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**THE MIDDLE EAST PEACE PROCESS:
DEAD OR ENTERING A NEW PHASE?**

by Laura Guazzone

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Introduction

The Arab-Israeli conflict has dilapidated human and material resources of the Middle East for 50 years. This conflict has caused great sufferances, killing 200,000 people, displacing 3,000,000, and distorting economic and political development region-wide.

There is no doubt that Iran and the countries of the European Union clearly share the interest of ending the Arab-Israeli conflict and bringing about a comprehensive and lasting peace between the former belligerents. Iran and the Europeans disagree, however, about the means to end the conflict and, more importantly, about the principles that can bring about a lasting peace.

European governments believe that the principle of land for peace -with what it implies of negotiated compromise- provides the basis for a stable peace, whose final shape can only be determined through negotiations between the parties in the framework of the peace process started in Madrid in 1991. The Iranian government instead denounces the present process as a mean to impose on the Arabs a peace that is "humiliating and unjust from an Islamic, principled and ideal point of view."¹

The present communication explores the present stage of the Middle East peace process and ways to support its continuation, with a special emphasis on the role that the European Union can play to this end.

The present stage

Whether the Arab-Israeli peace process is dead, as some observers believe, or just entering a new phase will not be evident for sometime and, according to some other observers, certainly not before the end of 1996. During the next months Egypt, Jordan, Syria and the Palestinians may work out a new common strategy toward the peace process, the new Israeli prime minister Netanyahu will have to translate his narrow electoral victory into stable government and the US - the main international sponsor of the peace process- will elect a new president.

In any case, the Middle East peace process has now passed the middle of the road: it has been remarkably successful in bringing about mutual recognition and the end the state of war among the majority of the frontline actors; Syria and Lebanon have been negotiating with Israel towards the same end; new political and economic relations have been established between Israel and the majority of the Middle East countries and a new thrust towards regional cooperation is consolidating through new Arab, Middle Eastern and Mediterranean initiatives.

1. Quote from a letter to the IAI's director of studies, Roberto Aliboni, by the Iranian vice-minister for foreign affairs Abbas Maleki (June 1996).

However, the conditions for a just and comprehensive peace between Israel and the Arab world have not yet been ushered in. Before the process reaches that point many more difficult knots have to be untangled through government negotiations and, equally importantly, the peoples of the countries concerned have to be fully convinced that there are no positive alternatives to this peace process and that the benefits of peace outweigh the cost of compromises needed to reach it.

At present, however, the process is still far from reaching the final stage on all 'tracks'² and, instead of moving in that direction, it faces a dangerous stalemate. The victory of Netanyahu in Israel is not the cause, but just one of the consequences of the problems which are confronting the Arab-Israeli peace process. The present stalemate, that can bring the process to an end but which can also be reversed, is the result of the actions of the opponents of Arab-Israeli peace, of some specific political errors on the part of the leaders steering the process, as well as of the inherent weaknesses of the process, conducted according to the method agreed in Madrid in 1991.

Looking ahead

Among the inherent weaknesses of the process, some factors stand out and need to be urgently addressed to support the continuation of the process. The first factor is the absence of a true mediator between the negotiating parties; this role was played by the US under the Bush administration and made possible the Madrid conference, but was later abandoned under the Clinton administration. So much so that the positions recently held by present US administration with regard to Lebanon, Jerusalem and Israeli settlements are now at odd with both UN resolutions and previous US positions. In the face of the present Arab fears about Israel's lack of attachment to the peace process goals and achievements, and of Israel's renewed fears for its internal and external security there is an urgent need to restore confidence among the negotiating parties, also through the revival of even-handed mediation.

The second factor of inherent weakness of the peace process is that the high degree of security, political, economic and cultural interdependence which characterizes the Middle East makes unstable any firm separation between the arrangements prevailing in its different sub-regions. Quite to the contrary, it exists now too a rigid division in the prevailing political conditions and international policies towards the Near East, the Gulf and the so called Northern Tier.

While a multilateral cooperative approach is sought among the countries involved in the Arab-Israeli peace process, conflict management initiatives with regard to the Kurd problem and the conflicts in the Caucasus are too weak, Iraq and Iran remain out of international initiatives for regional cooperation and subject to different kinds of embargoes, and the management of security in the Gulf area is left to national initiatives that rise mutual threat perceptions.

The official reasons given by the Iranian government for its opposition to the Arab-Israeli peace process are debatable, since it is up to the peoples concerned to decide what is good for them.

2. The Middle East peace process consists of four 'tracks' of bilateral negotiations -taking place separately between Israel and Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, and the Palestinians- and a multilateral 'track' through which the same countries - plus other Middle East and North Africa countries and their international partners- debate regional cooperation initiatives in five thematic conferences (water, environment, economic cooperation, refugees, security and arms control).

However it is evident that, from an Iranian point of view, the fear that under the present conditions the peace process may translate into an Arab-Western-Israeli coalition against Iran is understandable.

To alleviate this fear, Iran should be encouraged to apply constructively to the peace process the prescription that "politics is the art of dealing with what you do not like". At the summit held in Florence in June 1996, the EU presidency has sent out a clear message to this end which must be pursued by both sides. In the Florence summit final communiqué, the chapter of the (Italian) presidency conclusions devoted external action by the Union reads:

The European Union appeals to the countries that have not yet decided to support the Peace Process to do so without delay. In this contexts it looks in particular to Iran, with wich it has just held a furhter session of the critical dialogue. The European Union expects this dialogue to lead to concrete results also in the areas of non-proliferation, terrorism and Human rights, including Salman Rushdie.

In broader terms, it has to be noted that the compartmentation of Middle East security and the strictly bilateral approach adopted in the Arab-Israeli negotiations were useful in launching the process at a time when the entire region was in a flux, under the combined effects of the collapse of the Soviet Union and the second Gulf war. Now, that stage has passed and a new approach must be sought without undermining the past achievements of the process. A revision of the strategic approach uderlying the Middle East peace process may require reconving a Madrid-type conference, bringing together all countries involved in the bilateral and multilateral tracks of the process.

How can the international community and particularly the countries of the European Union help in supporting the peace process in the next, difficult stage? Besides working for a constructive involmment of the regional countries that are presently out of the process, such as Iran, European countries can help by continuing to uphold the principles on which the process is based, as the European Council is doing.³

This contribution should not been underestimated, especially when the specific implications of the 194, 242, 338 and 425 UN resolutions are spelled out with regard to land for peace, right of return for Palestinian refugees, sovereignty over Jerusalem, illegality of Israeli settlements, obligation of withdrawal from Lebanon without pre-conditions. However, the political support for these principles, whose final implementation remain to the parts to be negotiated, must be backed by the European countries by concrete and coherent diplomatic behaviors.

Nor should the European Union's economic underpinning for the peace process be underrated or taken for granted. A more active European mediating effort between all parties concerned should ensure that the continuation of economic support is linked to the respect of the agreed principles. But this requires a common European vision and more intra-european coordination in dealing with the negotiating parties, as well as an effort to engage the United States to resume a truly mediatory

3. At the Florence summit the declaration by the European Union stated: "The EU recalls the essential principles on which successful conclusion of the negotiations should be based. They have been enshrined in the UN Security Council Resolutions 242,338 and 425. The key principles -self-determination for the Palestinians, whith all that it implies, and land for peace- are essential to the achievement of a just, comprehensive and durable peace."

role in the process in coordination with Europe.

The continuation of the Middle East peace process beyond the present difficult stage does not depend on Europe. However, in the coming, fateful negotiations those involved at the heart of the peace process, be they Lebanese or Syrian, Israeli or Palestinian, must know that Europe stands ready to support and encourage them, to promote fairness and above all to work for a peace that can last.