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When Europe Spoke Out on the Mideast

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TEL AVIV — As Washington wrestles with the latest Mideast crisis in the aftermath of the flotilla attack, Europe might take a moment to mark an anniversary on its diplomatic calendar.

Thirty years ago, on a Friday the 13th in June, a declaration issued by the European Community broke new ground by backing “self-determination” for the Palestinian people and urging that the Palestine Liberation Organization be “associated with” the negotiations for peace in the Middle East.

Coming in the midst of U.S. efforts to launch negotiations between Israel and Egypt on Palestinian autonomy, in accordance with the peace treaty signed by the two countries a year earlier, the “Venice declaration” stunned Jerusalem and jarred some nerves in Washington.

The Israeli prime minister, Menachem Begin, read out one of the most livid statements in the annals of diplomacy. Calling the P.L.O. “the Arab S.S.” and comparing the European declaration to the appeasement of Hitler, he thundered: “Any man of good will and any free person in Europe who would examine this document would see in it a Munich-like surrender, the second in our generation, to tyrannical extortion, and an encouragement to all the elements which aspire to defeat the peace process in the Middle East.”

After that, it is not surprising that neither Brussels nor Jerusalem is eager to commemorate its anniversary. But revisiting Venice offers an opportunity to evaluate how the declaration has fared with the passage of time — and to recognize a visionary moment in European Mideast policy.

The verdict is clear: The Europeans were right. They were right to point out that solving the Arab-Israeli conflict required Israel to recognize Palestinian “self-determination,” the diplomatic code word for independent statehood. They were right to call for bringing the P.L.O. into the peace process. And they were right to press for a comprehensive solution to the Arab-Palestinian conflict — a solution that would go beyond the bilateral Israel-Egyptian agreement and the autonomy that both countries were to negotiate on behalf of the Palestinians.

In fact, the European declaration was not only right but also visionary in that it boldly spelled out the principles that such a comprehensive solution would require. These principles included recognition of Israel’s right to exist, security guarantees for all parties to the conflict (involving, if necessary, the deployment of a multinational force on the ground), and an Israeli withdrawal from the Arab territories it occupied in 1967. Calling Jewish settlements “a serious obstacle to the peace process,” the declaration also warned against any unilateral initiative to change the status of Jerusalem.

These are the principles that continue to define the contours of the only plausible agreement possible between Israel and the Palestinians.

Yet if the Europeans were proven right, that is not to say their diplomatic move was faultless — or that Begin’s government was the only party to have failed to embrace the European vision.

To start with, the Europeans themselves erred in their diplomatic buildup to the declaration and therefore contributed to its rejection. Indeed, in the wake of the Europeans’ chilly attitude from the outset to the U.S.-brokered Camp David process, the Venice declaration had the whiff of opportunistic vindication rather than a good-faith effort.

As for Washington, its reluctance to recognize that nothing substantial could come of the autonomy talks led to many years of diplomatic foot-dragging.

Indeed, while the Carter administration at least tried hard to build on the Camp David framework to advance the process, the succeeding Reagan administration largely satisfied itself with the impasse: Throwing in a token peace plan in 1982, it proposed no new ideas and did little to follow up the old ones. In fact, it was only in December 2000 that Washington fully caught up with the Venice declaration by presenting the so-called Clinton parameters.

Finally, the P.L.O., for which the declaration constituted an unquestionable diplomatic triumph, failed to cash in on the European prize by hastening its transformation from an armed guerilla to a political organization. It took the P.L.O. another eight years to formally renounce violence and commit itself to the two-state solution.

Yet the P.L.O., the U.S. and, to varying degrees, even Israel have embraced the European vision, and three decades later the Venice declaration continues to stand out as the boldest Mideast peace initiative to come out of Europe.

That no similar efforts have followed has to do with many factors, including the expansion of the European grouping, Europe's lack of a political (let alone military) muscle, and Washington's determined efforts to keep Europe at bay.

Europeans often complain that their role in the Mideast has been relegated to payers rather than players. The 30th anniversary of the Venice declaration should be a reminder of Europe's unique capacity to articulate a vision that is clearer, bolder and more far-sighted than any other party's. The region awaits another Venice.

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