to put the needs of the refugees at the forefront, as well as introducing more humanitarian visas for refugees. We also encourage the EU to dramatically increase the number of resettlers it accepts annually.

## **Find a new Partnership with Iran**

The former EU High Representative Cathy Ashton must be applauded for all the efforts she made towards facilitating an agreement between Iran and the P5+1 countries. As a matter of principle we entirely oppose military and civil use of nuclear power. We also strongly criticise the severe human rights violations in Iran. In the interest of de-escalation we nevertheless do hope that the negotiations over a nuclear compromise with Iran will come to a positive conclusion, satisfying both the security concerns of other countries in the region by a verified termination of the concentration of uranium and the legitimate rights of Iran under the Non-Proliferation Treaty. In addition, there need to be regional efforts for building lasting confidence. Greens urge in this respect European foreign ministers and the new EU High Representative to put pressure on those states, which have prevented the UN conference on a Middle East free of weapons of mass destruction from taking place so far. We support the aim of holding this conference before the 2015 Non Proliferation Treaty Review Conference.

It was a mistake not to invite Iran early on to participate in the efforts to bring about first a Syrian cease-fire and then a Syrian transition. It is obvious that regional stability cannot be achieved without Iran.

## **Re-invite Turkey**

Under the impact of negative leadership and negative public opinion from countries like Germany, France or Austria, and political decisions made by Turkish government itself, the accession negotiations with Turkey have been all but hollowed out. This has made it easier for the government to turn its back on the values that Europe stands for and to venture towards authoritarianism and excessive ambitions of regional leadership. The EU and Turkey should make every effort to get the accession negotiations going again in a meaningful way. Greens continue to uphold a Turkish EU accession perspective under the Copenhagen criteria and the Ankara Agreement. The Turkish government's hostility to Rojava and the Kurdish population of Turkey is increasingly problematic. Turkey must negotiate with the Kurds and cease to close their border to Syria from those supporting Rojava.

We demand from the Turkish government:

- 1) The full respect of fundamental rights and the rule of law in Turkey and importance of respect and acceptance of civil society organisations and NGOs;

- 2) to cease any support for IS or other militant islamist groups from their territory;
- 3) a reliable progress concerning the Turkish-Kurdish peace process.

### **Take active initiative towards Israeli-Palestinian peace**

The last Gaza war cost over 2.000 lives, over 95% of the victims being Palestinian. Greens strongly opposed this war and we first and foremost want to see the full implementation of the cease-fire arrangement reached in Cairo in August 2014. We criticise attacks on Israeli civilians by Hamas and other militant groups, they have to stop. We criticise that Israel used excessive force in the last Gaza war. We support the independent commission of inquiry of possible war crimes on both sides established by the United Nations Human Rights Council. During this Gaza war, Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu openly denounced the two-state solution that the EU as well as European Greens have sought for so many years. He clearly stated that he had no intention whatsoever to pursue that goal. In contravention of UN resolutions the continuing Israeli occupation, in particular the settlement policy that is being put in place, is creating facts on the ground that tend to make the prospects of a two-state solution more and more remote. The United States government failed in its most recent attempt to resuscitate the so-called peace process. The Quartet, under the non-existent leadership of Tony Blair has failed to deliver anything for years. But even though the prospects for a sustainable solution to the Palestine-Israel conflict and the end of the protracted occupation policies appear as distant as ever, we will continue to advocate the two-States solution. We call on EU Member States to follow the example of the new red-green Swedish government in recognising Palestine and welcome the vote of the British House of Commons and Irish Senate asking their governments to do the same.

Greens do want Israel to be able to live in peace within secure borders and without fear of violence or aggression. At the same time and equally intensely we want the Palestinians to be able to build their own future peacefully self-governed in an independent state side by side with Israel and their other neighbours, e.g. the Ramallah government has proven its capacity to carry out economic reforms. Towards this goal we support Palestinian reconciliation and welcome the fact that Palestinians are seeking to re-unite and speak with one credible voice. This will constitute a significant step forwards to the peace process in the region. Beyond that, the EU should accept its responsibility and take a bold and comprehensive peace initiative for the region based on the Arab peace initiative of 2002. Although the EU has taken some steps to be more

explicit in communicating to the Israeli authorities its criticism of their policies, the EU should speak with a clearer and more coherent voice on export of products originating from Israeli settlements in the occupied territories, on Israel's' settlement policy in violation of international law and on Israel's' policy towards its Arab citizens. We are concerned by the fate of the Palestinian refugees. We support the implementation of the right to return as an integral part of a negotiated peace solution. Greens do not accept any racial, ethnic or religious discrimination of minority groups or the forced acquisition of their property or vital resources. The Greens are concerned that EU - funded development projects have been destroyed by the Israeli offensive. Once assessed, we call on the EU to look into securing compensation for the damage. Greens will continue to remind Israel that as the occupying power it has a particular responsibility to comply with international law, including upholding accountability for violations of international humanitarian law or human rights. In this regard, we call upon the Israeli and Egyptian authorities to cease all blockades to access of support in the Gaza strip according to the cease fire agreement. More specifically, we insist that the EU-Israeli Association agreement should be revisited, and that clear conditions should be identified with regards to the human rights violations in Gaza, the occupation of Palestine territories, and the destruction of – EU-funded – civil infrastructure in the Palestinian territories.

### **Strengthen dialogue with civil societies**

Civil society is under maximum pressure in many countries in the Middle East. In Egypt and Libya they are presently under mortal threats almost daily. Therefore European Greens will focus on defending civil society groups and actors, including in particular women's rights groups, on making their cases and their struggles known and on helping them to invest medium and long-term in a better future for their countries. We also want the EU member States, the European External Action Service and the European Commission to significantly and urgently increase funds available for civil society-based programmes and initiatives and to speak out in unison when civil society organizations and human rights defenders are threatened or under pressure. Exchanges in the field of education should also play a larger role.

### **Fair trade and fair investment**

The EU must develop a common trade and investment policy towards the greater Middle East that uses economic support and economic cooperation to help in stabilising the region and to

use this approach in order to promote social equity, respect of human rights and gender equality, fair treatment of minorities and environmental responsibility.

### **There are no military solutions**

In Syria as in Iraq the goal of a peaceful co-existence of all citizens, regardless of the minority status, cannot be reached by military means. We support religious minorities and everybody else oppressed in Iraq and Syria together with the fight of the Kurdish people for their future and all those opposing oppression, and fighting for liberty, democracy and peace. We may hold different positions regarding military actions being taken in either country by using Western air force capabilities, or arming the Kurdish Peshmerga and the YPG of Kurdish Rojava, resisting against IS, or arming the more moderate Syrian opposition forces. We intend to learn more about Rojava and its progress towards a non-sectarian, ecological and feminist alternative and will show solidarity with them. Although military efforts often result in escalations of violence, they may be necessary to protect civilians according to the Responsibility to Protect. The EU must draw lessons from former mistakes like the military intervention of Iraq in 2003 and the lack of support for democratic and moderate forces in various countries. Also, the impact of the support of Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey of extremist Sunni groups in the ongoing conflict should not be underestimated in defining alliances. Those responsible for blatant violation of international law should be held accountable. European Greens will continue to focus on promoting a peace agenda, based on comprehensive and inclusive political solutions, international legality and multilateralism. To that end we want our governments to invest much more effort in identifying and promoting possible political solutions in the framework of the United Nations and to invest in peace initiatives in the support of peace activists from civil society as well as into the development of a common and comprehensive security structure for the region. When UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon and others at the recent General Assembly spoke about the necessity to find political solutions, they were right. The EU should use all instruments at its disposal and the funds available under the instrument for stability and peace to support such efforts consistently. The Arab League should also accept its responsibilities in this regard. We Greens demand the European Union to develop a coherent foreign and security policy in favour of conflict prevention.