

***A New Multilateral Framework
for the Middle East***

Dr. Joel Peters

***Associate Professor
Government and International Affairs
Virginia Tech***

Joel Peters is Associate Professor of Government and International Affairs in the School of Public and International Affairs, Virginia Tech, USA. From 1992-96 he was an Associate Research Fellow in the Middle East Programme at the Royal Institute for International Affairs (Chatham House), London, where he directed a research project on the Multilateral Arab-Israeli Peace Talks. He is the author of *Pathways to Peace; the Multilateral Arab-Israeli Peace Talks* (London; The Royal Institute of International Affairs, 1996).

The Government and International Affairs Program at the School of Public and International Affairs (SPIA) Virginia Tech is located at Virginia Tech's main campus in Blacksburg and in the Washington DC metro area in Old Town Alexandria. The program offers two post-graduate degrees focusing on globalization, governance and global security: A Masters in Public and International Affairs (MPIA) and a Ph.D. in Planning, Globalization and Governance (PG&G). For details: <http://www.gia.vt.edu>

© Joel Peters - email: peters25@vt.edu

Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University

Abstract

The numerous policy challenges facing the United States and the international community in the Middle East are interrelated. This demands the adoption a comprehensive approach to the region rather than a set of bilateral initiatives. Any new diplomatic efforts aimed at resolving the Arab-Israeli conflict should look beyond the Israeli-Palestinian and the Israeli-Syrian bilateral issues at stake and situate those negotiations within a broader comprehensive regional approach.

This paper calls for the setting up of a new multilateral track to complement renewed diplomatic efforts aimed at achieving an Israeli-Palestinian and an Israeli-Syrian peace agreement. This new multilateral framework should consist of two baskets, a 'security' basket and an 'economic and social development' basket. The paper reviews the experience and activities of the previous multilateral talks set up by the 1991 Madrid Conference. It evaluates the contribution of those talks to the Arab-Israeli peace process and discusses with the strengths and failings of those talks. The paper concludes by offering a number ideas for the structure and functioning of this new multilateral framework.

The incoming Obama administration faces a host of interrelated policy challenges in the Middle East, ranging from the withdrawal of US troops from Iraq, confronting Iran's nuclear enrichment program and addressing the Arab-Israeli peace process. On the Arab-Israeli front, President Obama inherits a two-fold challenge: First, how to inject a sense of purpose and direction to a faltering Israeli-Palestinian peace process, and how to engage with Hamas which won the Palestinians elections in January 2006 and took over control of Gaza in June 2007. Second, how to build on the momentum and the understandings reached between Israel and Syria in the 'proximity talks, conducted under Turkish mediation, of the past year, and bring about an Israeli-Syrian peace agreement.

The numerous policy challenges facing the United States and the international community in the Middle East are interrelated. This demands the adoption a comprehensive approach to the region rather than a set of bilateral initiatives. Any new diplomatic efforts aimed at resolving the Arab-Israeli conflict need to look beyond the Israeli-Palestinian and the Israeli-Syrian bilateral issues at stake and situate those negotiations within a broader comprehensive regional approach.

In particular, the international community should encourage other Arab states to assist in ending the Arab-Israeli conflict. The Arab peace initiative - offering Israel normal relations with all 22 Arab countries in exchange for a Palestinian state - offers an important diplomatic window to bring other Arab states, most notably Saudi Arabia, into the peace process. Increased efforts should be directed at promoting and building upon that initiative, and the opportunities it presents.

The Obama administration would also be well served by (re)examining the Arab-Israeli multilateral talks, held from 1992-96, and learning from the experience of those talks. Those multilateral talks provided Israel and the Arab world a diplomatic environment to engage in low-risk communication and exchange, to develop new forms of cooperation and to think collectively about new regional cooperative security structures. This paper reviews the activities and experience of the multilateral talks set up by the 1991 Madrid Conference. It evaluates the contribution of those talks to the Arab-Israeli peace process and discusses with the strengths and failings of those talks.

The paper calls for the setting up of a new multilateral track to complement renewed diplomatic efforts aimed at achieving an Israeli-Palestinian and an Israeli-Syrian peace agreement. This new multilateral framework should consist of two baskets, a 'security' basket and an 'economic and social development' basket. The paper concludes by offering a number ideas for the structure and functioning of this new multilateral framework.

The Multilateral Talks 1992-96

In addition to the bilateral negotiations, the 1991 Madrid Conference also set up a series of multilateral talks designed to bring together Israel, its immediate Arab neighbors, and the wider circle of Arab states in the Gulf and Maghreb to discuss issues of mutual concern.

Those bilateral negotiations have centred primarily on issues of territorial withdrawal, border demarcation, security arrangements, and above all the political rights of the Palestinians. The multilateral talks, on the other hand, provided a forum for the parties to address a range of security, economic, social, and environmental issues which extend across national boundaries and whose resolution is essential for long-term regional development and security. If the bilateral talks have addressed problems inherited from the past, then the multilaterals focused on the future shape of the Middle East.

The multilateral talks met from 1992 through to the end of 1996. The meetings were suspended when the Arab countries refused to further participate in protest over the impasse in negotiations on the redeployment of Israeli troops from Hebron. Since that point, despite occasional diplomatic efforts, they have effectively disappeared from the agenda of the peace process.

The thinking behind the creation of multilateral track at Madrid was outlined by the then U.S. Secretary of State James Baker in his remarks to the January 1992 opening meeting of the multilateral talks in Moscow:

It is for these reasons that we have come together – to address those issues that are common to the region and that do not necessarily respect national boundaries or geographic boundaries. These issues can be best addressed by the concerted efforts of the regional parties together with the support of the international community and the resources and expertise that it can provide.

The approach of the multilaterals was grounded in the functionalist thesis of international relations which holds that engaging states in an ever-widening web of economic, technical, and welfare interdependencies will force them to set aside their political and/or ideological rivalries and create a new perception of shared needs. 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.

The establishment of the talks also reflected the emerging concept of cooperative security in the post-Cold War era, with a greater emphasis on tackling the root causes of conflict and promoting confidence, rather than relying primarily on deterrence or containment.¹ Cooperation, it was hoped, would foster a fundamental

¹ See Robert Bowker, *Beyond Peace: the Search for Security in the Middle East* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 1996).

change in attitude and lead to a convergence of expectations and the institutionalization of norms of behavior.

The Structure of the Multilateral Talks

The multilateral talks comprised five working groups: arms control and regional security (ACRS); regional and economic development (REDWG); water resources; the environment; and refugees. Membership of these working groups comprised the conflict's immediate protagonists (Egypt, Israel, Jordan and the Palestinians) and also Arab states from the Gulf and the Maghreb, as well as a host of extra-regional participants. Syria and Lebanon were invited to participate in these talks but refused to attend any of the meetings.²

Each working group was chaired by an extra-regional power; the United States was responsible for ACRS and the Water Working group, the European Union for REDWG, Japan for the Environment Working Group, and Canada for the Refugee Working Group. A Steering Group, responsible for overseeing the activities of the five working groups and for effecting any changes in the structure of the multilateral talks, was also created.

Creating the multilaterals was an ambitious undertaking not without risk. Beyond the broader goals, there was little idea of what specific issues the multilaterals would address, how the meetings would be conducted, and how the process would be managed. The uncertainty surrounding the project at the outset and the vagueness of its relationship to the bilateral tracks raised serious questions about its value. However, fears that the multilaterals might collapse in acrimony and disarray proved unjustified. The talks quickly established a sense of direction and purpose, and developed a recognizable pattern, structure and set of procedural modalities, generating their own dynamics, language, rules and procedures.

The multilateral talks are often spoken about collectively. In practice, however, the working groups varied greatly with regard to group dynamics, degree of progress made, specific interests of the parties involved, and obstacles encountered.

The Working Group on Regional Economic Development (REDWG), was the largest of the five working groups, both in terms of participation and in the number of projects developed. The purpose of this group reflected most fully the long-term goal of the multilaterals, namely the entwining the states of the region in a new set of mutually beneficial economic relations and effecting real change in the living conditions of peoples of the region. By June 1994, a monitoring committee was set up to allow the four core regional parties - Egypt, Israel, Jordan and the Palestinians - to take a more direct role in organizing the activities, developing the priorities, and the projects of the working group. The specific work of the committee was divided

² For full details of the projects drawn up by meeting of the multilaterals see: Joel Peters, *Pathways to Peace; the Multilateral Arab-Israeli Peace Talks* (London; The Royal Institute of International Affairs, 1996) pp. 16-60.

among four sectoral committees, with Egypt taking responsibility for work on finance, Israel on trade, Jordan on promoting regional infrastructure, and the Palestinian Authority on tourism. The following year, a permanent regional secretariat staffed by personnel from the region was opened in Amman to support the activities of the working group.

The *Working Group on Water* sought to separate the 'low-politics' of the functional issues surrounding the use and increasing the supply of water from the 'high-politics' of questions of water rights and sovereignty. The water group divided its work into four areas: enhancing data availability, water management and conservation, enhancing the water supply, and developing new concepts for regional cooperation and management. Through its activities Israeli, Jordanian, and Palestinian experts began working together on a common database and a computer network designed to foster the adoption of common, standardized data collection and storage techniques among the parties, improve the quality of the water-resources data collected in the region, and to improve communication among the scientific community in the region. Although the multilaterals were formally suspended in 1996, the parties have continued to meet informally and work on many of ideas raised in the working group.

The *Environment Working Group's* agenda concentrated on four themes: the control of maritime pollution, treatment of waste water, desertification, and environmental management. Several extra-regional parties took on responsibility for a running a specific project: the European Union led work which focussed on the environmental management of the eastern Mediterranean coastal area. Italy oversaw work on solid waste management, the United States on waste water treatment for small communities, the World Bank on desertification and Jordan on environmental education. Such was the progress in this group that in October 1994, in a meeting hosted by Bahrain, the parties signed an Environmental Code of Conduct for the Middle East. This document laid out a set of principles and guidelines underlining the relationship between environmental management and security, and the transnational nature of these problems together with the need for regional co-operation and the development of joint frameworks to tackle these issues.

The *Arms Control and Regional Security* working group was the group marked by fundamental disagreements between Israel and the Arab states over priorities and approach. The Arab states, led by Egypt, placed highest priority on the problem of weapons of mass destruction in the region, and wanted to put the question of Israel's nuclear capability on the agenda. Conversely, the Israeli approach centered on the need to develop confidence-building measures such as the pre-notification of large-scale military exercises, the development of hotlines, crisis prevention mechanisms, and verification procedures. The group divided its work between two separate "baskets". The first basket, the "operational basket", dealt with a large number of military issues and confidence-building measures, such as pre-notification of military exercises, the creation of a communications network, and joint search and rescue exercises at sea. The second basket, the "conceptual basket",

addresses the long-term objectives of the arms control process. This basket concentrated on drawing up a Declaration of Principles on Arms Control and Regional Security on governing future security relations among the states of the region and a set of guidelines to direct any future arms control process.³

The *Refugee Working Group* (RWG) differed from the other four in that it did not address with the future relationship between Israel and the Arab world, but focused solely on one aspect of the Arab-Israeli conflict, namely the Palestinian refugee problem. While this problem can only be resolved at the bilateral level between Israel and the Palestinians, the creation of this working group is an acknowledgement that the outcome of any agreement reached will touch upon the interests of many other parties in the region, and will require the support of the international community and as such warrants consideration in a multilateral framework. The RWG was active in three broad areas: defining the scope of the refugee problem, encouraging dialogue on the issues involved, and mobilizing the resources required to address them. Forming the basis of the group's inter-sessional activities were the following themes: databases (Norway), family reunification (France), human resources development, job creation and vocational training (United States), public health (Italy), child welfare (Sweden), and economic and social infrastructure (European Union). The RWG skirted around the highly charged political issues that lie at the heart of the refugee question. Most of the group's efforts were concerned with improving the daily lives of Palestinian refugees and mobilizing the necessary financial resources to do so.⁴

Contribution of the Multilateral Talks

The main criticism leveled at the multilateral talks was that after four years of meetings they failed to produce any tangible outcomes. However, it is important to note that the multilateral talks differed from the bilateral negotiations, in that they were not a forum in which Israel and the Arab states bargained over issues and mutual concessions. Instead, they offered Israel and the Arab world an alternative diplomatic space to engage in low-risk communication and exchange, to develop new forms of cooperation, and to generate creative solutions and to plan for the future - for the first time - on a regional level. They presented an opportunity for each side to gain insight into the other's goals and intentions, perceptions and anxieties, and flexibility and limits. They also provided a framework for extra-regional parties to actively promote and support regional cooperation and stability in the Middle East.

Notably, the multilaterals provided a forum for unprecedented bilateral contacts between Israel and some Arab states, such as Bahrain, Qatar, Oman, Tunisia, and Morocco, leading to their engagement in the peace process. After the signing of the

³ Emily B. Landau, "ACRS: what worked, what didn't, and what could be relevant for the region today" *Disarmament Forum*, no. 2, 2008.

⁴ Rex Brynen and Jill Tansley, 'The Refugee Working Group of the Middle East Multilateral Peace Negotiations', *Israel-Palestine Journal* 2, 4 Autumn, 1995.

Oslo Accords, these states hosted some of the plenary sessions, and began to play an active role in many of the inter-sessional activities. These early contacts led to a series of open bilateral meetings between Israeli ministers and their Arab counterparts, and to the development of informal, low-level diplomatic ties between Israel and the wider Arab world.

The real importance of the multilateral track lay in its contribution to the post-settlement phase of the Arab-Israeli peace process. Developing collective long-range concepts for regional economic, social, and cultural relations cannot take place in the context of bilateral negotiations, which are inevitably governed by more pressing concerns. By breaking down issues into narrowly-defined functional areas, the multilaterals brought together experts from around the region and beyond. As was noted by former U.S. Assistant Secretary of State Edward Djerejian, in his observations on the Working Group on the Environment:

The mode of operation has been to bring experts--not politicians or diplomats--from the region together at workshops and set them to addressing the problems. What we found was that when we put these experts together they solved problems. Beyond the glare of the political klieg lights, we created an environment where scientists spoke a common language.

Continuous interaction between specialists from the different countries over time can foster a convergence of expectations and the institutionalization of norms of behavior. Through the multilateral process, the states of the Middle East began to develop a set of principles, norms, rules and decision-making procedures to govern the nature of their future relations. The Working Group on the Environment drew up the Bahrain Environmental Code of Conduct for the Middle East, while the efforts of the parties in the 'conceptual basket' of the ACRS working group were engaged in drafting a Declaration of Principles to cover regional security issues.

The multilaterals also began to lay the foundations for a new set of regional institutions, such as a desalinization research center in Oman, environmental training centers in Jordan and Bahrain, and a proposed regional security center in Amman. Of particular significance was the establishment of the REDWG secretariat in Amman. The creation of this secretariat represented an important, qualitative step in the institutionalization of the multilateral process, and in placing responsibility for driving the process of regional cooperation in the hands of the regional parties themselves. Although embryonic in its nature and functioning, the REDWG secretariat in Amman reflected the first tentative steps towards the fashioning of new common structures of cooperation, coordination, and decision making in the Middle East and a regional institution in which Egyptian, Israeli, Jordanian, and Palestinian officials worked together on a daily basis.

Failings of the Multilateral Talks

Despite those initial achievements, the numerous meetings held, and the various joint projects under discussion, the suspension of the multilateral framework in 1996 and the failure to relaunch this talks in the subsequent years indicate the fragility of the multilateral framework created by the Madrid Conference. Ostensibly the reason for the multilaterals' collapse during Benjamin Netanyahu's tenure as Israel's prime minister was the breakdown in the bilateral negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians. But setbacks in the peace process are not sufficient explanation for the talks' demise. Relations between Israel and the Palestinians were far from smooth from 1992-1996, but regardless of the difficulties that arose, at no point were the multilateral talks formally suspended. Nor does it account for why these meetings were not resumed when Israel and the Palestinians were moving towards final status negotiations. Before any consideration is given to reviving a multilateral track to support future efforts in the Arab-Israeli peace process, it is necessary to examine the shortcomings of the multilateral talks, and not simply attribute their previous demise to the vicissitudes of the peace process.

Failure of Direction and Political Commitment

From the outset, the multilaterals were seen as fulfilling a secondary role in the Arab- Israeli peace process. With an undetermined function (beyond serving as a complement to the bilateral track) and no guidelines for their management, the informal, ad-hoc, and low-key meetings made for an unwieldy process, resulting in a duplication of resources and a lack of focus and direction. The Steering Group, created in 1994, was empowered to produce a set of guidelines for the future running of the multilaterals and a paper outlining a shared vision for the future of the region. Yet, such direction was never provided and the guidelines were not drawn up. Indeed, the last time the Steering Group met was in May 1995.

The multilaterals suffered from a failure of political leadership and commitment. Although the United States was instrumental in establishing the multilateral talks at Madrid, it quickly lost interest in this aspect of the peace process. It invested few diplomatic resources in these talks and offered little leadership trying to revive them after 1996. In short the US allowed the multilaterals to disappear off the agenda. Israel, too, lost interest in the multilaterals, though it had much to gain from these talks. Netanyahu ridiculed Shimon Peres' vision of a New Middle East as naïve and illusory and saw little Israeli interest in maintaining these talks. Finally, the European Union, from the outset saw its participation in the multilaterals as a way of being sidelined by the Americans and Israel from any substantive engagement in the bilateral negotiations and the peace process.

With the decision of the Arab states to suspend the multilaterals in 1996, it concentrated its regional initiatives within the Barcelona Process (The Euro-Mediterranean Partnership) and saw little reason to encourage the Arab states to re-engage in the multilateral talks.

Political Demand for a High Level Process

The early discussions in the multilaterals resembled academic seminars where ideas for future cooperation were raised for debate. The emphasis was deliberately placed on loose frameworks, where bargaining was exploratory and communication relatively free.

The multilaterals adopted an approach to regional cooperation and peace-building that was pragmatic and gradual, rather than ambitious and grandiose. The value of this approach was borne out by the experience of the sessions. However, the political leadership was not invested in such a long-term, low-key approach to the development of regional process. In a political climate pushing for immediate and tangible results, the lack of identifiable outcomes emerging from the multilaterals led to dissatisfaction within certain political elites. This led for calls for a greater emphasis to be placed on high level and more visible approaches such as the MENA Economic Summit meetings, and for the establishment of a Conference on Security and Cooperation in the Middle East (CSCME), modeled on the CSCE process in Europe. Such demands, and the attendant publicity surrounding such initiatives, created additional pressures on the regional parties thwarting rather than enabling the promotion of new regional cooperative security initiatives.

Too Much Multilateralism

Paradoxically the Arab-Israeli peace process suffered not from a lack of multilateralism, but from a surfeit. Within the multilaterals themselves, there was considerable overlap in many issues and activities. Additionally, the multilateral talks were not the only framework for the discussion and development of new structures for regional cooperation. The multilaterals gave rise at the end of 1994 to the first Middle East and North Africa (MENA) Economic Summit held in Casablanca and aimed at directly engaging private sector businesses in regional economic development. In October 1995, the European Union launched in Barcelona the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership--the so-called Barcelona Process--aimed at developing a new framework of peaceful and cooperative relations in the Mediterranean region. Though not part of the peace process (in fact deliberately designed to be separate from it), the Barcelona Process incorporated many of the same participants and addressed many of the same issues as the multilaterals. The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), the Western European Union (WEU), and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) also launched initiatives towards developing a security dialogue with the countries of the southern Mediterranean.

Extra-regional rivalry

Aside from duplication, the overstretching, and draining of limited human and financial resources, the various enterprises led to another problem: the impression of an emerging extra-regional rivalry between the United States (seen as dominating the multilateral talks and MENA summits) and the European Union (which excluded the United States from the Barcelona Process) for the leadership and management of new cooperative security structures in the region and came to be regarded as

competing, rather than as complementary, mechanisms for regional cooperation. These various frameworks led to a dilution rather than a concentration of efforts towards developing regional cooperation.⁵

Normalization

A final weakness of the multilaterals was that they were too closely tied to the question of normalization for Israel. The fact that Israel was able to sit down with Arab countries and develop ideas for future cooperation in itself constituted an element of normalization and legitimacy for Israel. But the issue of normalization, rather than the regional progress on hand, (over)dominated the headlines. The Arab world attacked the multilaterals for offering Israel the rewards of peace before a full political settlement had been reached. Israel, however, also overplayed its hand by sending large, high-profile delegations to the plenary sessions hosted by Gulf and Maghreb states, compounding critics' perceptions. Given the overemphasis on the issue of normalization, it is hardly surprising that the multilaterals became hostage to the fortunes of negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians.

Ways Forward: A New Multilateral Framework

As part of its overall policy towards the Arab-Israeli conflict, the new American administration, together with the European Union, should call for the launching of a new multilateral regional process to complement diplomatic efforts aimed at resolving the Israeli Palestinian conflict and bringing Israel and Syria back to direct negotiations.

After a absence of nearly 12 years, the multilateral talks cannot pick up from the point where they were suspended. Nor should this regional initiative seek to replicate the previous process. Instead a new framework needs to be created which reflects current political realities and takes into account the strengths and failings from the previous set of multilateral talks.

1. Structure and Functioning of the Multilateral Framework

The new multilateral framework should comprise two baskets: a 'security basket' led by the United States, and an 'economic and social development basket' led by the European Union. It made little sense back in 1992 to create three separate working groups for regional economic development, water and the environment, and even less so today. That decision was driven by political considerations rather than any functional logic.

Participation in this new framework should be inclusive of all states in the region. The deliberations of each working groups should be independent of each other. Difficulties encountered in one working group should not be an impediment to the functioning of the other working group. The parties should strive to reach consensus over the projects and the focus of the working group. But the activities

⁵ Joel Peters, 'The Arab-Israeli Multilateral Talks and the Barcelona Process: Competition or Convergence?', *International Spectator*, 33, 4, 1998, pp. 63-76.

the progress achieved in this multilateral framework should not be held hostage to spoilers.

The success of future multilateral regional initiatives requires a greater level of coordination and cooperation amongst extra-regional parties. This is particularly the case in respect to the United States and the European Union. Transatlantic competition and rivalry over the regional multilateral processes previously impeded the development of new cooperative security structures in the Middle East. This new framework should complement the activities underway within the Union of Mediterranean process rather than being seen as a competing framework.

The overall responsibility for this multilateral framework should be added to the mandate of the Quartet. The Quartet role, however, should not replicate the functions of the Steering Committee which, in theory, was responsible for the overall direction, management and pace of activities within each of the five multilateral working groups. Rather, it should help facilitate international coordination in driving the process of regional cooperation forward.

The a resumption of the work of the Refugee Working Group should be separate to this new multilateral framework. Many of the issues surrounding the resolution of the Palestinian refugee question have regional implications, and require a strong degree of planning and coordination amongst the international community. The parties should look to the RWG as a forum where these issues can be raised. And, in particular, where ideas for an international mechanism for the overseeing and the implementation of refugee compensation can be raised.

2. Engaging Civil Society

The multilateral talks were designed to allow the parties to raise issues without the glare of the international media. Indeed, the multilaterals can best be described as an exercise in diplomacy by stealth. However, little thought was given as to including the civil societies of the Middle East in the process. The lack of public awareness ultimately ran contrary to one of the aims of the multilateral track, namely the creation of a series of confidence-building measures between the peoples of the region. Since knowledge of the multilaterals' activities was limited to the diplomats and elites involved, no confidence-building among the peoples ever took place. A new multilateral regional initiative needs to incorporate cooperative frameworks linking various elements of civil society, such as health, education, media, etc. Equally, the general public needs to be better informed about developments within the working groups as do academic and special interest groups, and especially the private sector and business communities.

3. Political Leadership and Commitment

The previous round of multilateral talks suffered from a lack of political leadership and commitment. The multilaterals were seen as being of secondary importance. President Obama, together with other political leaders, need to send a clear signal to all parties of the importance they attach to the process of creating of new

cooperative security structures in the Middle East. Efforts to establish this new framework should be an integral part of any new policy towards the Arab-Israeli peace process.

The pace of implementing regional projects devised at the multilateral level is clearly contingent on, and cannot be expected to outstrip, progress at the bilateral level, especially between Israel and the Palestinians. But the will of regional players to plan for the future should not be held hostage to progress in talks between Israel and the Palestinians or the Syrians. Nor should these talks be seen as a reward for Israel or viewed as a barometer of negotiations at the bilateral level.

The multilaterals adopted an approach to regional cooperation and peace-building that was pragmatic and gradual, rather than ambitious and grandiose. Whilst there will be a temptation and a political push for the adoption of high-profile initiatives this should be resisted. The process of creating of new structures of cooperation needs to be bottom-up and not top-down.

The multilaterals offered Israel and the Arab world an alternative diplomatic environment in which to develop a vision of their future relations in a post peace process era and to create new structures to address mutual problems. There is a need to recreate that diplomatic space.

The multilaterals began to foster the conditions for a comprehensive resolution to the Arab-Israeli conflict at the regional level. In particular, they created an environment in which relations between the two parties could move from conflict to cooperation.

Since the end of the Cold War, cooperative security structures, regionalism and regional integration have become predominant trends within the international system and global economy. In this respect, the Middle East lags far behind other regions in the world. If the Middle East region is to engage competitively in the global economy, it needs to work as an integrated unit.

While the priority facing the new American administration and the international community remains creating the conditions for a resolution of the Israeli Palestinian conflict and the signing of a peace treaty between Israel and Syria, these issues need to be placed in the context of a comprehensive, regional solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict. That work needs to start now and take place in parallel to any bilateral initiatives. It should not await until a resolution of the Palestinian problem and Israel-Syria conflict is found.