Regional Security in the Middle East: Cooperation between Multinational and Regional Actors?

Mohamed Ibrahim

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Since the second Gulf War and the peace process between Arab countries and Israel in 1991, regional dynamics in the Middle East have shaken the security of the region. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the Israeli-Syrian conflict, as well as the proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) have had direct impact on the regional security of the Middle East. Furthermore, after the terror attacks in New York and Washington on September 11, 2001, global terrorism has been perceived as the main threat to the Western World. The United States as well as the European Union declared that the biggest threat came from the Middle East. To fight this threat, European and US politicians emphasized the need for democratization and reforms in the Middle East. They contended that the implementation of these reforms would bring about regional security. But why regional security in the Middle East still has not become a reality? This paper makes the assumption that regional security will only be achieved by solving the Israeli-Arab conflict since this issue has the most imminent impact on regional security in the Middle East.[1] Another assumption is that the Israeli-Arab conflict can be solved through intensive cooperation between multinational and regional actors. The Israeli-Arab conflict will only be solved when peace between Israel and the Palestinians is realized. This paper will discuss new regional dynamics since the second Gulf War, its implications for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, as well as different multinational and regional initiatives and the reasons for their failure. It further suggests that the chance for a lasting peace between Palestinians and Israelis has a much greater chance if multinational actors cooperate with a potential regional power like Turkey. Such a peace agreement would promote stability in the Middle East.

Regional Dynamics since the Second Gulf War and their Effects on the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

The peace process in the mid-1990s has changed the political and economic relationship of Arab countries with Israel. Before the Oslo Agreement in 1993, Egypt was the only Arab nation maintaining diplomatic relations with Israel. Since it signed a peace agreement with Israel in 1978 in Camp David, it was consequently excluded from the Arab League. Although the Oslo Agreement justi-

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1   Cf. Anthony H. Cordesman. Iraq and "After": Rethinking the Major Policy Issues in the Wider Middle East (Center for Strategic and International Studies – CSIS), Washington, DC, 6.7.2004, p. 21.

fied official diplomatic relations between Arab countries and Israel, the escalating Israeli-Palestinian conflict still has direct implications on Arab-Israeli cooperation. No other conflict has bothered the Arab League more than the Israeli-Palestinian one. The final agreement between Palestinians and Israelis is in principle accepted by both parties: a two state solution, evacuation of most Israeli settlements in the West Bank, Jerusalem as the capital for both sides, and limited return of Palestinian refugees to Israel. The Palestinian government under Hamas implicitly accepts the idea of a two state solution by offering Israel a long-term cease-fire in exchange for the implementation of the above-mentioned conditions.[2]

The Oslo Agreement:

The first official dialogue between Arab countries[3] and Israel took place at the Madrid Peace Conference in 1991. This conference paved the way for direct negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians, which then led to the Oslo Agreement in 1993.[4] The Oslo Agreement stated that final status negotiations should start after a five-year period. Unfortunately, the conflict escalated in the mid-90s and the Oslo Agreement failed. Israel expanded its settlements, which the Palestinians considered and continue to consider a major obstacle for a potential Palestinian state. Israel, on the other hand, was still waiting for the security it was claiming. In addition to these major factors, the negotiations between the Palestinians and Israelis were conducted without any US or EU engagement. The failure of the Oslo Agreement lies in the fact that multinational and regional actors did not accompany the conflicting parties during the implementation phase. Although the international community provided intensive development aid to the Palestinians, the important issues that affected the daily life of the people were postponed for the final status agreement.[5] Multinational actors should have accompanied the conflicting parties on the ground, e.g. the inclusion of multinational observers within the joint Israeli-Palestinian security controls, in order to ensure that both parties complied with the agreed agenda. Without external help, a peace agreement between the two parties lies out of reach.

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2   "Hamas Officials Already Recognize Israel's Right to Exist, Apparently": Prime Minister Ismail Haniya: "If Israel withdraws to the 1967 borders, peace will prevail and we will implement a cease-fire [hudna] for many years." Published in: News Center (CommonDreams.org), May 31st, 2006, <http://www.commondreams.org/views06/0531-23.htm>.

3   Jordan (the Palestinians were part of the Jordanian delegation), Lebanon, Syria.

4   A German version of its text in: Angelika Volle / Werner Weidenfeld (Hrsg.), Frieden im Nahen Osten? Chancen, Gefahren, Perspektiven. Beiträge und Dokumente aus Europa-Archiv und Internationale Politik, Bonn 1997, pp. 168–176.

5   These issues included Israeli settlements, the city of Jerusalem, regional borders, Palestinian refugees, and access to water.

Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP)

The Euro-Mediterranean Conference of Ministers of Foreign Affairs, held in Barcelona in 1995 only two years after the Oslo Agreement, marked the starting point of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (Barcelona Process), a wide framework for political, economic and social relations between the member states of the EU and partners of the southern Mediterranean.[6] The agreement aimed at establishing a Euro-Mediterranean free trade area by 2010 and at creating a region of peace, security and prosperity. Through the Barcelona Process, Europe seeks to promote democracy, political reforms and regional co-operation in the partner countries of the EMP. Most governments in the Middle East, however, oppose these explicit goals. Thus, the efforts of the EU to promote political reforms have become incompatible with the policy of Arab governments, which seem willing to accept only reforms that do not question their authority.[7] The Israeli-Arab conflict and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in particular are not a stated priority of the Barcelona Process. It was not the explicit aim of the Barcelona Process to focus on or solve the Israeli-Arab conflict. On the other hand, the Barcelona Process had and still has direct implications on the Israeli-Arab conflict and therefore deserves attention. Due to a growing number of Jewish settlements

6   The group of nations included Morocco, Algeria, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, the Palestinian Authority, Syria, Lebanon, Turkey, Cyprus and Malta.

7   Cf. Muriel Asseburg, Die transatlantische Debatte über den »Broader Middle East« und die Erfahrungen des Barcelona Prozesses, Discussion Paper during the 12th SWP dialogue, October 12, 2004, p. 4.

Mohamed Ibrahim during his presentation on regional security in the Middle East, with Hans Bastian Hauck

in the West Bank, the Arab League called for a boycott of Arab-Israeli relations at the European-Mediterranean Conference that took place in Malta in 1997. Furthermore, the Second Intifada in 2000 had a negative impact on the Barcelona Process.

The Roadmap

In April 2003 the Middle East Quartet[8] presented its "Roadmap" to the Palestinian Authority and Israel, an initiative that should have led to a two state solution by 2005. Both conflicting parties had reservations and tried to push their own initiatives through, without any significant success. The plan consists of three phases. In the first phase the Palestinians shall declare a cease-fire as well as acknowledge Israel's right to exist. Furthermore, the Palestinian Authority must disarm Palestinian groups and proceed with political reforms. Israel is to stop the expansion of settlements, evacuate those settlements built after March 2001 and withdraw its military forces from areas populated by Palestinians. The second phase is meant to start with Palestinian elections, an international conference, and the establishment of a provisional Palestinian state. The third phase would then deal with all unsolved questions, e.g. regional borders, Jerusalem, the settlements as well as Palestinian refugees. The weakness of the Roadmap is obvious. Like the Oslo Agreement, the most important issues would be negotiated only at the end of the process. The agreement is not described in detail and only refers to well-known documents such as United Nations Resolutions 242 and 338.[9] Multinational actors' involvement in the Roadmap process is limited to observing its development on the international level. Even though an important instrument, international monitoring is not sufficient. The Roadmap is based on voluntary participation of the conflicting parties. Any means of international pressure or sanctions would constitute a breach of the agreement.

One of the main obstacles for the Roadmap to succeed is the fact that the conflicting parties have not been involved in the drafting process. The most important issues, such as Israel's security concerns, are not satisfactorily met in the agreement. On the other hand, Israel expected the Palestinians to give up their right of return. The failure of this initiative was inevitable.

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8   USA, EU, Russia, UN.

9   The UN Security Council Resolution 242 calls for the withdrawal of Israeli armed forces from territories occupied in the recent conflict; cf. <http://daccessdds.un.org/doc/RESOLUTION/GEN/NR0/240/94/IMG/NR024094. pdf?OpenElement>. The UN Security Council Resolution 338 calls upon the parties concerned to start immediately after the cease-fire the implementation of Security Council Resolution 242 in all of its parts.

The New Middle East after September 11, 2001

Immediately after the terror attacks in the USA, the Bush administration accused non-democratic countries of promoting terror and therefore endangering the Western World. In order to fight this terror, the administration attempted to use military force coupled with political reforms. From this perspective, the war against the Taliban in Afghanistan as well as the war against Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq was meant to produce regional security in the Middle East. With the "Forward Strategy for Freedom"[10] authoritarian regimes should be "guided" in the process of liberalization and democratization. After controversial negotiations between the US government and the EU concerning the use of military force, the US government modified its plan for a "Greater Middle East." Any subsequent modifications could not hide the weakness of the plan. The Greater Middle East Initiative was created by the US government and later modified by the EU, but the countries of the Middle East were not included in the negotiations. Therefore, yet another initiative was bound to fail.

Both the EMP as well as the Greater Middle East Initiative do not mention the Israeli-Arab conflict as a priority. However, the Greater Middle East Initiative had and still has direct implications on the regional security of the Middle East. Kuwait was the only Arab country which officially supported the regime change in Iraq. The smaller countries of the Gulf as well as Jordan indirectly supported the war led by the US. These countries are becoming increasingly important for geopolitical strategy, especially that of the United States. The countries of the Gulf as well as Israel gained more importance in the Middle East after the war. The Israeli fear of being attacked from the East has been unfounded since the war against Iraq. Since the war, countries like Syria, Egypt and Saudi Arabia have lost political power in the Middle East. Saudi Arabia has been accused of promoting terror, mainly by the US. Almost all assassins of the 9/11 attacks were Saudi Arabian citizens. Saudi Arabia is currently trying to get back its former standing towards the West but still suffers from the accusations of the West. Egypt has strongly opposed the attempts the US has made to promote reform in the region. While Egypt wants to sustain its support of the US with regard to the war against terror, it is fighting terror in its own country and fears that the enactment of political reforms would incite Islamic terrorism, which would lead to an unstable situation in Egypt and the whole region. The September 11 terror attacks have posed great challenges to regional security in the Middle East.

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10 Fact Sheet: President Bush Calls for a "Forward Strategy of Freedom" to Promote Democracy in the Middle East, The White House, Washington, DC, 26.11.2003, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2003/11/20031106-11.html>.

As stated above, the Israeli-Arab conflict was not a priority for the "Greater Middle East Initiative." But the US government contended that the implementation of this initiative would resolve the Israeli-Arab conflict. This assumption seems unrealistic since both the Greater Middle East Initiative as well as the EMP appear to Middle Eastern nations as a Western attempt to gain more influence in the region. Unless the desired reforms come from within the region itself, the "Greater Middle East Initiative" will fail.

Potential Regional Actors in the Middle East

Since the above-mentioned multinational initiatives failed in their attempts to provide regional security in the Middle East, the search for other approaches is pressing. One proposed solution is to include at least one regional actor in the Middle East in the development of future initiatives. Turkey is such a potential regional power.

Turkey as a potential regional actor in the Israeli-Arab conflict

The end of the Cold World War in 1989 decreased Turkey's geopolitical importance in the Middle East. NATO was in the process of closing military bases when suddenly the second Gulf War paved the way for Turkey's new role in the Middle East:

· military bases serving the war in Iraq;
· political and economic bridge to ethnic Turks in Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan;
· stronghold against Islamic fundamentalism;
· means of accessing oil and natural resources at the Caspian Sea.

Due to this new understanding, NATO as well as the EU describe Turkey as an important ally. Turkey's interests in the region are compatible with those of the international powers and have led to increased cooperation with Turkey. The terror attacks of September 11th brought international powers closer to Turkey. The new Turkish foreign policy in the Middle East became clear when Turkey stood on the allies' side during and after the second Gulf War. Turkey also intensified its cooperation with Israel during the mid 90s. In 1996, both countries signed a military agreement. Despite this close cooperation, Turkey also has close political and economic ties with its Arab neighbors. Due to its cultural and religious roots, Turkey is part of the Islamic world. But in regard to the Israeli-Arab conflict, Turkey is the only regional power which maintains a close relationship with both conflicting parties.

This paper assumes that regional security is possible by solving the Israeli-Arab conflict through the implementation of a long lasting peace agreement between Palestinians and Israelis. Multinational and regional powers must work together to solve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. As stated above, Palestinians and Israelis have in principle accepted the framework of a final status agreement. It is now time for negotiations between a multinational actor, like the Middle East Quartet, the conflicting parties and a regional power like Turkey. The Arab Summit in Beirut in 2002 made an extensive offer for a long lasting peace between all Arab countries and Israel. It called for all Arab countries to sign an immediate peace agreement with Israel, acknowledging Israel's right to exist. Israel would have to withdraw from all territories occupied in 1967 and a Palestinian state would be established. There are two main reasons why Israel ignored this offer. First of all, Israel did not trust the Beirut offer of the Arab League. Second, this offer did not meet Israel's security interests. Due to Turkey's good relations with Israel, its role as a regional power can actively contribute to Israel's security when it comes to a peace agreement between Israel and the Palestinians. Turkey can become a bridge-builder in the region since it enjoys trust on both conflicting sides. However, Turkey's role in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict must be envisioned within a broader US and EU involvement. Due to the US-Israeli relationship, Israel may only accept a peace agreement that would include the US. On the other hand, NATO cannot serve as a multinational power in a Middle East peace initiative since the Arab world considers NATO to be a purely western institution. The sit-

Israeli-Palestinian encounter and dialogue during the NFC

uation in Afghanistan demonstrates this perception. If Turkey became a member of the EU, it could not maintain its role as a regional power with good relations to both conflicting parties. Other regional actors would question Turkey's role as a regional power, since the country would be perceived as part of the West. It is also important to mention that thus far no common EU foreign policy towards the region exists. This does not only apply to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. As long as peace agreements do not result from cooperation between multinational actors and regional powers, security in the region will be difficult to realize.

This paper shows that one of the most important reasons for the failure of achieving regional security in the Middle East was the mistrust among conflicting parties. Turkey as a Muslim country with good diplomatic ties with the western world in general and Israel in particular could contribute to sustainable regional security in the Middle East. Turkey should not only mediate between Palestinians and Israelis. Turkey is the only regional power in the Middle East which could also give Israel the confidence that her security would not be endangered in case of a peace accord.

Karim Makdisi with emotional statements from Beirut, just weeks after the 2nd Israel-Lebanon War