

# The Role of the European Union in the Middle East Peace Process

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## Brief Analysis

**T**he common assumptions that the European Union and the United States are two contending partners in their efforts to bring peace to the Middle East, and that the EU has a marginal, secondary role in this process compared to the United States, are incorrect. The EU has long demonstrated a strong commitment to facilitating peace in the Middle East on a variety of different tracks, and has accomplished this in a manner complementary to the goals and policies of the United States. Beginning with the Madrid Conference in 1991, the EU sat alongside the negotiating parties in bilateral as well as international talks to develop the framework for future negotiations. The EU contributed positively and constructively to the multilateral negotiations in Moscow and helped broker the first real breakthrough resulting from the Madrid Conference, the Oslo Accords. Subsequently, at the October 1993 donors conference in Washington, the EU was the first to respond with economic assistance to the Palestinian request for help to establish sustained economic growth in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. This EU assistance accounts for over 53 percent of all economic aid to the Palestinians, (the United States by contrast accounts for only 11 percent). The EU was present at the Arava treaty with Jordan, the Cairo agreement, and served as witness to the Oslo II accords in Washington as well.

In addition, the EU continues to contribute tangibly in helping to implement agreements that have already been reached. Continued EU economic assistance has helped to finance and to train the Palestinian police and to support democratic elections in Palestinian self-rule areas both essential components to building peace in the region.

In the last few months, two main changes have come to the region: the election of Binyamin Netanyahu in Israel and a resultant stagnation in the peace process. These developments required that Israel be addressed in a different way by the Arab, American, and European sides in order to move the peace process forward. At the same time, the EU Council for Security in Foreign Policy decided it would be useful to devise a common foreign policy agenda and a new mechanism to deal with the peace process in the Middle East. To this end, the EU designated a special envoy to the Middle East in October 1996, [currently Ambassador Moratinos] with a clear mandate to work toward comprehensive peace in the interests of both Europe and the Middle East.

Although there has been criticism, both in Europe and abroad, that the EU plays "only an economic role" in the peace process, this view fails to take into account the political component of European contributions. Despite the original limitation placed on the envoy of only observing negotiations, the EU has gradually been accepted by all sides as playing a more active, ongoing political role in them. Now, the European presence is essential towards building trust between Israel and the Palestinians. The depth of this political role is manifest in the letter of assurance recently given to Chairman Arafat in which the EU pledged to "use all its political and moral weight" to ensure that the provisions of the Hebron agreement are "fully implemented." This letter serves to complement a similar American letter of assurance given to the Palestinians. It is important to note that this new political role of the EU is in coordination with and is complementary to the leading role of the United States. Ambassador Moratinos expects to work closely with U.S. Special Middle East Coordinator Dennis Ross, Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu and

Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat to continue to produce this type of "fruit of complementarity" in the future.

The EU is also working closely with the United States to resume negotiations on the Syria-Israel track and to foster confidence between the two parties. In a recent visit to Damascus, Ambassador Moratinos relayed two important messages on behalf of the EU: first, that in Europe's eyes, Syria is still an integral player in the peace process; second, that the EU is working very closely with Washington to resume Syrian-Israeli negotiations and ultimately reach a comprehensive solution. As a result of EU diplomatic efforts, the Israeli, Lebanese, and Syrian foreign ministers have agreed to attend an EU-sponsored conference on the Mediterranean, April 25, in Malta. This conference is a follow-up to the November 1995 Barcelona conference, which also brought together all Mediterranean foreign ministers (except Libya). Since Barcelona, Israeli, Lebanese, and Syrian representatives have regularly cooperated in working group sessions planning for Malta. The conference could provide a framework for Syria, Lebanon, and Israel to discuss relevant issues to peace negotiations. The EU is also facilitating an Economic Investment Forum, scheduled for next March 6-7, in London, which will include some 2,000 European and Middle Eastern private sector representatives. It will be the first time Israeli and Syrian businessmen have participated together in such a forum.

The EU is prepared to meet the challenges of upcoming negotiations through a variety of constructive political means. The EU has enormous potential to benefit all tracks in the Middle East peace process, through its established political will, economic means, cultural sensitivity, and intellectual creativity in working to foster trust and to create solutions in the region. EU mechanisms such as the "Barcelona process" will continue to allow the global problems of the Middle East to be dealt with in an interactive way. Furthermore, by developing a "complementary agenda" with the United States, the EU will continue to contribute positively and productively to solving existing and future problems in the Middle East. There will be no division of labor on the separate tracks to peace. Instead, the EU, together with the United States, will work toward solutions on all issues through a variety of political and economic means. EU representatives, led by Moratinos, are meeting with Dennis Ross to draft a set of common principles for a U.S.-EU "complementary agenda."

This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Ron Dolin.

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