

The Multilaterals:

Status and Prospects

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Brief Analysis

On February 1, the multilateral track of the Middle East peace process is scheduled to resume in Moscow with the first meeting of the Steering Committee since May 1995. In the wake of Israeli prime minister Ehud Barak's election last summer, there was widespread expectation that the multilateral talks would restart, but Egypt insisted no meeting be held until negotiations reopened between Damascus and Jerusalem. The restart of those talks last month paved the way for a revival of the multilateral talks.

Background The multilateral track of the peace process was intended not to substitute for bilateral Israel-Arab negotiations but to widen and deepen the web of economic, political, and technical relationships between the regional participants. This track is a state-to-state effort and should not be confused with efforts--still in their infancy--to promote private sector contact between Israelis and Arabs.

The formal commencement of the multilaterals took place at the 1991 Madrid Conference convened by the United States and the former Soviet Union. In January 1992, thirty-six parties reconvened in Moscow to establish the operational aspects of the negotiations, and a coordinating Steering Committee as well as five working groups were formed: Arms Control and Regional Security (chaired by the United States and Russia), Environment (chaired by Japan), Regional Economic Development (chaired by the European Union), Refugees (chaired by Canada), and Water (chaired by the United States). Designed to deal with the practical and technical aspects of regional cooperation, the working groups have nonetheless been affected by the politically contentious issues addressed in bilateral Israeli-Arab negotiations.

The multilaterals were conceived by the United States as an inducement to Israel. The promise of political and diplomatic "peace dividends" and the potential for normalizing relations with a wide array of Arab and Muslim countries was to offset Israel for its expected territorial concessions in the bilateral tracks of the Israeli-Palestinian and Israeli-Syrian peace talks.

Results versus Stalemate Despite the hopes that the work of the multilaterals would result in strides toward normalization and a deepening of the ties between countries in the region, the record of the past five years is that, with only a few exceptions, these new relations between Israel and the Arab Muslim countries remain conditional and dependent on other factors. The working groups, with different track records of progress, demonstrate this.

The Water Working Group has made steady strides, focusing on projects that seek to improve and enhance the region's use of its water resources. The group has conceived initiatives including a data banks project, a supply and demand project, public awareness, water conservation, a declaration of principles of cooperation among the core parties on water-related matters, and, most significantly, the establishment of the Middle East Desalination Research Center in Oman that has continued to function--with Israeli participation--despite the suspension of the multilaterals in 1996.

The Environmental Working Group initially enjoyed some progress, endorsing an environmental code of conduct for

the Middle East. The group has attempted to cultivate projects involving the control of maritime pollution, wastewater treatment and recycling, combating desertification, developing regional environmental training courses, and stemming the environmental damage caused by pesticides. It last met formally in Amman in 1998, and there were some intersessional meetings in 1999.

The Regional Economic Development Working Group (REDWG), the largest of the groups, has had halting progress. The group set up a monitoring committee with subgroups on finance, trade, infrastructure, and tourism. It was also instrumental in establishing the Middle East and Mediterranean Travel and Tourism Association in 1995. Under the auspices of the monitoring committee, a permanent secretariat was opened in Amman, Jordan, to support group activities; however, that secretariat has done little since the group last met in Amman in May of 1996.

One issue affecting REDWG has been rivalry between the European Union (EU) and the United States over the role of REDWG versus other initiatives, such as the Middle East-North Africa (MENA) economic summits that were held annually--in Casablanca, Amman, Cairo, and Doha--from 1994 through 1997 (another meeting may take place in Cairo this spring). The United States provided the political impetus for the MENA summits. Institutional projects stemming from MENA include the Regional Business Council and most notably, the Bank for Economic Cooperation and Development in the Middle East and North Africa (MENABANK)--a proposed multinational development bank that died when the United States refused to provide its share of the funding.

The Refugee Working Group (RWG) had its last plenary meeting in 1996, but it has had periodic coordination and intersessional meetings as well as missions to the region as late as 1999. Unable to reach consensus on even the definition of refugees, the group decided to skirt the fractious political aspects of the refugee issue and focus on seven themes that do not challenge the political interests of the participants: databases, family reunification, human resources development, job creation and vocational training, public health, child welfare, and economic and social infrastructure. The RWG has concentrated on creating projects within the refugee camps including schools and health centers, a wastewater treatment plant in Gaza, child-care clinics, and private business enterprises such as a bakery and a greenhouse. The group also cooperated heavily with the United Nations Relief and Works Agency's Peace Implementation Project, raising more than \$90 million for that effort.

The Arms Control and Regional Security Working Group (ACRS) has been marked by basic differences over priorities. The Arab states (especially Egypt) have emphasized Israel's nuclear capabilities (the "AC" in the group's name). Israel and the United States have focused on confidence-building measures (the "RS"), including regional communications networks, incidents-at-sea agreements, joint search and rescue exercises, exchange of military information, prenotification of large scale military exercises, verification workshops, and joint security ventures, and a declaration of principles on arms control and regional security. The ACRS group stopped meeting by the autumn of 1995, unable to continue because of these disagreements over priorities and in the wake of the 1995 Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty extension conference. ACRS remains particularly susceptible to the ebbs and flows of the bilateral negotiations and the strategic-military calculations of the individual nations. The United States has had more success at promoting regional security cooperation in other formats: It has worked on its own to develop a "cooperative defense initiative" among its Gulf allies to, inter alia, integrate early-warning information, and, with Israel and Turkey (and Jordanian observers), it has developed trilateral rescue-at-sea exercises.

Agenda for the Future and U.S. Policy Interests The multilateral peace process track will continue to encounter issues that will obstruct progress. Among them are Egyptian insistence on immediate attention to Israel's nuclear weapons; the continued refusal of Lebanon and Syria to participate; rivalries between Israel and individual Arab states and among the Arab states; and tensions between the United States and the EU members who suspect that Washington wants them to be "payers, not players." The United States is saying little about what it expects to accomplish in next week's meeting of the steering committee--a wise move, given that progress is likely to be

minimal. Plus, success is more likely if there is little publicity, so the working groups and their offshoots can continue developing projects that foster relations between Israeli and Arab technical experts despite problems that may arise in bilateral talks or in the more politically contentious aspects of the multilaterals.

The best argument for the participating states to remain active in the multilateral track is the payoff associated with tangible economic, technical, and political benefits. The most appealing side benefit is concrete improvement in the standard of living of those in the region--a development that can only enhance the sustainability of the multilateral track into the future.

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