

The Madrid Quartet: An Effective Instrument of Multilateralism?

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Abstract

On April 10th 2002, Colin Powell announced the formation of a Madrid “Quartet”, reviving the agenda of the 1991 Madrid conference with the UN Secretary-General, the EU High Representative for Common Foreign and Security Policy, and the Russian Foreign Minister; the focus of this approach was on pursuing a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, with the active engagement of outside actors. Since the creation of the Quartet the G-8 has supported its role in the peace process and emphasised the need for the parties to follow the indications of the so-called Roadmap for Peace.

The objective of this paper is to analyse the rationale behind the creation of the Quartet, its activities and ultimately its effectiveness.

Participation of the Quartet to the peace process underlines the commitment of the international community to the achievement of an equitable settlement of the conflict. The paper focuses on the concept of “multilateralism”, and tries to establish if the Quartet creates a genuine multilateral framework for the negotiations. It argues that ultimately what the Quartet really offers is a multilateral “control framework” for bilateral negotiations, and that these bilateral negotiations are supposed to aim at implementing pre-established steps agreed upon by the Quartet without the parties to the conflict. It is the contradictory nature of the Quartet’s action that until now has prevented it from becoming an effective instrument of multilateralism.

The Madrid Quartet: An Effective Instrument of Multilateralism?

Introduction

On April 10th 2002, Colin Powell announced the formation of a Madrid “Quartet”, reviving the agenda of the 1991 Madrid conference with the UN Secretary-General, the EU High Representative for Common Foreign and Security Policy (Javier Solana), and the Russian Foreign Minister (Igor Ivanov). The focus of this approach was on pursuing a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, with the active engagement of outside actors. In other words, the State Department had decided to pursue a multilateral approach to the peace process, and co-operation with European governments was to be a key factor.

In this context, the support the G-8 has given to the Quartet through various official declarations¹ was meant to give it further international sanction and legitimacy.

Since its creation the Quartet has been intermittently protagonist of the peace process, mainly with the elaboration of the “Roadmap to a Permanent Two-State Solution to the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict”, and given for dead, especially when the bilateral track of negotiations between Israel and the Palestinian - with the US as sole mediator or at least facilitator – seemed to be the only active track, or even more so in the numerous occasions in which violence escalated and the international community seemed unable, or unwilling, to play a constructive role in helping the parties to reach a settlement.

The Quartet has been praised for its “multilateral” nature that officially brings other actors - but particularly the European Union - into the peace process in addition to the “old” ones, i.e. the Israeli, the Palestinians, and the US as mediator, but also despised for its inability to bring about a breakthrough in the negotiations.

Surely the EU had played an increasingly important role in the peace process since the Madrid Conference, but participation in the Quartet arguably gave the European role a higher political relevance and resonance. The EU’s presence was particularly welcomed by the Palestinians, who saw it as a potential counterbalance to an American position they perceive as permanently biased in favour of Israel. Conversely, the creation of the Quartet met with a less enthusiastic reception in Israel, where multilateralism is seen as a means to impose unwelcome decisions, and the EU is perceived as a less than friendly actor.

The objective of this paper is to analyse the rationale behind the creation of the Quartet, its activities and ultimately its effectiveness. The paper will focus particularly on the role of the EU and on Israel’s perception of the Quartet as a new actor in the peace process.

The paper will be structured as follows:

- Outline of the major events that led to the creation of the Quartet in 2002;
- The role of multilateral negotiations in the Arab-Israeli peace process;

¹ See for example the G-8 statement of 2005 available at <http://en.g8russia.ru/g8/history/gleneagles2005/8/> and the St. Petersburg Declaration of 2006 available at <http://www.g8.utoronto.ca/summit/2006stpetersburg/mideast.html>

- The Quartet as an instrument of multilateralism
- Concluding remarks and policy recommendations.

1. The creation of the Madrid Quartet: brief historical overview (2000-2002)

The peace process and the creation of the Quartet

After the failure of the July 2000 Camp David summit between Barak and Arafat, the situation between Israel and the Palestinians deteriorated rapidly. On September the Second Intifada - also called Al-Aqsa Intifada - started, and a vicious cycle of Palestinian violence and Israeli retaliation began. In October 2000 - in a last attempt to bring peace to the region before the end of his mandate - President Clinton convened a peace summit in Sharm-el-Sheikh, where he met with representatives of Israel, the PNA, Egypt, Jordan, the UN and the EU. At the summit the decision was taken to appoint a Fact Finding Commission with the task of proposing recommendations to end the violence, rebuild confidence and resume the negotiations. The Commission was to be chaired by former US Senator George Mitchell and included EU CFSP High Representative Javier Solana, Turkish President Suleyman Demirel, the Norwegian foreign minister Thorjorn Jagland, and Former US Senator Warren B. Rudman.

The Sharm-el-Sheikh (or Mitchell) Committee presented its report in April 2001 to the new President of the United States, George W. Bush, but the new administration (at least until September 11) was showing relatively little interest in the Middle East and was deliberately disengaging from the previous administration's detailed involvement as main mediator between Arab states and Israel.

The Bush Administration felt particularly strongly about differentiation on the Middle East, where – from their perspective – Clinton's overactive diplomacy had demeaned the Presidency without achieving a settlement. They were committed to a much more "selective engagement" in global diplomacy, to what Richard Haass, the new head of policy planning in the State Department, called in July 2001 "à la carte multilateralism"².

In June 2001, after having vetoed a UN Security Council resolution to establish a UN observer mission, Bush dispatched CIA Director George Tenet to the Occupied Territories to negotiate a cease fire plan. Hamas and the Islamic Jihad, however, rejected the plan, arguing that it failed to address the root of violence.

The terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 forced a change in American policy. In order to secure the "coalition against terrorism" the US had once again to concentrate on the Arab-Israeli peace process: Bush declared his support for a Palestinian State, and in November 2001 retired Marine Corps General Anthony Zinni was appointed as senior adviser to work towards a cease-fire and to implement the Tenet plan and the Mitchell Committee Report. His mission, however, failed like the previous ones, as violence continued to escalate.

In April 2002 Colin Powell, US Secretary of State, met in Madrid with the representatives of the European Union, the United Nations, and Russia. The so-called "Madrid Quartet" emerged with a common agenda partly based on the 1991 Madrid Peace Conference's agenda: a peace settlement based on an equitable resolution to the

² Richard Haass, Head of the Policy Planning Staff in the Bush State Department, quoted in Stein K.W., 'The Bush Doctrine: Selective Engagement in the Middle East', in *Middle East Review of International Affairs*, Vol. 6, No 2, June 2002, available at <http://meria.idc.ac.il/journal/2002/issue2/jv6n2a5.html>

conflict, security for Israel and the Palestinians, and a major effort to address the looming humanitarian crisis within the Palestinian community. The focus of this approach was on pursuing a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, with the active engagement of outside actors³.

In a Communiqué issued in New York in September 2002, the Quartet announced that it was working with the parties and consulting key regional actors on a three-phase implementation “roadmap” that could achieve a final settlement within three years⁴.

The European Union: from the Common Strategy on the Mediterranean Region to membership of the Quartet

To use the word of Allen and Smith, “2000 was not a good year for the EU in the Middle East, despite the fact that a number of Arab states expressed a preference for much stronger EU involvement in the peace process”,⁵ the main reason being the deadlock in the negotiations after Camp David.

In June 2000 the European Union approved the new Common Strategy⁶ on the Mediterranean Region. The document, drafted before the failure of the Camp David talks, when hopes were still high that a settlement would be reached, foresaw a possible contribution of the Member States to the implementation of a final and comprehensive peace agreement between the Israeli and the Palestinians⁷: in paragraph 15 it declared: “The EU will, in the context of a comprehensive settlement, and upon request by the core parties, give consideration to the participation of Member States in the implementation of security arrangements on the ground”⁸. The breakdown of the peace process, however, rendered the EU’s commitment useless in the short term, as the possibility of a “comprehensive settlement” became more remote.

The failure of the Camp David talks also influenced the Barcelona Process negatively: Lebanon and Syria refused to attend the fourth Euro-Mediterranean conference of foreign ministers in Marseilles in September 2000, and the EU had to drop any attempt to sign a Charter of Peace and Stability for the Mediterranean as the Arab participants were not prepared to discuss the issue and no agreement was possible. Ultimately, economic co-operation could not prove conducive to a political settlement.

³ see Musu, C. and Wallace W., ‘The Focus of Discord? The Middle East in US Strategy and European Aspirations’ in Peterson J. and Pollack M.A. (eds.): *Europe, America, Bush: Transatlantic Relations After 2000*, Routledge, 2003

⁴ Communiqué issued by the Quartet, New York, 17 September 2002 available at http://www.un.org/news/dh/mideast/quartet_communique.htm

⁵ Allen, D. and Smith, M., ‘External Policy Developments’, *Annual Review of the EU 2000-2001*, *Journal of Common Market Studies*, Vol. 39, Blackwell Publishers 2001. Pp. 107

⁶ The Treaty of Amsterdam introduced the Common Strategy as an additional foreign policy instrument. The Common Strategy can be defined as a framework that defines what the main EU interests in a region are, and by what general means they might be pursued. See Calleya, S. in “*The Common Strategy of the European Union in the Mediterranean Region*”, Select Committee on European Union (Sub-Committee C), Ninth Report., House of Lords Reports, London, 2001

⁷ see Musu, C., in “*The Common Strategy of the European Union in the Mediterranean Region*”, Select Committee on European Union (Sub-Committee C), Ninth Report., House of Lords Reports, London, January 2001

⁸ European Council, *Common Strategy of the European union on the Mediterranean Region*. European Council, Feira, June 2000. Paragraph 15

In 2001 tensions arose between the EU and Israel as the Israeli army, in retaliation for Palestinian terrorist attacks, proceeded to systematic destruction of Palestinian infrastructures, most of which had been paid for by the EU, and due to the fact that Israel continued to export to the EU goods manufactured in the [Palestinian Territories](#) (the so-called problem of the “rules of origin”). When Israel halted the payments of tax revenues to the Palestinian Authority, the EU approved a series of replacement loans and, in response to the “rules of origin” problem, it threatened to withdraw the preferential tariffs that Israel enjoys. The threat, however, remained such⁹, and in general the EU’s action did not show great incisiveness.

Arguably, the failure of the Camp David talks and the collapse of the peace process left the EU unable to react in a co-ordinated and effective fashion: notwithstanding High Representative Solana’s participation in the October 2000 Sharm-el-Sheikh Peace Summit, the Mitchell Committee and the uninterrupted behind-the-scenes diplomatic activity of both the High Representative and the Special Envoy Moratinos, the EU’s contribution to ending the violence in the area was not particularly effective. In 2002, after a number of clashes among Member States, who were unable to agree on a common strategy for the peace process, and after a failed diplomatic mission during which the CFSP High Representative and the Spanish Presidency were not allowed by Israel to meet Arafat in Ramallah,¹⁰ the EU finally decided to renounce launching an independent peace plan and to back the US peace initiative that led to the creation of the Madrid Quartet. The EU hoped that participation in the Madrid Quartet would gain the EU more visibility and influence in the peace process, and would provide Europe with a tool for influencing American policies as they were formulated.

2. The Role of Multilateralism in the Arab-Israeli Peace Process: from the Madrid Conference to the Madrid Quartet

Before focusing on the role played by the Quartet in the peace process, it’s worth recalling briefly what role multilateral negotiations have played in the peace process over the past 15 years.

There has indeed always been an underlying tension between bilateralism and multilateralism in the negotiations. The Israeli diplomatic approach - supported by the United States - has been by and large geared to affording the utmost priority to bilateral contacts, possibly supported by an external party acting as facilitator. Bilateral contacts have been considered by Israel not only necessary, but almost a

⁹ The official Commission Website offers an explanation of EU policy in this respect: in the section “The EU & the Middle East: Position & Background” it states that: “The EU’s policy is based on partnership and cooperation, and not exclusion. It is the EU’s view that maintaining relations with Israel is an important contribution to the Middle East peace process and that suspending the Association Agreement, which is the basis for EU-Israeli trade relations but also the basis for the EU-Israel political dialogue, would not make the Israeli authorities more responsive to EU concerns at this time. It is also a well-known fact that economic sanctions achieve rather little in this respect. Keeping the lines of communication open and trying to convince our interlocutors is hopefully the better way forward.” See http://europa.eu.int/comm/external_relations/mepp/faq/index.htm#6

¹⁰ Soetendorp, B., ‘The EU’s Involvement in the Israeli-Palestinian Peace Process: The Building of a Visible International Identity’, in *European Foreign Affairs Review*, 7: 283-295, 2002 Kluwer Law International. Pp. 292-293

precondition for each set of talks.¹¹ The origin of the Israeli diplomatic strategy lies arguably in part in the will to discuss different issues separately, optimising negotiating power and potential leverage, and in part in the further crucial objective of meeting with the counterpart in a context where mutual recognition and mutual acceptance as legitimate interlocutors are indubitable.

On issues tied to the peace process between Israel and the Arab states and between Israel and the Palestinians, American and Israeli positions have been aligned: according to the American vision, the United States' function should be that of facilitating talks and negotiations between the two parties, not imposing predetermined solutions. A description of America's perception of its role in the peace process has been given by Middle East expert Stephen Cohen:

“In [...] the Arab-Israeli conflict there is such a struggle of wills within the competing parties, and between the competing parties, and the forces for and against change are so evenly balanced, that only a third party [...] can swing things toward compromise. That is America's role. [...] The parties themselves are always going to be focused on the immediate costs of doing something because the positive outcomes seem remote or even unlikely to them.”¹²

This role of the US as facilitator is also the one favoured by Israel, who does not welcome the idea of a mediator who wants to enforce its strategy against the will of the negotiating parties. Furthermore, the United States as well as Israel do not actually consider the UN an appropriate forum for debating issues that are the object of direct negotiations between Arabs and Israelis. Israel has a deep-seated mistrust of the UN, stemming from years of tense relationships, and an almost equally intense suspicion of Europe, often accused of being decidedly pro-Arab. Diametrically different is the Palestinian stance, which favours an involvement of both the EU and the UN in the peace process, seeing it as a guarantee of Palestinians' rights and as a counterbalance to the role of the US, perceived as excessively pro-Israeli.

The European Union's diplomatic approach to the peace process has differed significantly from that of Israel and the United States. Europe has followed a well-defined policy with clearly identifiable guidelines: focus on immediate results rather than on the process and the negotiation themselves, reiterated appeals to United Nations resolutions and international law, emphasis repeatedly placed on the need for the issues on the floor to be taken on globally, within the context of international peace conferences. The EU, possibly also as a result of its own nature of “multilateral framework” and of the habit developed by the member states of negotiating over every important issue, has favoured a multilateral approach to the peace process, emphasising the need for a greater role of the international community in the negotiations between the parties. This different approach to the peace process has created a fracture between the EU and both Israel and the United States.

The Madrid Conference

¹¹ A senior Israeli diplomat interviewed in Rome underlined that “Israel wants face to face talks. Negotiation with Egypt and later with Jordan started both with bilateral contacts, and saw the involvement of the Americans only in a second phase. The same happened in Oslo, where the Norwegians acted only as messengers; the American themselves were called in when talks were well under way”

¹² quoted in Friedman, T.L., ‘Passion for Peace’, Op-Ed, *New York Times*, 28 June 2003

In October 1991 a Middle East Peace Conference was convened in Madrid. The Letters of Invitation to the Conference were issued by both the United States and the Soviet Union as co-sponsor of the event, but it was clear that this was primarily an American initiative: the United States had become the sole guarantor and manager of security in the region, and was determined to take on a primary role in the peace negotiations. The delegations invited were those of Israel, Lebanon, Syria, Egypt and Jordan; the Palestinian delegation was to be included in the Jordanian one. The European Community was invited as an observer alongside the Gulf Co-operation Council and the United Nations.

The EC had long claimed that to solve the Arab-Israeli conflict a Peace Conference should be convened, in order to reach a comprehensive settlement between all the parties involved in a multilateral framework; it therefore insisted on being included in the Conference as a full participant rather than as an observer, but met with the stern opposition of Israel, who did not trust European governments and did not want to accept the EC as an additional mediator.¹³ In the eyes of the Israeli government the EC had made three tactical errors that doomed its role as an acceptable mediator in the peace process.¹⁴

- It demanded that Israel make concessions to the Palestinians in advance of direct peace negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians;
- It made concessions to the Palestinians that prejudged Israeli interests in advance of direct peace negotiations; and
- It insisted on the United Nations as the appropriate forum for negotiations towards a comprehensive peace settlement, knowing that this was unacceptable for Israel.

The US was also not particularly keen on having another mediator to deal with, as in its view this would only complicate the relations with the negotiating parties, and it preferred to maintain the process firmly in its hands.

After the Madrid Peace Conference, a double tier of negotiations was opened: *bilateral* talks between Israel and Arab states, and *multilateral* talks which comprised the conflict's immediate protagonists (Egypt, Israel, Jordan and the Palestinians) and Arab states from the Gulf and the Maghreb, as well as a number of extra-regional participants (US, Russia, EU, Japan, Canada and Norway).

The bilateral negotiations were based on direct talks between the parties, in which neither the United States nor the European Union would have a direct role. In actual fact, while the role of Europe was limited to all effects to the participation of a revolving troika of "observers" to monitor the development of the talks, the American role was significantly more important: the US not only met with the parties separately to discuss the issues at stake, but also had the possibility of setting forth proposals aimed at supporting the dialogue. Furthermore, following the conclusion of the Peace Conference, over a dozen formal rounds of bilateral talks were hosted by the US Department of State in Washington.

The multilateral negotiations, opened in Moscow in 1992, focused on more technical issues that crossed national borders. The EU played a relevant role in these,

¹³ However, in 1992 Israel lifted its veto on full EC participation in the Madrid Middle East Peace negotiations when the Labour Government took office, and consented to have the EC join the multilateral working groups in exchange for the EC's commitment to updating the 1975 EC-Israel Cooperation Accord.

¹⁴ Ginsberg, R.H., *The European Union in International Politics. Baptism by Fire*, Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Boulder 2001. P. 107

as gavel holder of the Regional Economic Development Working Group (REDWG). The United States, on the other hand, presided over the Water Working Group and, jointly with Russia, the working group charged with the most sensitive issues: Arms Control and Regional Security.

While the bilateral talks between Israel and the Arab states were meant to address issues of mutual recognition, peace, territorial withdrawal, border demarcation, security arrangements, and the political rights of the Palestinians, the multilateral talks were meant to provide a forum for the parties to address a range of economic, social, and environmental issues which extend across national boundaries and whose resolution is essential for long-term regional development and security. As Joel Peters put it, “If the bilaterals were to deal with problems inherited from the past, then the multilaterals would focus on the future shape of the Middle East [...] It was hoped that developments on the multilateral level would serve as confidence-building measures that would then facilitate progress at the bilateral level-- that is, that functional cooperation would eventually spill over into regional peace”.¹⁵

The Oslo Process

During these negotiations - which were not producing appreciable results or progress in the peace process - behind the scenes direct bilateral contacts between Israelis and Palestinians were initiated in Oslo: the European Community was left out of these talks, but so was the United States, informed of the results achieved only towards the conclusion of the negotiations. The essence of the of the so-called “spirit of Oslo” has thus been described by one of the negotiators:

“For those involved in the initial discussions in Norway the goal was to work towards a conceptual change which would lead to a dialogue based, as much as possible, on fairness, equality and common objectives. These values were to be reflected both in the character of the negotiations – including the personal relationships between the negotiators – and in the proffered solutions and implementation.”¹⁶

The outcome of the intensive diplomatic negotiations that took place in Oslo was an exchange of mutual recognition documents between Israel and the PLO, and the signing of a Declaration of Principles (DOP) which would serve as the framework for the various stages of the Israeli-Palestinian negotiations. The venue chosen for the signing of the DOP was Washington: a significant fact, as it underlined the important role played in the peace process by the US. The US may not have taken direct part in the talks, but nonetheless remained the sole mediator acknowledged and accepted by the PLO as well as by Israel. The role of Europe, represented at the ceremony by the EU President and by the President of the Commission, was limited to issuing statements of support.

The fact that “official” negotiations resulting from the Madrid Peace Conference and “unofficial” negotiation in Oslo overlapped for a period of time is a clear example of the enduring tension between bilateralism and multilateralism in the peace process. If, on the one hand, specific favourable circumstances (such as the ones created by the

¹⁵ ‘Can the multilateral Middle East talks be revived?’ By Joel Peters, *Middle East Review of International Affairs*, Volume 3, No. 4 - December 1999. Available at <http://meria.idc.ac.il/journal/1999/issue4/jv3n4a6.html#Author>

¹⁶ Pundak, R., ‘From Oslo to Taba: What Went Wrong?’ *Survival*, vol. 43, no. 3, Autumn 2001, pg. 21.

end of the Cold War and of superpower rivalry in the Middle East, and by the redefinition of the regional balance of power as a consequence the Gulf War) encourage an increased involvement of the international community in the conflict, on the other the main actors' preference seem to remain that of engaging in direct bilateral talk with the external support of the United States. This has proved to be the case for Israel, but arguably also for the Palestinians, who, despite viewing positively the role of the UN and of the EU, when it comes to negotiating crucial issues still see the United States as the only reliable actor able to "deliver".

The Barcelona Process

In the wake of the optimism created by the first positive results of the Oslo process, the EU attempted to create another framework to favour dialogue and cooperation in the Mediterranean- a region that for the EU comprises not only the Maghreb but also the Mashreq, including Israel and the Palestinian Authority.

In the years 1991-1995 the EU progressively reassessed its Mediterranean policy with the objective of developing an overall concept on relations with the region as a whole, encompassing security, economic development and social justice aspects. The EU's long term strategic approach to the Mediterranean region was focused on four objectives:¹⁷

1. to promote democratisation, as - in the European experience - democratic structures have proven to be efficient instruments of conflict resolution within states, and also effective in diminishing the risk of conflicts erupting between states;
2. to promote economic development and integration, an objective based on the assumption that free-market economies and liberalised international trade relations improve overall standards of living;
3. to contribute to the construction of a framework of effective regional institutions, that could provide mechanisms for the peaceful resolution of conflicts;
4. to favour a broader cultural dialogue underpinning all levels of political, economic and social interaction, in order to promote a Mediterranean identity on which more stable cross-regional relations could be based.

It is with these objectives in mind that the EU, at the 1995 Barcelona Conference, initiated the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP) between the then 15 EU Member States and 12 Mediterranean Partners: Algeria, Cyprus, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Malta, Morocco, Syria, Tunisia, Turkey and the Palestinian Authority.

To use the words of Commission Vice President Manuel Marin, "[...] The Euro-Mediterranean Partnership provided for the first time a clear geopolitical and economic scenario for a priority region in the Union's foreign policy, and it designed a far-reaching double structure at both the multilateral and bilateral level [...]"¹⁸.

¹⁷ see Behrendt, S. and Hanelt, C.H., *Bound to Cooperate – Europe and the Middle East*, Bertelsmann Foundation Publishers, Gutersloh 2000. Pp. 13-15

¹⁸ see 'The Role of the European Union in the Middle East Peace Process and its Future Assistance', *Executive Summary of the Communication to the Council of Ministers and the European Parliament made by Manuel Marin, Vice President of the European Commission*, European Commission, 26 January 1998. Available in French at <http://www.medea.be/site.html?lang=en&page=10&doc=296>

The Barcelona Process was meant from the beginning to be independent from, but parallel, to the Middle East peace process: the peace process would achieve the political breakthrough; the Barcelona Process would set up the real conditions for long-term stability and economic development. It would also offer a multilateral forum for the parties involved in the peace process to meet in a different context from that of the difficult and controversial negotiations on political and security issues. However, it soon became apparent that the formal separation between the Partnership and the peace process could not serve to prevent the *de facto* linkages emerging between the processes, and that any progress in the field of Mediterranean regional co-operation was continuously hampered by the difficulties encountered by the peace process. In other words, the EU's aspiration to be able to keep the process of economic co-operation and development isolated from the spill-over of the political consequences of the stalemate in the peace process proved to be an illusion.

3. The Quartet: An Effective Instrument of Multilateralism?

From the analysis conducted in the previous paragraph, it would appear clear that multilateralism has so far not been especially successful or effective in the context of the Middle East peace process and of Israeli-Palestinian negotiations. Before proceeding to analyse more in detail the Quartet as an instrument of multilateralism and to question its effectiveness however, it is worth giving some consideration to the concept itself of multilateralism. Only then it will be possible to draw some meaningful conclusions and to formulate policy recommendations.

In 1990, Keohane defined multilateralism as “the practice of coordinating national policies in groups of three or more states”¹⁹, a definition that in a 1992 article Ruggie described as “nominal” and basically incomplete.²⁰ According to Ruggie, what is distinctive about multilateralism is that it coordinates relations among three or more states in accordance with certain *principles*. This inclusion of principles in the definition of multilateralism suggests that the beliefs required for multilateral cooperation are as central to its function as are its more formal tenets.

Multilateralism is a demanding organisational form, particularly because it requires the parties to the conflict to refrain from defining their strategy on the basis of immediate national interest, to abandon a *quid pro quo* attitude in approaching their interaction with the counterpart, and to accept the idea that the benefits of this interaction may only come in a relatively distant future. Participants have to renounce temporary advantages and ad hoc coalitions and have to avoid policies based on situational exigencies.

Such an approach so far has not been embraced by either the Israelis or the Palestinians. The individualist paradigm of international relations, according to which states interact in a rational, self-interested way, may help us to explain why this is the case. Arguably, states' preferences for unilateralism, bilateralism or multilateralism can be considered *derived preferences*, i.e. they derive directly from states' *substantive preferences* with regard to crucial issues such as power, security or wealth. We can therefore expect states to engage in multilateralism when they

¹⁹ Keohane, Robert O. “Multilateralism: An Agenda for Research.” *International Journal*, 45 (Autumn 1990)

²⁰ Ruggie, John. “Multilateralism: The Anatomy of an Institution.” *International Organization*, 46, 3 (Summer 1992)

anticipate to gain substantial benefits from it, and to turn to unilateralism or bilateralism when this serves their purposes better.²¹

It derives logically that Israel, expecting to benefit more significantly from bilateralism (as in the case of negotiations with Egypt, Jordan or the Palestinian Authority) or from unilateralism (as in the case of the withdrawal from Lebanon or from the Gaza Strip), has largely avoided engaging in multilateralism which, in its perception, did not serve its substantive preferences (i.e. survival of the State of Israel and security against hostile neighbours). It has however accepted to engage in multilateral negotiations in the few occasions when circumstances suggested that a clear benefit was to be gained. Israel's acceptance to participate to the Madrid Conference in 1991 for example was arguably prompted by two factors: first, Saddam Hussein's bombing of Israeli territory with scud missiles during the conflict had led Israel to reconsider its security needs; the Israeli government became aware that physical control of the territory through occupation was no longer a guarantee of military security, and was compelled to reconsider its strategy and the possibility of starting talks with the Palestinians. Second, the end of the Cold War meant that Israel no longer represented a strategic asset to the US in the confrontation between superpowers. It was therefore in its interests to avoid antagonising the United States - its main ally - and to support the peace initiative.

As for the Palestinians, they have also in turn favoured the framework that best served their substantive preferences: bilateral talks when they were expected to deliver results, multilateral institutions as a crucial instrument of legitimisation of their cause, and finally unilateralism, mainly in the form of armed struggle against a counterpart seen as a mortal enemy.²²

As discussed above, the European Union has long favoured a multilateral approach to the peace process, insisting that such a framework is the best suited to create the conditions for real progress. European internal division and political weakness and American pressures have resulted in this view only being taken into consideration sporadically. The creation of the Quartet can be seen as one of these occasions, as it *officially* brings into the negotiations other actors (i.e. the EU, the UN and Russia) in addition to the Israeli, the Palestinians and the "traditional" mediator, the US. Participation of the Quartet to the peace process underlines the commitment of the international community to the achievement of an equitable settlement of the conflict.

However, based on the previous discussion on the concept of multilateralism, an interesting question arises: does the Quartet create a multilateral framework for the negotiations? And furthermore, does the Quartet try to promote multilateralism as an *organising principle* of the peace process?

Arguably, what the Quartet really offers is a multilateral "control framework" for bilateral negotiations. These bilateral negotiations however are supposed to aim at implementing pre-established steps agreed upon by the Quartet.

The text of the Preface to the Roadmap confirms this view:

The following is a performance-based and goal-driven road map, with clear phases, timeliness, target dates, and benchmarks aiming at progress through reciprocal steps by the two parties in the political, security, economic, humanitarian and institution-building fields, under the auspices of the Quartet. [...]

²¹ Lisa Martin, 'The Rational State Choice of Multilateralism'. In J. Ruggie (ed.), *Multilateralism matters: the theory and praxis of an institutional form*, Columbia University Press, 1993; Mark A. Pollack, 'Unilateral America, multilateral Europe?', in Peterson J. and Pollack M.A. (eds.), *op. cit.*

²² a unilateral declaration of statehood on the part of Arafat's PA was blocked by a combined American and European diplomatic effort in 1999.

A settlement, negotiated between the parties, will result in the emergence of an independent, democratic, and viable Palestinian state living side by side in peace and security with Israel and its other neighbours.[...] A two state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict will only be achieved through an end to violence and terrorism [...] and through Israel's readiness to do what is necessary for a democratic Palestinian state to be established, and a clear, unambiguous acceptance by both parties of the goal of a negotiated settlement as described below [...]²³

If in appearance the Quartet opens the peace process to multilateralism, in substance it creates a somewhat contradictory framework: final goals and intermediate steps have been approved by the Quartet and then presented to the parties to the conflict who are supposed to implement them, but the role of direct negotiations and the importance of achieving a negotiated settlement between the parties is clearly acknowledged.

In the Roadmap, the Quartet has called for a series of steps to be undertaken by both Palestinians and Israelis. In particular it has called for Palestinian democratization, a new Palestinian leadership, local elections, a written constitution, uniform and centralized security organs, and a crackdown on terrorism. As for Israel, it should withdraw to the pre-intifada lines, freeze settlement activity, and relieve humanitarian and living conditions of the Palestinian people. The Roadmap attempted to create a performance-based timetable (subsequently said to be non-binding), with "phases" to build the provisional state, followed by negotiations for a final accord. Furthermore, it envisaged the organisation of an international conference to facilitate the final-status talks and an international monitoring mechanism theoretically to supervise and determine performance for the progress from one phase to the next.

The two main parties to the conflict however were not involved in developing the Roadmap, and have both been trying in one way or another to redefine it. The timeframe originally proposed by the Quartet (i.e. a final accord by 2005) has long passed. One of the main reasons for this failure is that some of the steps envisaged by the Roadmap have been proved to be unattainable in the prospected sequence: the Palestinian Authority for example declares that it needs to build its capabilities before taking on its obligations of dismantling terrorist infrastructure. This in turn means that Israel feels it has to take difficult steps before the desired guarantees on security issues.

The contradictory nature of the Quartet' action is partly at the root of its less than brilliant record of successes: both the Israeli and the Palestinians turn to the Quartet and to the Roadmap to the extent they see fit to safeguard their interest, but both do not hesitate to turn back to the traditional scheme of negotiations (i.e. Israel and the Palestinian Authority with the US as mediator) and negotiate important points that the Roadmap may address not to their satisfaction. The US itself, despite being a member of the Quartet, has had a mixed attitude towards it, almost fuelling the suspicions that it had contributed to its creation in order to respond to external pressures (mainly from the European allies) while at the same time aiming to maintain an undisputed role as the sole mediator accepted by both parties.

If the peace plan proposed by the Quartet is to become successful the first essential step should be to involve the main parties in the definition of the various phases and specific steps to be undertaken. Only under these conditions would both the Israelis and the Palestinians feel that they can truly be committed to the plan rather than being pressurised into accepting externally imposed solutions.

²³ See http://europa.eu.int/comm/external_relations/mepp/faq/roadmap.pdf

For all, indeed, the ultimate goal is the permanent resolution of the conflict, and it is a goal that can only be achieved if both sides agree to make changes or even sacrifices for their own, albeit not immediate, benefit. In this framework the guarantee offered by the Quartet's commitment to the peace plan would become crucial and would finally render progress feasible.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The objective of this paper was to evaluate the activities of the Quartet and its role in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, and to establish if the Quartet has become an instrument for the promotion of effective multilateralism.

The analysis conducted by this paper brings to the conclusion that the Quartet has not been effective so far in promoting multilateralism in the peace process. Despite having been welcomed as a symbol of a rapprochement between American and European positions on the issue of the peace process, the Quartet has created an ambiguous structure that cannot be truly defined as multilateral.

In order for the Quartet's action to become effective, the perception of the main actors with regards to the principle of multilateralism has to change. The EU has been progressively integrating this principle in its approach to international affairs for the past 50 years, but this vision is not shared by the parties to the conflict.

Israel has been wary of the Quartet's involvement in the peace process and has expressed numerous reservations with regards to the peace plan proposed in the Roadmap. Its preference remains that of dealing with the Palestinian Authority in a bilateral framework avoiding as much as possible interference from third parties beyond the United States.

The victory of Hamas (which is included in the list of terrorist organisations of both the EU and the US) in the Palestinian elections has heightened Israel's feeling of insecurity and its need to receive reassurances that the international community will not support the Palestinian Authority financially if this means supporting an organisation that organises terrorist attacks on Israel's soil.

The victory of Hamas has highlighted divergences within the Quartet itself: if the EU and the US have freezed - albeit temporarily - economic support to the PA and refuse to deal directly with Hamas until it recognises Israel's right to exist, on the other hand Russia (also a member of the Quartet) has invited members of the Hamas leadership to Moscow for talks. Events such as this cannot but undermine the credibility of the Quartet as a coherent actor

The goal of promoting multilateralism as an organising principle of the peace process is a long term one: if multilateral cooperation is to be successful, its different actors need to understand that they are working toward a greater future benefit that will require certain sacrifices to be made, to different extents, by the actors involved. The various parties will have different roles to play in cooperative efforts, given their different needs and capabilities, and based upon these differences, the benefits of cooperation will seem more immediate to some actors than to others.

The current stalemate between Israel and the new Palestinian leadership make the achievement of this goal in the immediate future extremely difficult and the likelihood of the two parties engaging in cooperative efforts very low.

The most effective policy that the Quartet (and the G-8 in its efforts to promote the peace process in the Middle East) can follow now is that of devising original solutions to practical problems that can slowly show the parties to the conflict what are the potential benefits of including external actors in the negotiation process.

The EU should use its role in the Quartet as a way to bridge the gap that has divided it from Israel for many years and to start building up a degree of credibility as an actor involved not only in the financial dimension of the peace process, but also - if to a lesser extent - in the security dimension, which remains the crucial one.

In November 2005 the Quartet has been instrumental in the conclusion of an "Agreement on Movement and Access" between Israel and the Palestinian Authority,

which included agreed principles for the Rafah crossing between Gaza and Egypt. On 21 November 2005, the Council of the EU welcomed the Agreement and agreed that the EU should undertake the Third Party role proposed in the Agreement. It therefore decided to launch the EU Border Assistance Mission at Rafah, named EU BAM Rafah, to monitor the operations of this border crossing point. The operational phase of the Mission began on 30 November 2005 and will have a duration of 12 months.²⁴

This limited initiative, whose final success is still uncertain, has been unprecedented in nature: for the first time EU military personnel, under the command of an Italian general, supervise an area of security concern for Israel.²⁵

Just a short time ago such a proposal would have been unthinkable: the EU has long voiced its wish to be involved more directly in the security dimension of the peace process but, as already underlined, both Israeli and American opposition had rendered this by and large unfeasible. In the particular circumstances created by Israel withdrawal from Gaza however, the EU was better suited to carry out the task of supervising the Rafah crossing, and American assurances contributed to convince Israel to accept the EU's offer. Arguably, such a development was partly made possible by the EU's membership of the Quartet, which creates a formal framework for the EU's role tying it to the US one, thus easing Israel deep seated reservations with regards to the EU's involvement.

The EU should now use this as a starting point to slowly upgrade its involvement in the security dimension of the peace process, while at the same time coordinating its action with the other members of the Quartet to ensure cohesiveness and coherence of policies. The handling of the stalemate created by Hamas' victory will be crucial for the consolidation of the EU role in the peace process. If the EU wants to pursue its goal of promoting effective multilateralism it will have to succeed in a daunting task: maintaining a firm stance on the support of Israel's right to exist in security while at the same time preventing a serious political and humanitarian crisis in the Palestinian Territories. This will have to be done in coordination with the US and the other members of the Quartet, as only the credibility that would derive by a successful management of this crisis could lay the foundations for a future relevant role of the Quartet in the peace process.

The role of the G-8 (as the institutional embodiment of the responsible world powers, whose leaders also provide most of the humanitarian assistance to the Palestinians) in facilitating and legitimising this process will be crucial.

²⁴ see <http://www.consilium.europa.eu/showPage.asp?lang=en&id=979&mode=g&name=>

²⁵ The EU BAM differs deeply in nature from the so called TIPH, i.e. the Temporary International Presence in the City of Hebron, which is a civilian observer mission in the West Bank city of Hebron and is staffed by personnel from Denmark, Italy, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland and Turkey. See <http://www.tiph.org/>