

The Quartet for the Middle East and the Peace Process. Events, Dynamics and Future Prospects

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1. The Annapolis Process, One Year After

On 27 November 2007, George W. Bush solemnly read at Annapolis, Maryland, the joint statement concluded the night before – *in extremis* – by the President of the Palestinian Authority, Mahmoud Abbas, the Israeli Prime Minister at the time, Ehud Olmert, and their teams of negotiators.

According to this shared declaration of principles, the parties agreed to work for a decisive solution to the conflict that was to be structured on «their respective obligations under the performance-based road map to a permanent two-state solution [...] issued by the Quartet on 30 April 2003»¹. Moreover the ambitious goal should have been reached in a relatively short period of time. This is the substance of their commitment:

In furtherance of the goal of two states, Israel and Palestine, living side by side in peace and security, we agree to immediately launch good-faith bilateral negotiations in order to conclude a peace treaty, resolving all outstanding issues, including all core issues without exception, as specified in previous agreements.

We agree to engage in vigorous, ongoing and continuous negotiations, and shall make every effort to conclude an agreement before the end of 2008².

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¹ Annapolis - Joint Understanding, 27 November 2007, available at www.caabu.org.

² *Ibidem*.

In 2008, the Israeli representatives of the steering committee set at Annapolis and several international envoys have frequently tried to portrait a positive picture of the ongoing negotiations to globally promote the advancement of the peace process. In April, U.S. Secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice, pushed the parties for drawing up a *memorandum* in order to convince the international community about the progress

³ B. Ravid, A. Issacharoff, *J'lem Source: Rice Seeks Israel-Pa Memorandum Before Next Month Week's Bush Visit*, 6 May 2008, available at www.haaretz.com.

⁴ Associated Press, *Bush, Abbas Meets as Mideast Talks Falter*, 24 April 2008, available at www.usatoday.com.

⁵ See also at www.haaretz.com: News Agencies, *Blair: Middle East Peace Process Is a Race Against Time*, 26 March 2008; DPA staff, *Senior Palestinian: We Need to Halt Talks with Israel*, 3 April 2008; Associated Press, *Olmert Acknowledges Need for «Tangible» Changes in West Bank*, 5 May 2008.

⁶ CNN, *Olmert: Peace Deal Has «Never Been as Close» as Now*, 13 July 2008, available at www.cnn.com.

⁷ This – in rough – the content of the proposal: «Under the proposal, Israel would return to the Palestinians 93 percent of the West Bank, plus all of the Gaza Strip, when the Palestinian Authority regains control over the Gaza Strip, which the militant group Hamas seized from forces loyal to Abbas in June 2006. [...] In exchange for West Bank land that Israel would keep, Olmert proposed a 5.5 percent land swap giving the desert territory adjacent to the Gaza Strip» (A. Benn, *PA Rejects Olmert's Offer to Withdraw from 93% of West Bank*, 12 August 2008, available at www.haaretz.com).

⁸ Ha'aretz service, *Olmert: Israel Must Quit East Jerusalem and Golan*, 1 October 2008, available at www.haaretz.com.

⁹ United Nation Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs monthly reports on movement and access in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, humanitarian situation in Gaza, incidents at the checkpoints at www.ochaopt.org.

¹⁰ The Israeli information center for human rights in the occupied territories, daily reports and press releases at www.btselem.org/ English/.

made, with no success³. In contrast with these efforts, Mahmoud Abbas has frequently repeated that the deadline set at Annapolis had become unrealistic and – during his visit to the USA in April – he claimed that the parties were committed in having serious negotiations to reach an agreement by the end of the year, but the gaps were still wide between the Palestinians and the Israelis⁴.

In spite of this and other «pessimistic» declarations⁵, both leaders were invited to the first Summit of the Mediterranean Union – on 13 July 2008, in Paris – where they claimed, during their joint press conference, that they had begun to negotiate issues that would have taken them to a point at which they had never been before⁶. «Peace Deal Has Never Been so Close» was the consequent average headline-message of the major international newspapers and news services, but on 12 August 2008 – one month only after the Paris Summit – the Palestinian Authority rejected the latest Olmert proposal describing it as a plan which showed «lack of seriousness»⁷.

Olmert himself – while stepping down as Prime Minister following a corruption scandal broken out in the early spring – released an interview to the Israeli newspaper «Yedioth Aharonoth» in which he admitted that «Israel would have to withdraw from East Jerusalem and the Golan Heights if it was serious about making peace with the Palestinians and Syria»⁸. This unexpected claim came three months before the deadline set at Annapolis and – symptomatically – was uttered by a former leader who had just lost the effective power to realize its purposes.

From this Chinese puzzle of conflicting declarations on both sides, it is plain that – excluding understandable encouraging claims in order to preserve regional calm and international support – efforts might haven't been serious enough to reach the agreement by the end of 2008. This dramatic perception can be further reinforced by the current situation on the ground.

Monthly reports by the UNOCHA office in Jerusalem⁹, B'tselem¹⁰ and many other international, Israeli (and Palestinian) NGOs, demonstrate that no progress has been recorded on core areas since the Annapolis Conference was held, although some efforts have been made in order to put major Northern Palestinian cities – as Nablus and Jenin –

under the control of the renewed Fatah-led security forces¹¹. Moreover, regarding some other core issues (freeze of settlements, freedom of movement in the West Bank, humanitarian situation in the Gaza Strip) the situation has further deteriorated comparing it with the data collected the year before.

According to all these statements and reports, the current stalled/deteriorating situation – united with the political instability and fragmentation, both in the Israeli Government and in the Palestinian Authority, and the American transition process started on 4 November with the election of the new President Barack Obama – won't allow the basic conditions to reach an agreement in the very near future. Six and a half years after the notorious 24-of-June speech – in which George W. Bush declared for the first time his personal commitment to the solution of the Israeli/Palestinian conflict based on «his» vision of «two states, living side by side in peace and security»¹² – the peace process could have reached a new, extremely dangerous, deadlock. Only time will make this clear; in the meanwhile diplomatic peace efforts haven't stopped yet.

On 8 November 2008, the parties met in Sharm el Sheikh to take stock of the situation together with all the major regional and international stakeholders. The declarations following the meetings have implicitly consolidated the idea that there is no breakthrough in sight, but despite the evident stall none of the personalities participating at the Red Sea Meeting, dared to use the word «failure» in describing the Annapolis Process which has consequently begun its metamorphosis from the initial time and results-oriented commitment to a sort of indefinite framework for bilateral negotiations. A similar process has stalled the Road Map since June 2003. Therefore – regarding the status of the peace process – it is possible to conclude that the original Annapolis Process didn't succeed in its aims, but its spirit might still help promoting an agreement in an indefinite future.

In facts, if on one side Condoleezza Rice has declared that «the distance to peace has been narrowed although peace has not been achieved»¹³ – which sounds like an acknowledgement of defeat – the parties have expressed a different point of view:

although the process initiated at that conference failed to meet its

¹¹ More on: B. Ravid, *Tony Blair: Israel Agrees to Ease West Bank Restrictions*, 13 May 2008, available at www.haaretz.com.

¹² *President Bush Calls for New Palestinian Leadership*, 24 June 2002, available at www.whitehouse.gov.

¹³ Al-Jazeera, *Quartet Urges Middle East Push*, 9 November 2008, available at www.aljazeera.com.

state goal on a final status agreement by the end of 2008, both Abbas and Livni said it was important to continue bilateral talks based on those principals¹⁴.

Anyway nothing will be known until a definitive deal is reached. The two representatives have agreed to concentrate the negotiations to the solution of every issue in order to avoid a partial agreement or an agreement in principle, that would be worse because it won't actually end the conflict¹⁵. Moreover they have taken a strong common position on external effort to bring peace, stressing that, «absent joint request of the parties, third parties should not intervene in the bilateral negotiations. [But] international support and assistance will be vital once an agreement is reached»¹⁶.

However, if by the end of 2008 nothing has been solved yet, are there any actors who should be particularly blamed for the failure of this umpteenth effort to bring peace to the region?

In the latest months harsh criticism has been continuously addressed to the Quartet for the Middle East (or Madrid Quartet) that «has not only failed to advance the peace process since its establishment in 2002. Astoundingly, it has also whittled away the political credibility and impact of two of those parties – the E.U. and the U.N.»¹⁷.

If the Quartet presented itself as the only hope for peace during the hardest years of the second Intifada, its perception has been fast precipitating either among regional and international organizations, observers and journalists or – above all – among local public opinion until the current dead end.

An interesting example of the negative perception widespread among common people in the region is the imaginary intervention to a Quartet Meeting, written by a Palestinian aid worker in Gaza and published by Al-Jazeera. If he was in a room with the group of diplomats he would say:

you said you would help to reform the Palestinian Authority, would call on Israel to stop expanding the settlements, ease the restrictions and the harsh policy towards the occupied Palestinian territory, you made many more promises... We are still waiting for these promises to become a reality¹⁸.

¹⁴ T. Lazaroff, *Livni: We Recognize Need for PA State*, 9 November 2008, available at www.jpost.com.

¹⁵ B. Ravid, *Livni, After Quartet Meet: I Am Not Repeating Mistakes of Camp David*, 10 November 2008, available at www.haaretz.com.

¹⁶ *Quartet Statement 09 Nov. Sharm el Sheikh*, 9 November 2008, available at www.reliefweb.int.

¹⁷ R.G. Khoury, *Put the Quartet Out of Its Misery*, 27 September 2008, available at www.dailystar.com.lb.

¹⁸ *Gaza Diary: The Middle East Quartet*, by Omar a humanitarian aid worker, in partnership with Oxfam, available at www.aljazeera.net.

Harsh criticism has started substituting widespread scepticism and disenchantment following the declarations of two U.N. senior officials who had worked in the region side by side with the Quartet. At the end of May 2007 the United Nations Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process, Alvaro de Soto, wrote a confidential end-of-mission report in which he criticized the Quartet and the current approach of the UN to the Israeli/Palestinian conflict. He concluded: «unless he is willing to take a stand to alter the *status quo*, the Secretary-General should seriously reconsider continued membership in the Quartet»¹⁹.

Even harsher was the criticism carried out in October by the Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, John Dugard. He suggested to the UN General Assembly that the Secretary-General withdrew the UN from the Quartet, clarifying that his suggestion was an appeal to the Secretary-General and his senior staff to consider the United Nations role in the Quartet with special regard to the human rights situation²⁰. Differently from the De Soto's report – which was supposed to be confidential²¹ – Dugard's declarations were intended to be public and were previously anticipated to news agencies²².

With the convocation and the follow-ups of the Annapolis Conference, the Quartet has had some break from criticism, which, however, hasn't last long. On 25 September 2008 – on the eve of a Quartet Meeting in New York – a group of 21 major international aid NGOs (including Care, Christian Aid, Oxfam, Save the Children and the Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Network) published a progress report which failed the general effort of the diplomatic group underlining its wrong approach and little results in six crucial areas (namely: blocking settlement expansion and natural grow, easing access and movement in the West Bank, improving humanitarian situation in the Gaza Strip, reforming the Palestinian security sector, securing donors pledges and implementing Palestinian private sector progress) in which «the Quartet has laid down clear recommendations»²³ in its Berlin statement, dated 24 June 2008.

In the conclusions and recommendations paragraph of this exhaustive report, the group of NGOs put its expectations in the follow-ups of the upcoming Quartet Meeting – held in

¹⁹ A. De Soto, *End of Mission Report*, May 2007, available at www.guardian.co.uk.

²⁰ More on: GA/SHC/3893, *Quartet Has Paid Little Attention to Human Rights of Palestinians*, 24 September 2007, available at www.domino.un.org/unispal.nsf.

²¹ The report was leaked and «The Guardian» has published it at www.guardian.co.uk/world. Alvaro De Soto has consequently confirmed its authenticity.

²² Reuters, *Envoy Urges to Quit Quartet Over Lack of Regards for Human Rights*, 15 October 2007, available at www.haaretz.com.

²³ *The Middle East Quartet: A Progress Report*, September 2008, available at www.oxfam.org and in the official websites of the NGOs which have participated to the report.

New York on 26 September 2008. «Without a real improvement on the ground» – the reports foretells – «it will become necessary to consider what the future is for the Middle East Quartet»²⁴.

This report has received huge feedbacks from the international media which have published articles and analysis underlining the proven responsibilities of the Quartet; quoting just examples from the British media: «the quartet of international powers has “lost its grip” on the Middle East peace process which it means to foster»²⁵ is the aspect emphasized by the BBC, while another article published by the «Independent» underlined that the Quartet is responsible for «creating power vacuum in the Middle East»²⁶.

The collective criticism has given a sort of final blow to the credibility of the Quartet and consequently of the international community, which the Quartet formally represents in the region, but those conclusions – although evident – do not contemplate plenty of essential considerations.

If, on one hand, the visible overall negligence and inability of the Quartet to bring peace appears rather indisputable, on the other hand, the diplomatic group in itself can't be properly considered guilty for the current stall/failure of the situation in the region.

Paradoxically, the best way to assess if recent criticism to the group might be totally justified or even useful is answering to an hypothetical question: if peace comes, will it happen thanks to the major role played by the Quartet?

Answering this question allows having a genuine overview of the group, its role and its actual contributions – positive or negative – to the peace process and sharing responsibilities and merits among the various actors which have been actively participating in the last eight years of mediation.

Thanks to this approach, it is possible to propose a new role for the Quartet that – without overestimating the actual capabilities of the group – might save its good attributes and transform it in a useful instrument for reconciliation and peace.

²⁴ *Ibidem*.

²⁵ BBC, *Mid-East Quartet «Has Lost Grip»*, 25 September 2008, available at <http://news.bbc.co.uk>.

²⁶ D. Macintyre, *Quartet «Creating Power Vacuum» in Middle East*, 25 September 2008, available at www.independent.co.uk.

2. The Quartet for the Middle East and Its Envoys. A Brief Overview

The Quartet for the Middle East can be roughly defined as an informal diplomatic group composed by the institutional representatives and the regional envoys of four major international actors – the European Union, the United Nations, the United States of America and the Russian Federation – that has committed itself, on its own accord, to a multilateral activity of mediation aimed at restoring the negotiations between the Israelis and the Palestinians and either at prompting or reaching a permanent status agreement through a common strategy (the Road Map).

At first sight, the choice for the actors composing the group could generate questions and doubts: although the official reasons for such a composition have never been officially explained, the most probable motivation seems to be that «each of these parties brings something special to the table: the U.S. bring their influence in the region and their special relationship with Israel; the E.U. brings major economic policy instruments; Russia is seen as providing an often pro-Arab perspective and the U.N. provides stamp of international legitimacy»²⁷. The evident absence of regional actors in the composition of the group was made up in 2007 with the creation of an Arab Quartet, composed by the representatives of Egypt, Jordan, United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia and, later, with the institution of a more representative group – aimed at monitoring the implementation of the 2002 Arab Peace Initiative – known as the Arab Follow-on Committee. The two groups do not play an influential role in the peace process, but have an essential function at the information, analysis and sensitivity level; furthermore they provide an important feedback to the international Quartet about the Arab perception of its initiatives.

Although the first formal Meeting of the Quartet for the Middle East was held on 10 April 2002 in Madrid, the idea of a quartet of international mediators was presented to the General Assembly of the United Nations several months before, when the Secretary-General, Kofi Annan, discussed the Middle East situation with Secretary of State Powell, Foreign Minister Ivanov and EU High Representative for the Common

²⁷ Personal conversation with Alexander Costy, Advisor on Donor Affairs for the Office of the Special Representative of the Quartet in 2007, 5 November 2008.

Foreign and Security Policy Solana. Together they «encouraged their representatives in the field to continue working together to help the Israelis and the Palestinians find a way to resolve the current crisis in their relations»²⁸. This effort set up the initial core of the present-day multi-layer structure of the group of diplomats.

The Quartet is a political group without a legal written statute, therefore it is «a loose structure, not an institution in any traditional sense»²⁹. Its members – as well as the Israeli Government and the Palestinian Authority – haven't signed any agreement or *memorandum* ruling its establishing. They haven't given the Quartet precise tasks, powers or responsibilities, therefore – up to now – no official document regulates its composition, the internal relationship between the members – or the relations between the members and third actors –, the modality of decision inside the group and the eventual compulsoriness of its recommendations. This looseness provides the Quartet of an impressive flexibility, but, at the same time, it – *de facto* – deprives the group of any real authority.

Since the original text of the Road Map was presented in 2003, the decision and evaluation of progress has been formally based on the consensus of the four, thus granting every member the privilege of veto.

As a consequence, only by making compromises on the proposals of the most involved and powerful member (the US in the praxis) the Quartet has been able to avoid stall and advance recommendations and proposals on the peace process. On the other hand, if this hadn't happened there wouldn't have been a Quartet for the last 8 years and – despite comprehensible frustration – claiming that a peace process without the Quartet would have led to better or similar results sounds rather meaningless.

Alvaro De Soto in his highly critical assessment of the Quartet value and methods of work drew a plain portrait of the dynamics of the group and the internal hierarchy of its members, underlining the weight of the United States in the decision process:

the idea of a mechanism to harmonize disparate diplomatic efforts and to discourage potentially contradictory solo forays by important

²⁸ *Chronological Reviews of Event Relating to the Question of Palestine*, November 2001, available at www.domino.un.org/unispal.nsf.

²⁹ Personal conversation with Alexander Costy, 5 November 2008.

actors in the Middle East [...] had distinct appeal. [...] The Quartet, I was to learn, functions in a flimsy framework of ritual and tradition passed orally from person to person. [...] In my experience, the nature of the Quartet lies somewhere between a «contact group» and a «group of friends». [...] A «group of friends» presupposes that the members of the group have in common a friend who is in the lead and shared goals. Whatever the Quartet was at the interception, let us be frank with ourselves: today – as a practical matter, the Quartet is pretty much a group of friends of the US – and the US doesn't feel the need to consult closely with the Quartet except when it suits it³⁰.

Surprisingly, despite its flexibility and complexity, the composition of the Quartet can be simply defined. Since 2005 the architecture of the group has been structured on three dimensions or levels: the principals (also known as the ministerial level), the regional envoys and the special representative, whose head quarters have been set in East Jerusalem.

This multi-layer composition firstly allows the Quartet to have fast and direct links between international diplomacy and the situation on the ground and, secondly, it provides a fixed point of reference (the special representative) for the activity of the envoys and the coordination on the field of the proposals made during the high level meetings. This particular architecture is the second feature which makes the Quartet extremely adaptable and reactive to sudden changes on the ground.

The first dimension is composed by the Secretary-General of the United Nations and the representatives for the foreign affairs of the other three members. Clearly, the composition varies following political changes in the leaderships of the four members. In the semester June/December 2008 the ministerial composition of the Quartet is then made up by the UN Secretary-General, Ban Ki Moon, the US Secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice, the Russian Foreign Minister, Sergei Lavrov, and the High Representative for the Common Foreign and Security Policy of the European Union, Javier Solana. Moreover, the standard line-up includes other two European representatives: the Commissioner for External Relations and European Neighbourhood Policy and the Foreign Minister of the European Country holding the six-monthly Presidency of the Union, respectively – in the period considered – Benita Ferrero-Waldner and Bernard Kouchner. Even presidents,

³⁰ A. De Soto, *End of Mission Report*, cit.

ministers, experts and other representatives of the four members have sometimes taken part to ministerial meetings and consequently can be somehow considered part of the Quartet.

The group normally meets at the principals level in order to assess the situation, make proposals and reach common positions and strategies which are made public through statements and generally discussed in press conferences. The frequency of meetings depends on the events on the ground. The year 2008 has seen only three official meetings while the eventful 2007 saw ten of them³¹. Sometimes statements are drawn up and issued following telephone or video conferences. At the regional envoys dimension, it is much harder to have a clear picture of the composition because of the continuous turnover among the representatives sent in the area. Not only the four members' field envoys, but also technical officials and security experts should be considered part of the Quartet at this level. This dimension is maybe less ostensible and known than the other two, but it is indeed very concrete: as seen before, the decision to support and coordinate the efforts of the four members' field envoys gave birth in 2001 to the idea of the present diplomatic entity. Prominent international personalities as Miguel Moratinos, Terje Roed Larson – who constituted its embryo together with Ronald Schlicher and Andrei Vdovin – had an essential role during the first steps of the Quartet, including the drafting and the initial promotion of the Road Map.

The last dimension was instituted in 2005 in order to grant a peaceful and constructive transition following the disengagement from Gaza, imposed and carried out unilaterally by Ariel Sharon in the Autumn of the same year. The Special Representative shouldn't be considered the leader of the Quartet – despite several journalists' claims, especially after the appointment of Tony Blair –, on the contrary he is the only special envoy in the region representing the group as a whole with the Israeli Government, the Palestinian Authority and the rest of international actors involved in the process. Other important tasks of the Special Representative and his office are: bridging the gap between regional envoys and the principals, searching consensus for the policy of the group and coordinating programs and efforts locally.

³¹ A complete collection of all Quartet statements, can be found at www.state.gov.

The former leader of the World Bank, James Wolfensohn, was appointed Special Representative in May 2005, on the eve of the Israeli disengagement from Gaza. His mandate focused «on the non-security aspects of withdrawal, particularly disposition of assets; passages, access and trade; and revival of the Palestinian economy during and after Israeli withdrawal»³². He has been the first common envoy and his biggest efforts have resulted in the signing of the Agreement on Movement and Access (AMA) on 15 November 2005. This document is rather important because its initial implementation led to an innovative cooperation between the State of Israel and what could be perceived as the embryo of a future viable Palestinian State. The agreement, as well as Wolfensohn's determination, haven't however survived the general hardening following the victory of Hamas in the January 2006 Palestinian elections for the Legislative Council. The first Special Representative of the Quartet resigned one year after he took the job. About the reasons of his resignation he claimed:

in the recent two, three months, the political events are such that I think the issues are above my pay grade. These are issues between the Israelis and the United States – the principals, if you like. And with the government of Hamas having taken over with the Palestinians, it's a very difficult moment [...] because of the emphasis that Hamas puts on the destruction of the state of Israel, and the less than communicative relationship with that state³³.

The second and current Quartet special representative is the former British Prime Minister Tony Blair who, despite some internal contrasts, especially among the European and Russian principals³⁴, was nominated by the group at the end of June 2007, following the internal power struggle in Gaza and the creation of a new Palestinian Government in the West Bank.

Tony Blair had a positive mediation role in the Northern Ireland Peace Process, with the conclusion of the Good Friday Agreement on 9 April 1998, therefore he was chosen in order to bring more authority and centrality to the Quartet besides improving the reforming process in the divided Palestinian Territories.

Yet despite carrying an unprecedented political weight as a recent British Prime Minister local perceptions of this selection

³² *Quartet Statement After the Moscow Meeting*, 9 May 2005, available at www.state.gov.

³³ *Media Availability with Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and James Wolfensohn, Special Envoy for Gaza Disengagement Following Their Meeting*, 1 May 2006, available at www.state.gov.

³⁴ *The Associated Press, Quartet at Loggerheads Over Scope of Authority for Mideast Envoy*; 27 June 2007, available at www.haaretz.com.

were muted. To many, Blair appeared as another high level envoy in a region which can boast a long history of special envoys.

Harsher was the reactions of international journalists and observers. The strictest criticism has come from the «Independent» Middle East correspondent, Robert Fisk:

I suppose that astonishment is not the word for it. Stupefaction comes to mind. I simply could not believe my ears in Beirut when a phone call told me that Lord Blair of Kut al-Amara was going to create «Palestine». I checked the date – no, it was not 1 April – but I remain overwhelmed that this vain, deceitful man, this proven liar, a trumped-up lawyer who has the blood of thousands of Arab men, women and children on his hands is really contemplating being «our» Middle East envoy³⁵.

Blair's mission has been concentrating on «efforts to create viable and lasting Palestinian government institutions, strengthen the Palestinian economy, and establish law and order for the Palestinian people»³⁶ but, primarily on the economic dimension of the peace process:

despite some speculation at the beginning that the Quartet Representative might go beyond these terms of reference, his focus has strictly been on economic and financing issues. In Jerusalem, he has focused on several areas of economic intervention which, in his opinion, would help to push the broader peace process forward³⁷.

In the effort to strengthen the Palestinian population and its leadership, Blair has been promoting an initiative known as «Valley of Peace» that involves a joint effort by Jordan, Israeli and Palestinian leaders to share new industrial and economic projects in the area of the Dead Sea, which will solve the water problem in the region, create new local businesses and job growth and promote ongoing cooperation between the parties. Although his political authority in the region has constantly been diminishing since the day he took the job, Tony Blair has succeeded in some technical aspects of his mandate: on 13 May 2008, the Government of Israel accepted to carry out a light ease of movement conditions in the West Bank, removing some secondary checkpoints and earth mounds, and to

³⁵ R. Fisk, *How Can Blair Possibly Be Given This Job?*, 23 June 2007 available at www.independent.co.uk.

³⁶ Appointment of Tony Blair as the Quartet Representative, 27 June 2007, available at www.state.gov.

³⁷ Personal conversation with Alexander Costy, 5 November 2008.

support the creation of a Palestinian security and economic free zone around the Northern West Bank town of Jenin, where Palestinian renewed security forces have already taken charge with success, allowing also significant investment in infrastructures projects³⁸.

This little development is one the few evident and recognized improvements reached in the region since Annapolis. If the political situation remains stalled, although operating primarily on a technical level, this approach – thanks to the spillover mechanism – can bring benefit to Palestinian population and positively influence the slower macro-political process.

3. Four Degrees of Exclusion. An Essential History of the Quartet

Since Autumn 2001 the Quartet has been facing several events, which have seriously put to the test its adaptation skills and have implied its gradual exclusion from the core of the peace process, the most considerable of which are four: 1) the Israeli reservations to the Road Map; 2) the Sharon's unilateral disengagement plan; 3) the victory of Hamas in the 2006 Palestinian elections; 4) the Annapolis Conference.

Through a brief overview of the behaviour of the Quartet in these critical situations, it is possible to have the necessary means to draw the conclusions on the present position of the Quartet and propose a new role for the diplomatic group.

1) The 14 Israeli Reservations to the Road Map, 2003

On 2 May 2002 the Quartet issued a statement where it claimed to have reached a common strategy to bring peace in the Middle East³⁹. This shared plan – already drafted by the end of September – was presented to the parties only on 30 April 2003, following Israeli general elections and the supposed «end» of the American invasion in Iraq, which was formally declared concluded by George W. Bush on 1 May during a surprise rally on the Abraham Lincoln aircraft carrier. The three-phases peace plan proposed by the Quartet – whose complete title is: *A Performance-based Roadmap to a Permanent Two-State Solution to the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict* – was to be intended as:

³⁸ J. Hider, *Israel May Ease Grip in Tony Blair Deal Revive West Bank*, 14 May 2008, available at www.timesonline.co.uk

³⁹ *Quartet Joint Press Release*, 2 May 2002, available at www.domino.un.org/unispal.nsf.

a performance-based and goal-driven roadmap, with clear phases, timelines, target dates, and benchmarks aiming at progress through reciprocal steps by the two parties in the political, security, economic, humanitarian, and institution-building fields, under the auspices of the Quartet⁴⁰.

In spite of the broad criticism directed to its gradual empowerment and lack of definitions and specification for eventual sanctions, the text of the Road Map – in the analysis of the International Crisis Group – reflected «a complex and at times uncomfortable compromise»⁴¹.

The Road Map has never been enforced, therefore a complete analysis in the context of this treatment would be superfluous. Nonetheless, there is a couple of arguments that should be underlined in order to understand the way down of the Quartet; according to the original text of the peace plan, the Quartet was to be the only responsible for the assessment and decision process:

Progress [...] will be based upon the consensus judgement of the Quartet of whether conditions are appropriate to proceed, taking into account performance of both parties [...].

Relying on existing mechanisms and on-the-ground resources, Quartet representatives begin informal monitoring and consult with the parties on establishment of a formal monitoring mechanism and its implementation⁴².

As a consequence, once the document had been officially accepted by the parties, the Quartet would have had a written document where the international community, Israel and the Palestinian Authority had formally recognized a precise role and authority for the group. The Palestinians accepted the peace plan few days after its presentation, while the Israeli Cabinet – following a surprising speech in which Ariel Sharon publicly described for the first time the national policy in the Palestinian Territories as «occupation» – attached 14 reservations to the document, although the text of the Road Map had been considered unmodifiable from every single member of the Quartet, including the US⁴³.

With the American implied consensus on 12 of these caveats⁴⁴, the meaning and the perception of the Road Map changed

⁴⁰ A *Performance-based Roadmap to a Permanent Two-State Solution to the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict*, 30 April 2003, available at www.state.gov.

⁴¹ ICG, *A Middle East Road Map to Where?*, in «*Journal of Palestine Studies*», vol. 32, no. 4, 2 May 2003.

⁴² A *Performance-base Roadmap to a Permanent Two-State Solution to the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict*, cit.

⁴³ *US Secretary of State Colin Powell, Comments on the Road Map*, in «*Journal of Palestine Studies*», vol. 32, no. 4, 12 May 2003.

⁴⁴ B. Aluf, *Sharon May Seek Cabinet Vote on Road Map Sunday. But Only if Washington Agrees to Take Israeli Reservations on Plan into Account*, 23 May 2003, available at www.haaretz.com.

deeply. In particular, the fourth reservation had disastrous consequences for the role and dynamics of the Quartet. It claimed:

the monitoring mechanism will be under American management. [...] Verification will be performed exclusively on a professional basis and per issues [...] without the existence of a combined or unified mechanism. Substantive decisions will remain in the hands of both parties⁴⁵.

Compromising with the United States, trying to avoid stall, the Quartet agreed to let the monitoring of the Road Map to the only United States thus allowing Israel to implement all the other reservations and giving it the unilateral control of the peace plan. As a result of this muddy agreement, no obligation of the plan has been fulfilled by the parties up to now, but the Road Map is still constituting the operative reference framework for the Annapolis principles and the broader peace process. Anyway – despite the importance and the relevance which is continually given to the Road Map – it is essential to underline that, since June 2003, the Quartet hasn't been in charge of its own-made peace plan.

2) The Sharon's Unilateral Disengagement Plan, 2004-2005

The events regarding the disengagement process proposed and imposed by Ariel Sharon in 2005 gave the Quartet a new opportunity to return in the centre of the peace process. The main difficulty was to support the Israeli plan – which was much more than what is requested by the dispositions of the Road Map – and to involve the Palestinians in it, in order to deprive the initiative of its evident unilateralism.

On a surface level, the Quartet succeeded in having a common position, underlining the necessity of doing every activity in the framework of the Road Map principles. John Wolfensohn was appointed Special Representative giving life to the third dimension of the group and security experts were sent in the field – especially by the US – to grant a safe transition between a settled and a new, settlers-free, Gaza Strip, including economic development, and cooperation between security forces. The transition happened successfully, despite present military surrounding.

⁴⁵ *Israel's Road Map Reservations*, 27 May 2003, available at www.haaretz.com.

On a deeper level, the Quartet received passively another grave affront by Israel and the United States: it accepted implicitly the content of an exchange of letters, dated 30 April 2004, between George W. Bush and Ariel Sharon in which the American President wrote an unprecedented sentence which gave a sort of international legitimacy to the Israeli occupation of the Palestinian territories. This paragraph is so relevant that it is continually used as a guarantee by Israeli leaders during international meetings, conferences and negotiations.

In light of new realities on the ground, including already existing major Israeli populations centers, it is unrealistic to expect that the outcome of final status negotiations will be a full and complete return to the armistice lines of 1949 [...] It is realistic to expect that any final status agreement will only be achieved on the basis of mutually agreed changes that reflect these realities⁴⁶.

Without a common strong reaction of the parties or of the international community to Bush's consideration on Israeli settlements – which was even mentioned during Olmert's speech at the Annapolis Conference – all the peace initiatives proposed by the United Nations (Security Council Resolutions 242, 338, 1397, 1515), the Arab League (the 2002 Saudi/Arab Peace Initiative) and by Israeli and Palestinian politicians and intellectuals (the 2003 Geneva Agreement) will become just waste-paper, and the possibility for a just, everlasting and shared peace in the region will be compromised forever.

3) The Victory of Hamas in the Palestinian Elections, 2006

The 2006 elections for the Legislative Council in Palestine had a destabilizing effect on the Quartet apparent cohesion. On a superficial level the group appeared united in congratulating «President Abbas and the Palestinian people on an electoral process that was free, fair and secure»⁴⁷ and in subordinating aid to the new leadership to the three principles every Palestinian Government should accept: «non-violence, recognition of Israel, and acceptance of previous agreements and obligations, including the Roadmap»⁴⁸.

Despite the ostensible cohesion superficially demonstrated by the group, the internal position of the four actors was deeply

⁴⁶ US President George W. Bush, *Letter to Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon on the Disengagement Plan*, in «Journal of Palestine Studies», vol. 33, no. 4, 14 April 2004.

⁴⁷ *Quartet Statement on Palestinian Legislative Council Elections*, 26 January 2006, available at www.state.gov.

⁴⁸ *Quartet Statement on the Situation in the Middle East*, 30 January 2006, available at www.state.gov.

different and, while the US and the EU (despite the internal oppositions of some member-states) included Hamas in the list of terrorist organizations, Russia tried to make Hamas part of the process, inviting its Prime Minister to Moscow for an official meeting thus breaking the Quartet-sponsored international isolation of the Islamic Party⁴⁹.

With this umpteenth contradiction – heavily reinforced by the critical resignation of James Wolfensohn – the Quartet definitely proved its internal division and general weakness. Moreover, from this point on, it was evident that isolated points of view contrasting with US strategies, wouldn't have been taken into consideration as valuable perspectives on the peace process by the whole group.

4) The Annapolis Conference and Its Follow-ups, 2007-2008

The road to Annapolis was paved by a Palestinian internal fracture which led to an internal clash (a civil war according to many observers) – later defined the «battle of Gaza» – and by an arbitrary solution to it which resulted in the creation of a «friendly» entity in the West Bank and an «enemy» entity in the Gaza Strip.

Because of the tragic starting point of the conference idea, what was decided at Annapolis was just un umpteenth effort to frame negotiations. Nothing concrete was proposed to solve the internal problems before resuming the meetings between the parties. As a consequence, the November 2008 Meeting at Sharm el Sheikh was attended by the Foreign Minister of a ghost government, Tzipi Livni, and by the President of the minority of Palestinians. According to an internet survey proposed by Maan, a Palestinian news agency, 73% of voters think Mahmoud Abbas should step down at the end of its term in January 2009 and, even if that kind of survey can't be considered scientifically reliable, it gives an idea on the percentage of population actually represented by the present Palestinian President. On the other side, daily surveys on «Haaretz» and other Israeli newspapers, show that, unless the Obama Administration backs the Saudi Peace Initiative, thus implicitly supporting Livni's vision, the winner in February Israeli elections will be Benjamin Netanyahu and his economical peace plan. Therefore, the beginning of 2009 will be a key period to see if Annapolis can really continue.

⁴⁹ M. Chance, *Hamas Repeats Hard Line in Moscow*, 2 March 2006, available at www.cnn.com.

The Quartet, after the sack of the Hamas Government and the institution of the Salam Fayyad Transition Government, named Tony Blair as its special representative and held meetings with the parties and the regional Quartet in order to help Palestinians and Israelis resuming bilateral negotiations and to favour the highest possible turnover of Arab countries at the conference; the only missing regional actors at the conference were Hamas and the not-Arab Iran, that are, at present, the only entities refusing to accept the principle of non-violence and the existence of Israel.

In the text of the joint understanding presented at Annapolis there are two contrasting claims: the first – quoted at the beginning of this article – puts all the operative part of the peace process on the Road Map, issued by the Quartet in 2003; the second expresses the parties' agreement to form: «an American, Palestinian and Israeli mechanism, led by the United States, to follow up on the implementation of the road map»⁵⁰. This is an official confirmation of the fourth reservation that has been – *de facto* – in force since May 2003. Differently from that, this passage of the joint understanding – being it publicly accepted, not only by the parties, but by the Quartet itself, all the other Arab countries and the international organizations invited to the conference – converted into reality the definitive exclusion of the Quartet from the macro-political peace process.

That sentence represents the definitive bow to the Quartet: with this official public and shared declaration the exclusion of the group from the macro-political peace process is total. If the lack of authority of the Quartet has been a tacit rule for years (but still a controvertible rule), with the Annapolis Conference it has become an incontrovertible reality.

4. Bridging the Gaps and Encourage Reconciliation: A New Role for the Quartet

According to the historical reconstruction proposed in the previous paragraphs, it is clear that the answer to the question made in the first paragraph – if peace comes, will it happen thanks to the major role played by the Quartet? – can be only negative. Therefore, symmetrically, it is inappropriate

⁵⁰ Annapolis - Joint Understanding, 27 November 2007, available at www.caabu.org.

considering the failure of the Quartet efforts as one of the main reasons for the current situation in the region. If the Quartet actually doesn't play a major role in the negotiations – as demonstrated in the previous pages – it can't be either blamed if the parties do not implement obligations which are highly depending on the results of negotiations. How could the Quartet impose, for example, the freeze and the consecutive removal of Israeli settlements if Annapolis has set a process based on bilateral negotiations monitored by a mechanism where the Quartet is not present? How can it enforce its decisions?

On a formal level, the statements issued by the group do actually represent a common strategy and common principles for an acceptable agreement; they do recognize some necessary steps to bring peace to the region, they underline the necessity for parallel actions on both sides and they include every typology of problem, but, in spite of this, the Quartet can't enforce them just because Israel, the Palestinian Authority and both George W. Bush administrations have agreed to move the «implementation centre» elsewhere.

As a consequence, the criticism contained in the September NGOs progress report is clearly precise and indisputable in its contents, but it is actually directed to what could be seen as an empty case. The operative decisions are not taken by the Quartet whose political weight is all concentrated in the activity of issuing formal statements and recommendations about how the situation must progress.

The inability of the European Union in proposing an effective common foreign policy, the distance and substantial disinterest of the Russian Federation, the weak leadership of the United Nations and, clearly, the arrogance and unilateralism of the United States are the reasons why international diplomacy have failed the multilateral approach, returning to the historical praxis in which the US was the only possible accepted mediator among the parties. Therefore, the Quartet represents a shared front which works as a scape-goat for their original failures and responsibilities.

Summing up, in the current situation, despite its *palmarès* of high political personalities, its detailed and strong statements, the ostensible centrality in the peace process and the formal support received by almost any member of the international

community – especially in the Arab world –, the Quartet has never had the actual power to solve (or to actively help solving) the conflict and, following Annapolis, its position has irreversibly worsened. Concluding this overview borrowing the words used by Alvaro De Soto in its report:

membership in the Quartet gives the UN the illusion of having a seat at the table where it is being played out. Alas, it isn't being played out there. The Quartet has become a side show [...] it is only partly about the Middle East, it isn't a very apt mechanism for solving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and other members don't necessarily use it for that purpose⁵¹.

Nowadays, despite criticism and failures, the Quartet keeps being committed to the peace process trying to maintain some grip on American predominance. In the latest statement issued after the November Meeting in Sharm el Sheikh, the group has even declared its intention to convene an international meeting in Moscow by the Spring of 2009. It has also declared to be determined to support the negotiations and to help the process promoting an «environment conducting to peace»⁵² as requested by the parties. Anyway only a different approach by the four members could make the Quartet become a potential heavy-weight in the next cycle of the peace process. Realistically speaking, the best way to reach a certain balance inside the group would be improving the political role of the European Union in the region; that could happen when the Treaty of Lisbon comes in force and when (and if) the structure of the new born Union for the Mediterranean reaches a certain consolidation and credibility. Nevertheless, if a consistent shift in the Middle Eastern policy of the new American administration happens in the next months, plenty of new prospects will be put on the table, and most of these conditions wouldn't need to be realized, at least in the negotiating perspective.

Anyway even though this and the other necessary mutations foretold do not happen the Quartet can still play an essential, different role.

The progress on technical aspects of the peace process should allow – by itself – a rehabilitation of the diplomatic group and a new assignment. If the political weight of the Quartet has been analysed and questioned in an irrevocable way, the

⁵¹ A. De Soto, *End of Mission report*, cit.

⁵² *Quartet Statement 09 Nov 2008, Sharm el Sheikh*, 9 November 2008, available at www.reliefweb.int.

economical support – the European-led TIM and PEGASE⁵³ – the Palestinian security services reform and the efforts to facilitate access and movement in the West Bank and in Gaza have had some little but encouraging results. This because the flexibility and the three-layers structure of the Quartet allows a special communication from the field to the international community and vice versa. Moreover thanks to its multi-field expertise, its vicinity to the parties and the general availability of Israeli Governments in making more concessions on technical aspects, the Quartet can work better than any other international organism or institution and paradoxically it can work on elements which, in the end, might contribute more to a just, everlasting, and shared peace than the signing of a political peace agreement in itself, especially if signed by leaders who do not legitimately represent their populations.

The only guarantee of success for a true peace in the region is a reconciliation between the two populations. Many groups and NGOs have been working for years to confront hatred and fear among them trying to overturn the negative stereotype of *the other* created in decades of conflict by media, politicians, educators and religious figures. Particularly, the joint effort of Israeli/Palestinian NGOs including, among the others: IPCRI, AIC, Parents' Circle-Family Forum and Combatants for Peace – working on different layers of the local social tissue –, have already successfully demonstrated that a sincere reconciliation between Israeli and Palestinian people is not only realistic, but indeed realizable if included in a framework of justice, respect of human rights and international law, non-violence and opposition to the Israeli occupation and military control of the Palestinian Territories and to every extremism. The Geneva Agreement, on another level, represents, at present, the only detailed draft agreement for peace between Israel and the Palestinian Authority, but – excluding former US President Jimmy Carter and former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan – it hasn't been approved or even supported by any political leader worldwide. In the meanwhile, the Geneva movement has never given up.

If the bottom-up process, represented by the joint efforts of local civil society, intellectuals and political personalities, who took part to the Geneva negotiations and other similar activities, is supported and reinforced locally and inter-

⁵³ Commission Launches PEGASE - A New Mechanism to Support the Palestinian People, 20 January 2008, available at www.imemc.org.

nationally there will be a gradual shift in the perception of *the other* among the Palestinian and the Israeli public opinion and this will be of huge, if not determining, contribution for peace. Unfortunately, these efforts haven't constituted an unique movement yet because of lack of connection and a certain disparity of points of view, positions and roles among its potential members.

The Quartet – with its field-level composition – appears as an apt organism to help this movement to unify and raise a unique voice in the region and, since it also represents (at its principal level) the international community, it could bridge the gap between the bottom-up process described before and the top-down process which has been encouraged for years by generations of world leaders, and by the Quartet itself, without relevant success. In order to do so, the Quartet should firstly gain the support of local people and civil society since the general perception of the group is very negative: «civil society groups who work with the Quartet may have work because they get funding but usually their reputation amongst common people is negative, and lastly, the leaders they are working with in the Arab world are also discredited amongst Palestinian people»⁵⁴.

Anyway a transformation of the Quartet in this direction remains a sound possibility which would allow the group to act on its own and help the realization of an internal switch; if continuing on the current path, «the Quartet is playing the same game as played forever, and they're not bringing a different way of thinking, of talking, of listening so nothing is changing»⁵⁵.

Only with a strong support of the local population an agreement will be legitimate and lasting and the only certain way to reach genuinely this local support is by demolishing the walls of fear and hatred between Israelis and Palestinians with the essential contribution of those Israelis and Palestinians who have already understood the necessity of dialogue. With a strong determinate multi-level activity in this sense, the Quartet would help these people in the difficult reconciliation effort, thus influencing the policies of their governments and providing the necessary legitimacy and the natural request to implement the decisions which are now unsuccessfully taken at peace meetings and summits around the world.

⁵⁴ Interview with Laura Ribeiro, Right to Education Campaign, Birzeit University, October 2008.

⁵⁵ Interview with Janelle Segal, Neve Shalom School for Peace – Negotiation Dialogue Group, October 2008.