

European Union Elections: Implications for Middle East Policy

by [Simon Henderson \(/experts/simon-henderson\)](/experts/simon-henderson)

Jun 15, 2004

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Simon Henderson \(/experts/simon-henderson\)](/experts/simon-henderson)

Simon Henderson is the Baker fellow and director of the Bernstein Program on Gulf and Energy Policy at The Washington Institute, specializing in energy matters and the conservative Arab states of the Persian Gulf.



Brief Analysis

On June 10-13, elections were held throughout Europe for the European Parliament (EP), the institution that represents the peoples of the twenty-five member states of the European Union (EU). The results indicated a mixture of uninterest (as evidenced by low voter turnout) and a pattern of electorates punishing their incumbent governments for domestic failings. In Britain, Prime Minister Tony Blair acknowledged that the policy of supporting the United States in Iraq was problematic on the domestic front. Yet, the governing parties of President Jacques Chirac of France and Chancellor Gerhardt Schroeder of Germany also suffered setbacks in the EP elections, despite their opposition to the war.

Some of the edge had already been taken off the Iraq issue during President George W. Bush's recent trip to Europe, when he visited Pope John Paul II in Rome and President Chirac in Paris before attending the sixtieth anniversary celebrations of the D-Day landings in Normandy. The renewed commitment at last week's G-8 summit to pushing the Israeli-Palestinian peace process should further ease transatlantic tensions.

Split Powers and Institutionalized Inefficiencies

In recent years, the EP, along with the other institutions of the EU, has gained a reputation for its sometimes highly critical stance toward both the United States and Israel -- a stance that is occasionally at odds with European public opinion polls. This reputation seems unlikely to change much in the near future, given weaknesses in the political structures of the EU and current trends in European politics.

The EP is just one point in the EU's institutional triangle, the other two being the Council of Ministers of the European Union (which represents member governments at the ministerial level) and the European Commission (the bureaucracy that implements agreed laws and principles). In addition, the EU holds summit meetings (known as European Councils) four times a year involving the heads of member governments. (The next such summit will be held later this week in Brussels.) The European Councils cling jealously to their powers, particularly in foreign policy. When united, the EU's member countries can act as direct counterparts to the United States, as seen in their efforts to support the Quartet Roadmap to Middle East peace alongside the UN and Russia. Such power can be a

mixed blessing for Washington, as the EU sometimes shares the load but other times effectively undermines U.S. efforts (e.g., with regard to tackling Iran's suspected emerging nuclear capability or improving Syria's behavior). Without unity, however, the EU loses its collective foreign policy voice, as happened in Iraq.

In contrast, the EP can only claim credit for measures such as health warnings on cigarette packages and recycling rules; it has no say on larger matters such as taxation or foreign affairs. Membership on one of the EP's seventeen standing committees does give individual parliamentarians the opportunity to voice criticism of U.S. or Israeli policy insofar as it affects the EU (e.g., on issues such as trade relations or scientific cooperation). And, occasionally, individual EP members have gained prominence or notoriety for their public comments or actions with regard to the Israeli-Palestinian arena. For example, remarks made by a French member in 2001 ridiculing support for Israel, although objectionable, were of little consequence. More significant are the recent efforts by another French representative, Francois Zimeray, to force an audit of EU financing for the Palestinian Authority. His efforts were procedurally doomed from the start -- such an audit would have required the approval of more than half of the EP's 626 members. Yet, 170 members did sign the proposal, and the resultant political fallout noticeably tightened the EU's system of transferring funds to Palestinian security forces -- a system administered by the European Commission. (It should be noted that Zimeray's party did not include him on the list of candidates for last week's EP elections.) In a related note, the European Commission was also responsible for delaying the publication of a recent report that pinned a rise in anti-Semitism on Arab and Muslim youths.

Blair Blames Iraq Effect

The extent to which developments in the Middle East were even a tangential issue in the EP elections varied widely among the EU's twenty-five member states. In Britain, members of the governing Labor Party were quick to home in on the admission of Blair and others that the poor electoral results reflected the extent of popular opposition to the Iraq war. Their concern seems likely to persist and perhaps even increase -- if the EP election results are any indicator, many of Labor's members may lose their seats in the British Parliament if a general election is called next year as expected. Accordingly, several members of Parliament have increasingly criticized Blair's policy in Iraq and the Israeli-Palestinian arena, as well as his close relationship with President Bush, a source of major irritation for many Labor members.

The role of other member states in the EP may be of consequence as well. The governing parties of Italy and Poland suffered setbacks in the EP elections, which could be significant in light of the fact that both countries have contributed military forces to the Iraq coalition (particularly given Spain's military withdrawal from Iraq following the recent al-Qaeda attacks in Madrid and the subsequent Socialist Party electoral victory). Moreover, ten new states recently joined the EU, nearly doubling its membership and expanding its population to 440 million. Most of these new members are Eastern European nations. Given their memories of the Cold War and their consequent "Atlanticist" outlook, these states have generally supported the war in Iraq. Such support may persist, particularly given President Chirac's prewar comment that these countries "missed a good opportunity to shut up over Iraq," which offended many Eastern Europeans.

Last week, European Commission bureaucrats set out a detailed strategy for Iraq, giving priority to preparations for elections and economic reconstruction using the commission's aid program. At the October 2003 Madrid donors conference, EU member states and the European Commission together pledged \$1.5 billion toward these efforts. In addition, the EU may send a special envoy to Baghdad.

Future Organizational Challenges

Given its recent expansion, the EU will undergo significant changes, and the transition may take time. For example, Romano Prodi, head of the European Commission, is returning to Italian politics, and a replacement has yet to be

chosen. New member states are already pressing for positions as commissioners in charge of the different policy directorates at the Brussels headquarters. In addition, new EU nationals will be eligible for recruitment as bureaucrats. The EU must also decide how many new official languages it will adopt. Its existing quota of eleven languages -- into which all EU documents must be translated -- makes the UN (with five official languages) appear comparatively efficient.

The expanded EU may also take a different collective view of the Middle East. The former Communist Bloc nations have a legacy of arming and training Arab armies and terrorist groups. Western Europe has focused on much different concerns, given its history of colonial heritage, dependence on Arab oil, and growing Muslim populations.

Implications for U.S. Policy

For the foreseeable future, the United States must concentrate its diplomatic efforts on the Council of Ministers of the European Union and the European Commission rather than on the European Parliament. Although the newly expanded EU may sometimes clash with U.S. policy imperatives, its diplomatic power and budget allocations ensure that it will remain an important player in the Middle East, and therefore difficult to ignore.

Simon Henderson is a London-based associate of The Washington Institute and author of the Institute Policy Paper [The New Pillar: Conservative Arab Gulf States and U.S. Strategy \(templateC04.php?CID=33\)](#) (2003).

Policy #875

RECOMMENDED

BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Unpacking the UAE F-35 Negotiations](#)

Feb 15, 2022

◆
Grant Rumley

(/policy-analysis/unpacking-uae-f-35-negotiations)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

[How to Make Russia Pay in Ukraine: Study Syria](#)

Feb 15, 2022

◆
Anna Borshchevskaya

(/policy-analysis/how-make-russia-pay-ukraine-study-syria)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

Bennett's Bahrain Visit Further Invigorates Israel-Gulf Diplomacy

Feb 14, 2022



Simon Henderson

[\(/policy-analysis/bennetts-bahrain-visit-further-invigorates-israel-gulf-diplomacy\)](#)

TOPICS

[U.S. Policy \(/policy-analysis/us-policy\)](#)