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IN THE MEDITERRANEAN:  
CURRENT INITIATIVES AND  
EUROPEAN POLICY PERSPECTIVES**

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# MULTILATERAL COOPERATION IN THE MEDITERRANEAN: CURRENT INITIATIVES AND EUROPEAN POLICY PERSPECTIVES

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## **Introduction**

Although the problems of employment, economic development and migration affecting the countries of the Western Mediterranean are in many ways different from those in the rest of the Mediterranean region, their solution cannot be separated from the broader Mediterranean context politics in which the policies meant to address them are framed. This paper analyzes this broader context by focussing on multilateral diplomatic initiatives aimed at fostering international cooperation in the Mediterranean.

Since the 1991 Gulf war, a number of new diplomatic initiatives involving regional and extra-regional actors have been launched to support the search for political stability and increased economic efficiency in Middle East and North African (MENA) countries. In fact, Europe's southern neighbours in the Mediterranean are experiencing a period of rapid and difficult change under the combined effects of the end of bipolarism, the second Gulf war, the Arab-Israeli peace process and domestic political and economic reforms.

At least on paper, there are currently some nine diplomatic initiatives targeting the MENA. The number alone is indicative, on the one hand of the persistence of external interest in these regions. On the other hand, it attests to the widespread hope that the Arab-Israeli peace process will remove the powerful obstacles to the integration of the MENA region in international cooperation. Finally, the number of current initiatives reflects a sense of urgency, as the present window of opportunity for cooperation in the MENA may close rapidly and is unlikely to open again soon.

Closer scrutiny reveals that there is a good degree of common vision in the different efforts to build multilateral cooperation in the Mediterranean, but also a number of latent problems and contradictions.

What are the chances for success of the existing web of multilateral frameworks for cooperation in the Mediterranean? This paper analyses them by considering the potential weaknesses of the political and economic visions the frameworks imply from a European point of view. It is not argued here that Mediterranean cooperation is not required or that the present efforts to this end - finally undertaken after decades of neglect - are doomed to failure. Quite to the contrary, the argument is that a critical look at existing initiatives is essential for the very reason that the present, much needed, efforts to foster economic development and political stability in the Mediterranean should not be dissipated.

## 1. Current initiatives: an overview

The most comprehensive of the ongoing initiatives for multilateral cooperation in the Mediterranean is no doubt the Middle East peace process started at the October 1991 Madrid conference. The other main cooperation initiative targeting the MENA is the new European-Mediterranean Partnership, which was launched only recently at the Essen European Council (December 1994), but which had been in the making since 1992 and is, in fact, a further expansion of the Community's Mediterranean Policy launched in 1972 and renewed in 1990. The MENA is also the object of at least seven other diplomatic initiatives.

Table 1 gives a synopsis of the existing initiatives; an annotated list is provided in annex 1. The picture that emerges lends itself to some overall considerations.

*Globalism vs. Regionalism* Each initiative is different with regard to geographic scope, issues considered and institutional mechanisms, but all share the same long-term goal of fostering the conditions for peaceful and mutually profitable relationships among the countries of the MENA and between them and their external partners.

It appears that both the regional and the global approach coexist in the context of Mediterranean cooperation. The EU and/or its member countries are either promoting or taking part in all initiatives, while the US are promoting or taking part in three of them (in the framework of the OSCE, NATO and the Middle East peace process); Japan and Russia are involved in these efforts only through the multilateral track of the peace process, which is also receiving the support of a number of extra-regional powers such as Canada, Australia, India and China. On the whole, "extended regionalism" seems to prevail: of the seven active initiatives, three are purely Euro-Mediterranean and two (CSCE, NATO) address cooperation in the Mediterranean as a dimension of European security, with the US and, more marginally, Russia participating as European powers. Even the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership, the most "regionalist" of the existing initiatives, foresees some extra-regional involvement (e.g. through coordination with extra-regional donor countries). The most dynamic and comprehensive of current initiatives, however, is the Middle East peace process, which is led by the US and is globalist in its membership and method.

The Maghreb countries appear to find their extra-regional integration mainly with the EU, while the US are the main partners to Middle East countries. There are two initiatives, however, the Mediterranean Forum and the MENA Economic Summit, that contrast with this traditional polarization: the former was launched by Egypt to strengthen its links to Western Mediterranean countries and, hence, to Europe; the latter provides Maghreb countries --Morocco and, to a lesser extent, Tunisia-- with an opportunity to join the cooperation processes taking place in the Levant under US auspices.

Participation of MENA countries in multilateral Mediterranean cooperation nevertheless remains spotty: in each sub-region there are 'problem' states (Libya, Sudan, Lebanon, Syria, Iran, Iraq) that are kept or want to remain outside of multilateral cooperation efforts. Moreover, there has been little or no integration of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states into the various Mediterranean cooperation schemes.

*Competencies and Specialization* A second general observation concerns the functional specialization of the different initiatives. Consideration of military aspects (i.e. conflict management, CSBMs, arms control) of security cooperation is absent from Euro-Mediterranean initiatives and has not (yet) been tackled by European security institutions. Political dialogue, on the other hand, is on the agenda of almost all existing initiatives, but it is not conceived and institutionalized in the same way. Finally, while economic cooperation is supposed to be the basic prerequisite and common aim of all frameworks, it is really only implemented and supported financially in the multilateral group of the peace process (Regional Economic Development Working Group-REDWG) and in the framework of the EU Mediterranean Policy/Partnership. As a result, the other initiatives are left either to compete for residual resources not invested in the main initiatives or, more commonly, to provide their members with privileged access to the resources available there.

Finally, among the active initiatives, only two - the Middle East peace process and the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership- are comprehensive and envisage action in all three fields (politics, economics and security) of Mediterranean cooperation. Therefore, the nature of Mediterranean cooperation today depends mainly on these two initiatives. Attention must also be paid, however, to the Mediterranean Forum and the Casablanca Summit processes, as they are explicitly linked, and posed as backups to the REDWG and the EU Partnership, respectively. In particular, the agenda adopted in July 1994 by the eleven member countries of the Mediterranean Forum states that Mediterranean Political Cooperation (MPC) mechanisms developed in that framework should be organically linked to the EU common foreign and security policy;<sup>1</sup> in addition, in January 1995 the REDWG "committed itself to strengthening its relationship with the follow-up activities of the Casablanca Summit involving the business community".<sup>2</sup>

## **2. A common vision and many open questions**

As stated before, all initiatives for cooperation in the Mediterranean share the same long-term goal of fostering the conditions for peaceful and mutually profitable relationships among the countries of the MENA and between them and their Western partners. Indeed, if compared to the not too distant past it is indeed striking that this could be a common aim: it is the first time in many, many years that Israel, Arab countries, Turkey, European countries and the US accept each other as legitimate participants in Mediterranean relations. This does not go without some qualifications and exceptions, but it remains a remarkable fact.

Not only are the need for and the ultimate aim of Mediterranean cooperation shared, but so are the general analyses of the obstacles hindering and the instruments required for its achievement. With different phrasing and emphasis, all Mediterranean cooperation initiatives have been launched under the conviction that the vicious circle between socio-economic crises and political and military conflict in and among Mediterranean countries can only be broken by economic development and political dialogue. This has to be pursued with substantial outside help, but

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1. See Istituto Affari Internazionali, "Cooperation and Stability in the Mediterranean: An Agenda for Partnership", *The International Spectator*, vol. XXIX, n. 3, July-September 1994, pp.10-12.

2. REDWG, Bonn meeting (18-19 January 1995) Conclusions established under the Chair's authority.

ultimately depends on good governance in the individual states and support from civil forces in society.<sup>3</sup>

The almost unanimous definition of problems and cures for Mediterranean cooperation should not conceal some potential weaknesses of the political and economic wisdom of common vision.

*Stability* When talking of political stability as a primary aim to be pursued through Mediterranean cooperation, different actors often mean different things: some governments equate this concept to maintenance of the status quo while others take it to be the final aim of a process of democratization, permitting --and in some cases requiring-- peaceful political change. This problem is particularly evident in the reactions of the Southern Mediterranean countries to the Commission's conception of political dialogue in the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership.<sup>4</sup>

The European Community has always stressed its support for the promotion of democracy in the political systems of its neighbours. It is however only with the renewed Mediterranean Policy in 1990, and more clearly with the recently launched Euro-Mediterranean Partnership that democracy has become an immediate concern, orienting the conception and implementation of the Union's cooperation policies.<sup>5</sup>

In any case, the basic tensions between the promotion of political liberalization in Arab countries and the search for stability and security are clearly epitomized by the political dilemmas posed by attitudes towards Islamist movements, which generate different reactions and policies in Israel, Arab countries, Turkey, European countries and the US.<sup>6</sup> Europe has not yet worked out a common assessment, let alone a common policy framework towards Islamism; on the contrary, national evaluations of the Algerian crisis became increasingly diversified during 1994.

Another dubious assumption underlying existing schemes for Mediterranean cooperation concerns strategic stability. Although concerns for arms proliferation remain high and a number of disputes about resources or territories still have to be solved in the MENA, there seems to be a widespread assumption that once the Arab-Israeli conflict is removed or firmly put under control by the ongoing peace process, the MENA countries will lack the basic incentive for going to war with one another. Unfortunately, it can be argued that, quite to the contrary and as happened after the end of the East-West conflict, the end of this central conflict will free energies and ambitions

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3. Emphasis in the formulation of this vision has moved from security to economics and politics; see Italian-Spanish non Paper on the Conference on Security and Cooperation in the Mediterranean (CSCM), Foreign Ministry, Rome, 1990; European Commission Proposals for the Establishment of Euro-Mediterranean Partnership, COM(95) 72 def.

4. See "Reservas árabes ante los planes para la conferencia Euro-Mediterránea", El País, 27 March 1995

5. See Gianni Bonvicini, "The Role of Human Rights in the Design of the Community's European Political Cooperation: Application to the Middle East", paper presented at a Conference organized by Leonard Davis Institute for International Relations, on "Israel and Europe: Common and Divergent Interests" (Jerusalem, 21-24 March 1993); EC Commission "Establishing a New Euro-Mediterranean Partnership", COM(94) 427 def., p. 2; among cooperation programs in the new partnership some are explicitly aimed at strengthening democracy (see COM(95) 72 def., pp. 8-11); moreover, bilateral partnership agreements (presently under negotiation with Morocco, Tunisia, Egypt and Israel) will include a clause stating that the agreed relations between the Community and the partner country are based on the respect of democratic principles and human rights, which constitutes a founding element of the bilateral agreement.

6. See Laura Guazzone (ed.) *The Islamist Dilemma in the Arab World*, London: Ithaca Press (forthcoming).

to settle other domestic and interstate conflicts which have been relatively contained by the primacy of the Arab-Israeli conflict.

Some EU members such as France and Germany also point to the problem of establishing a more stable strategic balance when they stress the need for maintaining some degree of "critical" dialogue with Iran and reducing the pressure on Iraq as soon as possible. In other words, some Europeans seem to believe that the collective security approach being sought in the framework of the Middle East peace processes cannot succeed if Gulf instabilities and emerging bilateral rivalries are not adequately addressed.

*Development* These political dilemmas are not unrelated to another basic assumption on Mediterranean cooperation, which holds that adjustment to a market economy is in the long run the basic and only recipe for fuelling economic growth and socio-economic development in the Mediterranean Southern Rim. Of course, multilateral cooperation in the Mediterranean is sought precisely to sustain and channel the action of free market forces in economic development. But the success of the development strategy involving adjustment and cooperation policies is predicated on the ability to attract private investments, and private investments, by definition, tend to avoid countries and areas which are politically unstable or unpredictable.

According to the Commission's proposals, the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership substantially wagers on the growth-generating potential of the private investments to be attracted to the MENA countries by the free trade area that will be established by 2010: for instance, 25 per cent of the EU budgetary resources to be mobilized in support of the Euro-Mediterranean economic space will be devoted to stimulating small and medium enterprises investments.<sup>7</sup>

Without going into a comparison of this approach and a similar one and the problems it has posed in the framework of the NAFTA agreement, one might question whether the timing of the actions and reactions set in motion by adjustment policies and free trade measures has been thoroughly evaluated and whether it sufficiently takes into account the specific socio-political and cultural conditions prevailing in the Mediterranean countries. In this regard opinions are divided: one school of thought believes that political and economic liberalization processes can reinforce one another in the majority of the Arab countries;<sup>8</sup> another school, however, feels that the two processes do not necessarily coincide and can be mutually detrimental given Arab entrepreneurs' substantial dependence on the state.<sup>9</sup>

Another aspect of the economic component of Mediterranean cooperation schemes which should be scrutinized is directly related to the envisaged feedback between economic reform, job creation and migration flows. It is well known that adjustment policies are not, *per se*, job-creating and that they can have devastating short-term effects on employment levels in countries experiencing exponential demographic growth.<sup>10</sup> Thus, in the case of the Mediterranean countries, structural

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7. COM(95) 72 def., point 2.1.3 and Annex.

8. See Alan Richards, "Economic Pressures for Accountable Governance in the Middle East and North Africa", in Augustus R. Norton Civil Society in the Middle East, Leiden-New York: Brill, 1995.

9. See Volker Perthes, "Le secteur privé, la libéralisation économique et les perspectives de démocratisation", in Ghassan Salamé Démocratie sans démocrates, Paris: Fayard, 1994.

10. See Giuseppe Pennisi "Development Cooperation and Employment", The International Spectator, n. 2 vol. XXVII, April-June 1992.

adjustment must be accompanied by definite and consistent cooperation policies to sustain job creation.

Proposals aimed at job creation are outlined by the Mediterranean-2000 Project,<sup>11</sup> the blueprint for Mediterranean cooperation adopted by the Mediterranean Forum initiative. In the framework of the Regional Economic Development Working Group (REDWG) of the Middle East peace process, job creation is not explicitly mentioned as a central objective, but the Copenhagen Action Plan identifies training as one of the nine priority sectors of the REDWG. The employment problem was not specifically addressed at the Casablanca MENA Economic Summit.

In any case, the relative marginality of employment issues within the framework of the two latter initiatives reflects the fact that they are focussed mainly on promoting economic cooperation with the Levant countries (i.e. Israel, Jordan, Egypt and the Palestinians), among which migration flows are not prominent.

On the other hand, the recent proposals of the European Commission for the establishment of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership stress the centrality of job creation in stemming violence and reducing migration. Nevertheless, the proposals do not spell out which mechanisms are envisaged to support employment levels during the adjustment period, nor what the job-creating potential of the different cooperation programs is.

The problem, however, is that even a more clearly focussed EU cooperation policy would not have a significantly positive impact on employment and migration in the immediate future. The urgent need for a Euro-Mediterranean migration policy therefore remains and is one of the most difficult tasks facing the forthcoming Euro-Mediterranean conference in Barcelona (scheduled for November 1995) which will discuss the still ill defined the political content of the new partnership.

Finally, another common tenet of the existing initiatives for Mediterranean cooperation is the persuasion that growth in the MENA countries will be stimulated by increased economic cooperation among them, and that this, in turn, will maximize the benefits of their economic cooperation with Europe and the rest of the world. It is seldom stressed that there are some powerful obstacles to regional economic integration. First, in order to be able to benefit economically from regional integration a country must already have a certain level of development and a relatively open system; therefore, as only a few Arab countries satisfy these conditions, there are also economic disincentives to regional integration.<sup>12</sup> Even stronger disincentives come from the political and cultural spheres. In fact, some analysts argue that economic integration must be sought first among the Arabs themselves to counter the risk of having cooperation schemes backfire as a result of the premature integration of Israel.<sup>13</sup>

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11. A synthesis of the project elaborated by the Istituto Affari Internazionali (Rome) in "Cooperation and Stability in the Mediterranean: An Agenda for Partnership", *The International Spectator*, vol. XIX, n° 3, July-September 1994; the section of the Agenda concerning emigration and employment summarizes Giuseppe Pennisi's chapter in the project.

12. See Piercarlo Padoan, "The Economics and Politics of Integration and the Choice to Integrate", paper presented at a conference organized by the Istituto Affari Internazionali on "Global Interdependence and the Future of the Middle East" (Rome, 7-8 November 1994); Franco Zallio "Structural Economic Adjustment in the Middle East: a Comparative Assessment", *idem*.

13. For a rather pessimistic assessment of the chances of economic cooperation in the Middle East see Dirk Vandewalle "The Middle East Peace Process and Regional Economic Integration", *Survival*, Winter 1994-95;

In this regard, it may be worth noting that the strategy for Mediterranean economic development devised by the European Commission appears less dependent on 'horizontal' regional integration than the strategy presently pursued in the framework of the REDWG or the Casablanca process. Economic cooperation among MENA countries, and especially among those of the Levant is a clearly stated aim of the Euro-Mediterranean partnership, and a number of cooperation projects (namely the MED-networking programs) are to be implemented on a regional scale. The main emphasis of the economic strategy envisaged by the Commission, however, is on financial support of national adjustment programs through free trade and cooperation programs.

### **3. Contradictions and rivalries**

Notwithstanding a basic shared approach, the existing initiatives stress the different threads of Mediterranean cooperation to different degrees. This is particularly apparent in the different emphasis put on stemming migration flows and promoting 'horizontal' (i.e. intraregional) economic cooperation. While both aims are stated in (almost) all initiatives, the containment of migration flows receives high priority (albeit with some inconsistencies) only in the framework of Euro-Mediterranean initiatives such as the Mediterranean Forum and the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership. Conversely, the promotion of economic integration between the Israel and the Arab countries is a high priority only in the framework of the Middle East peace process and in the framework of the Casablanca process.

There is nothing surprising or contradictory in these differences in emphasis, since they reflect the different realities of the subregions on which the different initiatives are focussed. Possibly more importantly, they reflect the different priorities of the external partners of the MENA countries: ensuring Israel's security by bringing it beyond bilateral peace to real integration in a peaceful Middle East is a top priority for US foreign policy, while containing migration flows by supporting the growth of more prosperous trading partners at its southern approaches is a central concern for the European Union and its members countries.

Seen in this perspective, Mediterranean cooperation could be a successful case of international cooperation in regional development and an example of that new transatlantic division of labour that the US and Europe are presently seeking.

Things are not so simple, however, and the coexistence of the various cooperation schemes for the Mediterranean is not devoid by a degree of political competition.<sup>14</sup> Competition that stems from the internal contradictions in current inter-Arab, inter-European and Euro-American relations. As a result of these contradictions: 1) the responsibility for security management and

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for a perceptive analysis of the politico-cultural reasons in favour of an "Arab integration first" strategy, see Bahgat Korany, "The Old/New Middle East", paper presented at a conference organized by the Istituto Affari Internazionali on "Global Interdependence and the Future of the Middle East" (Rome, 7-8 November 1994), for economic arguments in support of the same thesis see Mahmoud Abdel Fadel "Macro-Economic Tendencies and Policy Options in the Arab Region", *idem*.

14. The content and implications of these rivalries for Mediterranean cooperation are analyzed in depth in Roberto Aliboni "Institutionalizing Mediterranean Relations: Complementarity and Competitions", paper presented at the Second Annual Conference of the Mediterranean Study Commission-MeSCO (Alexandria, 30 March-1 April, 1995).



political dialogue in the MENA regions is a matter of indirect contention between Europe and the US, echoing the burden-sharing and out-of-area debates of the Cold War era; 2) the amount of political and economic attention to be paid to the Mediterranean is a source of dispute between northern and southern EU members, fuelled by competing responsibilities towards Central Europe and broader difficulties in developing a common foreign and security policy and deepening the Union; 3) the adhesion of the MENA countries to the different cooperation schemes is also a function of their views on regional or sub-regional leadership and the instrumentality of US or European support to this end. In this sense, the Mediterranean Forum and the Casablanca Summit are deeply instrumental to the foreign policy of Egypt and Morocco respectively; for the same reason, the GCC countries are hesitant to foot the bill of the Mediterranean cooperation schemes they cannot control.

The combined effects of these contradictions and competitions cannot but have a negative influence on Mediterranean multilateral cooperation.

On the intra-European side, it is evident that the timing of the new EU Mediterranean initiative is of extremely political importance in balancing the feelings of neglect of the South and of irrelevance of the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy which are increasingly widespread inside and outside the Union. Yet, the new EU Mediterranean initiative is a compromise between what is needed and what is possible. The most evident limits of the new EU Mediterranean initiative reflect the overall characteristics of EU external policies: the prevalence of economic instruments over political ones, the risk of inconsistencies between the two and the disputes over limited resources.

In effect, it is already evident from the size of the financial 'envelope' proposed (but not confirmed) for the Mediterranean Partnership (5.5 billion ECU) that the aim of balancing EU action vis-à-vis its Eastern and Southern neighbours will not be achieved, as the proposed increase will only transform the ratio of East/South per capita distribution of EU aid from the present 5:1 to 5:2.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, further cuts in the financial envelope may endanger the feasibility of the free zone scheme, which constitutes the strongest asset of the new EU Mediterranean package. Since the overall EU budgetary ceilings for 1993-1999 cannot be changed, it is likely that the financial support for Mediterranean cooperation will depend to a large extent on the willingness of the Southern European countries to increase their contribution to the EU budget or sacrifice a quota of financing they receive from it; this decision may be difficult for individual countries and put intra-EU solidarity under additional stress.<sup>16</sup>

Another example of the negative effects of the political and methodological contradictions observed is the deadlock reached concerning the proposal to create a new development bank for the Middle East and North Africa. Championed by the United States and Israel and supported by Egypt and Turkey, the creation of such a bank has met with the hostility of some EU members (France, Germany and Great Britain), which seem to fear that the new institution would be US dominated and would disregard North African investment needs. The proposal has also been

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15. See "Europa e Mediterraneo: intervista con Manuel Marin", Dossier Europa (magazine of the EU Commission office in Rome), December 1994, n° 15, p. 7.

16. See Roberto Aliboni, "L'Italie et le Maghreb dans la perspective du renouveau de la politique européenne", Communication at the seminar on "Les Relations euro-maghrébines" organized by the Association des Etudes Internationales (Tunis, 24-26 November 1994)

opposed by the GCC countries -expected to be among the main donors for the bank- on the grounds that the bank would support a premature deepening of Israel's integration in regional cooperation. For their part, the Europeans have advanced the alternative proposal of creating a coordinating mechanism for MENA development within the existing international financial institutions and, possibly, an export credit fund for private investments in the Mediterranean.<sup>17</sup>

## Conclusions

Summing up, it appears that all existing initiatives for cooperation in the Mediterranean share a common approach, based on promoting economic development as a cure for the social and political instabilities in the region and to promote mutually profitable relations among MENA countries and between them and their Western partners.

This common approach has some potential flaws however, that may prevent Mediterranean cooperation from reaching its aims. The main questions that remain open about the method underlying Mediterranean cooperation schemes concern: 1) potentially dangerous feedback between economic and political liberalization, and the need for better definition of the meaning of democracy being promoted; 2) possible strategic instabilities generated by the end of the Arab-Israeli conflict, namely, spillover effects from strategic imbalances in the Gulf area; 3) doubts about the ability of the cooperation envisaged to promote private initiative from within the region (because of the weakness of Arab middle class sectors) as well as from without (because of enduring political instability); 4) low job creation potential in the short term and, thus, low impact on migration flows; 5) the persistence of powerful economic and political obstacles to horizontal economic integration among MENA countries.

As noted earlier, notwithstanding a basic shared approach, the initiatives described are not exempt from contradictions and rivalries deriving from tensions existing within and among the MENA countries, the EU and the US. These contradictions involve: 1) the new transatlantic relationship and, more precisely, the division of labour between the US and EU countries in marshalling financial support and security management for the region; 2) the balancing of North/South and East/South needs in the framework of the European Union, and the ensuing difficulties in developing a common foreign and security policy and supporting it financially and politically; 3) the inter-Arab balance of power, unsettled by uncertain prospects of Israel's integration in the Middle East and US-European competing influences.

Whether the significant political and economic resources presently pledged in the existing multilateral initiatives will be able to fulfill the hopes they have raised, will depend to a large extent on the ability of the actors involved to tackle and solve these contradictions in good time.

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17. See "Key Arab Nations Reject Proposal for Mideast Bank", International Herald Tribune, 18-19 Feb. 1995; "Le projet d'une banque pour le Proche-Orient est en panne: désaccord entre les Etats-Unis et l'Union Européenne", Le Monde, 9 March 1995, "Echec du projet de banque de développement pour le Proche-Orient", Le Monde, 4 April 1995.