

FEATURE

A year into the successful deployment of the – mostly European – peacekeeping force in Lebanon, there is growing speculation that EU countries may soon be playing a more active role elsewhere in the Middle East. Richard Gowan reports

FROM BEIRUT TO BAGHDAD?

Late last summer, I was looking for photos to illustrate an article on the influx of European peacekeepers into Lebanon. Amid the standard shots of armoured cars, one image was distinctly different. It showed a group of blue-helmeted troops striding purposefully up a beach – and being completely ignored by a nonchalant sunbather.

We didn't use the photo. But the image summed up what many Europeans hoped: that while their governments were ready to project strength in the Middle East, their troops would not be seen as occupiers or terrorist targets. The Lebanon deployment was an opportunity to show that not all Western missions in the region had to be like Iraq.

It is an opportunity the EU's members have continued to invest in heavily. Although the peacekeeping force is technically a UN mission, it now involves about 8,000 Europeans, out of a total force of just over 13,000. That means there are more EU citizens in uniform in Lebanon today than there are in all current EU-flagged missions combined.

This July, on the first anniversary of the Lebanese crisis, there was a spate of reports by journalists invited on

patrol with European units. Their guides were keen to prove their relations with the locals remained cheerful: a BBC reporter duly noted one French officer buying fireworks for a Bastille Day party. But parallels with Iraq could not be ignored.

Memories remain fresh of the June killing of six Spanish soldiers by a roadside bomb – an attack designed to mimic Iraqi insurgent tactics. While Hezbollah, still all too active in the UN zone, condemned the bombing, it heightened an established European sense of insecurity.

That insecurity had been clear from the start of the operation. The Europeans didn't really think they had arrived for a beach holiday. Their initial deployment involved heavy armour that churned up war-damaged roads, and they were soon constructing themselves well-fortified camps. Some units were not allowed to patrol at night. Reports have proliferated of behind-the-scenes negotiations with Hezbollah on the force's safety.

And although there is no comparison between the operation's losses and the mauling of US forces in Iraq, the situations are very far from entirely separate. Soon after the Spanish losses, the Americans reported that a senior



Force for peace: could European troops step into other conflict zones in the world's most volatile region?

Photograph: Belga

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Lebanese militant had been captured while training Iraqi insurgents – and that Hezbollah and Iran were coordinating attacks on US troops. Such claims have become familiar. Tony Blair stated that Iran and Hezbollah might be assisting bombers targeting the British in Iraq as far back as October 2005.

While Hezbollah may well export weaponry and even insurgents into Iraq, a greater concern is that any deterioration of the Iraqi situation could destabilise its neighbourhood. More than two million refugees have already crossed its borders – and the belief that the US has been beaten encourages the region's radicals.

And if the Middle East's governments are struggling to cope with such pressures, other shocks may await, from a direct clash with Iran to

further chaos in the Palestinian territories. A combination of such shocks might turn into a regional confrontation, embracing Lebanon.

How might the European forces stationed there react? Many analysts fear that the force would withdraw in short order, especially if it came under direct pressure from Hezbollah – a humiliation worse than the Bosnian debacle of the 1990s.

There isn't much support among EU voters for significant casualties in the Middle East. In this context, the Spanish deaths were tragic, but the fact that Madrid responded in a measured fashion at least indicated that the European forces would not be scared off as easily as some feared.

With the risk of far worse losses ahead,

the need for the EU's members to help reduce the possibility of a regional breakdown in the Middle East is now greater than ever. But how?

Prior to last year's crisis, the standard answer was to emphasise Europe's soft power in the region – be it through EU High Representative Javier Solana's shuttle diplomacy with Iran on nuclear issues, quiet French and German efforts to influence Syria, or EU aid to the Palestinians.

Yet it is notable that, for all the tensions around it, the Lebanese operation seems to have piqued European interest in further military missions to the region. After Hamas seized control of Gaza early this summer, a group of ten European foreign ministers (including those of France, Italy and Spain, the leading troop contributors



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in Lebanon) signed an open letter to Tony Blair in his newly designated capacity as a Middle East peacemaker.

Alongside various civilian gestures, they suggested that a "robust international force" under NATO or the UN should deploy to the Palestinian territories to "maintain order" or even "enforce compliance with a necessary ceasefire". To those (like me) who make a living squinting at the small print of peacekeeping documents, this was dramatic stuff.

By mentioning NATO, the ministers implied that they were ready to risk their own troops in such a force. And they seemed to suggest that the new mission should have a much tougher mandate to use force than that in Lebanon. If the Europeans are prepared to adopt a live-and-let-live attitude to Hezbollah, they could not take such a benign attitude to Hamas.

Does this mean that European governments have really come to accept that they will need to project more hard power in the Middle East if they are to contain its multiple crises?

There are reasons to be sceptical. The foreign ministers did not bind themselves to anything, and knew that their idea was unlikely to win immediate support from either Washington or Hamas – or even their own typically cautious defence ministries. It is easier to be bold on paper when you don't really think you'll get on the ground soon.

Nor does the ministers' readiness to consider a Palestinian deployment mean they would countenance sending troops to contain other elements of a wider Middle East crisis. And this may prove politically problematic, as another part of the region may soon be in need of a new peace force – one bound to raise memories of past rifts in the EU. It is Iraq.

For if the last year has seen increased European interest in military options in the Middle East, it has also witnessed the far more explicit

collapse of American political and public support for continued operations in Iraq.

With the Democratic presidential candidates united in their desire for a withdrawal, and Republicans increasingly split on the issue, it is probable that there will at least be a very substantial reduction of US forces in the run-up to the 2008 election or soon thereafter. This could precipitate just the burst of chaos in Iraq that could provoke regional instability. Indeed, the risks of a spillover of violence from Iraq are on the increase, given sabre-rattling by Turkey against the Kurds, Saudi concerns for the Sunni population, and Iran's involvement in the present civil war.

In this context, growing numbers of both American political commentators and Middle East specialists (including some profoundly opposed to the original invasion) are now asking if it may be necessary to create some sort of UN-mandated force to help manage the US drawdown and its aftermath.

No one expects this to be on the scale of the current US presence. One figure that has been suggested is 15,000 troops – slightly more than in Lebanon, and roughly equivalent to the UN's larger operations in Africa. Rather than take on the insurgents US-style, this international force might monitor internal and national borders, help deliver humanitarian aid and keep an eye on the Iraqi military.

Discussions of this option have been low-key, in part because it may sound far-fetched given the original diplomatic meltdown over Iraq. And it may prove so politically toxic that it will never gain traction. For the time being, the US wants an increased political role for the UN in Iraq, but not 'blue helmets'. But the one might yet lead to the other.

Few would imagine that even the most pro-American EU governments could make sizeable commitments to such a force. Most of those that still have contingents in Iraq have been working to draw them down ahead of the Americans, Britain included.

For countries like Spain and Italy, the presence in Lebanon is to some extent meant to compensate for withdrawals from Iraq – so, for many EU members, are increasingly controversial commitments in Afghanistan. They are hardly likely to go back into Iraq.

So any future international force in Iraq may have to rely on non-Western militaries. Washington nearly persuaded India to send a division of peacekeepers after the initial invasion, but Delhi concluded that the political costs were too high.

It might find it easier to deploy if the new force was seen as a UN initiative. It has often been argued that Muslim peacekeepers might have additional legitimacy in Iraq (Indonesia, Qatar and Malaysia all sent troops to Lebanon). But regional experts think that may be naive.

Yet the EU's position on the development of such a peacekeeping force could still be crucial, both politically at the UN, and quite possibly in terms of financing its operations. Any effective post-US peace operation in Iraq would also need to be tied to large-scale aid programmes, drawing heavily on US and European donations – just as no operation in the Palestinian territories makes any sense without large-scale EU financial assistance.

Most EU governments would much prefer to send money than men for a high-risk Iraqi venture, just as they provide the majority of funding for the African peacekeepers in Darfur. That said, they might not do so with particularly good grace. There may well be many who feel that they have wasted quite enough resources (and lives) trying to help sort out Iraq since 2003. And some still resent the fact that many American officials treated both UN and European offers of support with contempt straight after the invasion.

But European leaders cannot congratulate themselves on their year in Lebanon – or propose high-profile missions in the Palestinian territories – if they do not have a strategy for handling the next phase in Iraq. Limited interventions may be useful, but they are vulnerable to the potential of a regional confrontation. The EU stumbled through one Iraq crisis with little glory. It will not be able to disassociate itself from whatever comes next.

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