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***Comparing EU and US Foreign Policy on the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict:  
Competition or Cooperation?***

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Introduction:

The aim of this paper is to examine the concept of whether competition or cooperation exists between the European Union and the United States with respect to attempts at resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In order to achieve this aim, the paper has been divided into a number of sections.<sup>1</sup> The first section will give a brief general overview of some key elements of EU policy towards the region. Section two will do likewise for US policy towards Israel and the Palestinian Authority. The third section will focus on all the instances of competition and cooperation between the EU and the US. In the conclusion of the paper, it is hoped to establish whether competition or cooperation is more prominent; and if the answer to this question has any relation to progress, or lack of it, in the peace process. Finally, it is hoped to produce some recommendations as to how progress can be made in resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

EU Foreign Policy in the Region:

The relationship between the-then European Economic Community and Israel began in 1975 with the signing of a Cooperation agreement between the two parties. At the time, this was the only type of agreement available to Israel and granted the Jewish state preferential trade access to the European market. This agreement was subsequently upgraded to an Association Agreement in 2000. While this new agreement enhanced the trading arrangements for Israel, it also set out restrictions to be applied to goods coming from the so-called Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT). This agreement also contained steps to be undertaken in order to advance the political relationship and this aim was formalised by a 2008 European Council decision. However, following the Israeli incursion into Gaza, the process of upgrading the relationship was suspended.<sup>2</sup> Following the signing of the original cooperation Agreement in 1975, the EEC found itself excluded from the US-sponsored Camp David Peace Accords of 1978. As will be seen later, this was not to be the only time that the EU would find itself over-shadowed by the US in the region. The exclusion of the EU from these talks prompted the-then nine

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<sup>1</sup> Due to space constraints, there will not be discussion of issues such as the formation of the state of Israel, previous wars in the region or peace initiatives that pre-date 1991.

<sup>2</sup> Despite this suspension, advancing the relationship with Israel remains a clear aim of the EU as soon as conditions allow for it.

member states to make a definitive attempt at having the organisation be recognised as a global actor. The result of this decision was the publication of the so-called Venice Declaration in 1980, which can be considered a fledgling common foreign policy statement.<sup>3</sup> The opening point of the declaration alludes to the fact that the EEC has been spurred into action by the process that produced the Camp David Peace treaty between Israel and Egypt. The nine also clearly state their reasoning for seeking a role in achieving peace in the region: ‘The nine member states of the European Community consider that the traditional ties and common interests which link Europe to the Middle East oblige them to play a special role and now require them to work in a more concrete way towards peace.’<sup>4</sup> This document also stressed the right to self-government of the Palestinians and the need for the PLO to be involved in any negotiations that took place as well as demanding that Israel pull back to the pre-1967 borders even though no concessions would be required of the Palestinians. However, despite the EEC’s optimism about becoming actively involved in resolving the conflict, they failed to produce any concrete actions that would have any impact on moving negotiations forward and ultimately leading to a peaceful solution. In fact, having taken a step forward with the release of the Venice Declaration, the EEC then retreated back into itself, returning its focus to internal, economic matters. For most of the 1980s, its involvement in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was limited to releasing statements following summit meetings where the leaders called on both sides to show restraint during the first *Intifada* that took place between 1987 and 1992.

It was only following the US-sponsored peace conference in Madrid, and the subsequent Oslo Accords, that the newly-named European Union once again attempted to assert itself as a potential mediator in the conflict; or at the very least, it attempted to provide an environment in which the Israelis and Palestinians, as well as other regional actors, could engage in negotiations aimed at securing a peaceful future for the whole of the region. This came about through the announcement of the Barcelona Declaration in 1995.<sup>5</sup> The Declaration itself was composed of three main objectives which were referred to as baskets. The first of these was entitled the Political and security partnership and had as its aim the establishment of a common area of peace and stability. This chapter urged the participants to ‘promote and strengthen by all means at their disposal’<sup>6</sup> the peace, security and stability of the wider Mediterranean region through regular political dialogue that would focus on human rights, rule of law, democracy, respect for diversity and territorial integrity. The second chapter was entitled Economic and financial partnership and was aimed at the creation of an area of shared prosperity in the region. The most important instrument to be used in the creation of this area was to be a free-trade area encompassing the EU and its regional partners in the Mediterranean.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Full details of the Venice Declaration can be found at [http://eeas.europa.eu/mepp/docs/venice\\_declaration\\_1980\\_en.pdf](http://eeas.europa.eu/mepp/docs/venice_declaration_1980_en.pdf).

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Full details of the Barcelona Declaration can be found at [http://eeas.europa.eu/euromed/docs/bd\\_en.pdf](http://eeas.europa.eu/euromed/docs/bd_en.pdf). The participating countries included the 15 EU member states along with Algeria, Cyprus, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Malta, Morocco, the Palestinian Authority, Syria, Tunisia and Turkey.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> This was to come into force in 2010 but failed to materialise.

The third and final chapter of the Barcelona Declaration was called the Cultural and human chapter and had as its focus the promotion of understanding between all the cultures in the region through civil society exchanges at multiple levels. It is not surprising to note that the Barcelona Process was very much dependent on progress being made in the wider MEPP and represents the only forum in which representatives from Israel and the PA took part in face-to-face negotiations on a continuous basis.

The initial success of the Barcelona Process saw the EU seek a further role in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict specifically with the appointment, in 1996, of the EU's first Special Representative to the Middle East Peace Process (EUSR). One could argue that this was in direct response to the existence of such a role in the US. The EUSR was given the following mandate: 'to provide active support to actions and initiatives leading to a final settlement of the conflict; to contribute to the implementation of international agreements reached between the parties [...]; to report on possibilities for EU intervention and on the best way of pursuing EU initiatives and ongoing Middle East peace process related EU efforts [...]'<sup>8</sup>

The final element of EU policy towards the region to be examined in this section is the 2003 Neighbourhood Policy that was initially outlined in the 2003 European Commission paper titled "Communication on a Wider Europe"<sup>9</sup> This document was produced in light of the 2004 enlargement to the CEECs and Malta and Cyprus and was considered necessary to ensure a continued good relationship with the neighbours that would now border the EU following the enlargement. The objective of the ENP was to share the benefits of membership, especially in the fields of trade and cultural exchange, without actually offering the possibility of membership to those who signed up. Effectively the ENP was an updating of the Barcelona Process. Under the ENP, Action Plans would be developed for each country that would include a number of goals to bring them closer to the regulations that pertained in the EU.

From discussing the various attempts by the EU to play a role in the Middle East Peace Process, it can clearly be seen that it focuses more on economics and trade rather than a more overtly political element. This will now be contrasted with some of the US initiatives of the same time period before finally examining the idea of competition or cooperation between the two entities.

### US Foreign Policy in the Region:

Historically the United States has not always seen the Middle East as the strategic asset that it is considered today and, indeed, has been for the 60 or so years. One must wonder what prompted this shift in the US position towards the wider region. According to Mearsheimer and Walt 'The United States has played an important and increasing role in Middle East security issues since World War II, driven initially by oil, then by anti-communism and, over time, by its growing relationship with Israel.'<sup>10</sup> In

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<sup>8</sup> European Council Decision appointing EUSR to the MEPP.

<sup>9</sup> Full text can be found on: [http://ec.europa.eu/world/enp/pdf/com03\\_104\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/world/enp/pdf/com03_104_en.pdf)

<sup>10</sup> John J. Mearsheimer ; and Stephen N. Walt: "The Israel Lobby and US Foreign Policy" (USA: Straus and Giroux; 2007)

fact, some have argued that recent events in the region mark a return to an oil-driven relationship.<sup>11</sup> The closer strategic relationship mentioned above does not waiver regardless of whether the Democrats or Republicans control the White House. The relationship had been growing ever closer under all presidents since the end of World War II but it was firmly cemented under Ronald Reagan in 1981 with the signing of a memorandum of Understanding on Strategic Cooperation. Despite this close relationship, however, tensions between the two emerged over such issues as Israel's bombing of the Osirak reactor in Iraq. Perhaps the most striking dispute between the two allies came under the presidency of George H.W. Bush when tensions emerged over the use of US funding to build settlements in the OT. As a result of this, Bush Snr had Congress withhold the funding, briefly, until the Israelis agreed not to use it for settlement construction. However, bearing in mind that the US gives the Israeli state \$6 billion a year in aid, it can be assumed that some of this is in fact used to construct settlements. Subsequent US presidents have shown themselves to be strongly pro-Israeli; especially Bill Clinton and George W. Bush.

In relation to attempts to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and diffuse tensions in the wider region, the United States began this process under Jimmy Carter. This resulted in negotiations held at Camp David which resulted in the Camp David Accords, a peace treaty between Egypt and Israel. Carter had hoped that this treaty would signal to other Arab nations that it was possible to make peace with Israel. However, not only did it not result in this, but the peace between Israel and Egypt can be considered a cold and fragile one.<sup>12</sup> Subsequent to this initial success, Carter and Reagan attempted to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in similar fashion but this proved unsuccessful.

The atmosphere in the region changed in 1991 with George H.W. Bush's declaration of a "New World Order" following the fall of Communism and the defeat of Saddam Hussein in the first Gulf War. The American-led defeat of Iraq had resulted in enormous political capital for the US president from Arab states in the region and those were the states he would need support from in order to attempt a final resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Using this goodwill, the Americans invited all the regional parties to a peace conference to be held in Madrid. Despite being a US-inspired peace conference, even the the EU admitted that Madrid 'constituted the first comprehensive attempt to reach a just and lasting solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict since 1948.'<sup>13</sup> The talks themselves consisted of both bilateral and multilateral tracks. The aim of the talks was for Israel to negotiate peace treaties with all of its neighbours, including some form of fledgling Palestinian Authority. Despite the best efforts of all the parties, the only peace treaty to emerge directly from Madrid was with Jordan. Perhaps this lack of progress can be attributed to the fact that the talks undertaken in Madrid did not focus on

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<sup>11</sup> This is hinted at in US Senate Intelligence Committee reports on whether the Bush administration mislead the country on the reasons for going to war in Iraq in 2003. Details can be found at <http://intelligence.senate.gov/prewar.pdf> and <http://gpoaccess.gov/serialset/creports/Iraq.html>

<sup>12</sup> This idea is developed throughout the chapter on Carter's peace efforts in the region in Thomas Princen : "Intermediaries in International Conflict"

(UK: Princeton University Press, Oxford; 1992)

In fact, recent events in Egypt have made the Israelis extremely nervous that the Camp David Accords may no longer ensure peace between the two nations.

<sup>13</sup> European Commission, 1998)

the substantive issues that were stumbling blocks between the Israelis and the Palestinians. Here, of course, we refer to issues such as settlement construction, the right of return of refugees and the position of Jerusalem. As the Bush presidency drew to a close, it was hoped that the arrival of Bill Clinton in the White House would re-invigorate the process.

However, the Madrid talks process that Bush had begun was to become almost irrelevant under the Clinton administration with the beginning of the secret Oslo Process. This process was not sponsored by either the US or the EU and brought academics and diplomats from the Israeli and Palestinian sides face to face to negotiate on the substantive issues that have already been discussed above. In fact, the United States was only informed of the existence of the Oslo Process after the preliminary agreement has been reached.<sup>14</sup> However, despite the euphoria of the now-famous handshake on the White House Lawn of September 1993, the Oslo process also stalled after the initial breakthrough. One could, in fact, argue that the entire peace process itself collapsed following the unsuccessful outcome of Clinton's Camp David summit right at the end of his presidency and the outbreak of the *al-Aqsa Intifada*. The situation in the region deteriorated considerably once George W. Bush came to power and immediately withdraws the US from any attempts to negotiate peace between the Israelis and Palestinians. In fact, Bush does quite the opposite and effectively gives Israel unconditional support for its actions in the Occupied Territories by labelling them part of the so-called "war on terror".

This brings us to the central question of this paper: Do the European Union and the United States compete or cooperate with each other in attempting to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict? The concepts of competition and cooperation between them will now be examined in the next section.

### Competition or Cooperation?:

This section begins with a discussion of instances of competition between the European Union and the United States before moving on to examine instances of cooperation.

The first example of competition found during the course of the research involves how the two parties are perceived to act with respect to the region. Long-running US support for Israel is not popular either in parts of Europe or among the Arab states themselves. This is manifested in reluctance to support US-backed peace initiatives for the region as many see them as biased in favour of Israel without even having to read the documentation or attend the scheduled talks. One could argue that this has intensified since the effective collapse of the Middle East peace process from 2000 onwards and was only ever contained in the immediate aftermath of the first Gulf War. The European Union, on the other hand, is strongly considered to be pro-Arab in general and,

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<sup>14</sup> This point is clearly made in Yossi Beilin's book: "Touching Peace: From the Oslo Accord to a Final Agreement."  
(London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson; 1999)

specifically, strongly pro-Palestinian ; a stance which is not popular in Washington or in Jerusalem. As was shown previously when examining EU foreign policy in the region, statements and declarations from the EU on the conflict seem to largely seek concessions from the Israelis without demanding any in return from the Palestinians. This was particularly evident in the Venice Declaration. Despite the ongoing US support for Israel, there have been times when American administrations have attempted to attach conditions to the aid that it grants to the Israeli government. However, these attempts have been short-lived as was shown when George H.W. Bush withheld aid from Israel but was over-ruled by Congress who voted not to attach any conditions to it. It is not surprising, therefore, that the amount of aid given to Israel by the US is a source of tension given that it is used to fund settlement construction which the EU considers to be illegal. A further source of competition in respect of this issues of perceived support for each side is the use of US-supplied equipment by the Israelis to destroy infrastructure that is largely funded by the EU. Given that many see the main role of the European Union to be that of financing the creation of the infrastructure to support a final settlement, it is not surprising that its destruction at the hands of the Israelis using American fighter jets and missiles is a source of tension between the EU and the US.

The second, and perhaps clearest, example of competition between the European Union and the United States can be found with the 1991 Madrid Peace Conference. As has already been discussed, the peace conference itself was an American idea. However, the Europeans hoped to be given a major role in the conference as they had claimed strong historical ties to the region as far back as the Venice Declaration and believed that this automatically made them the ideal choice to co-sponsor the peace conference. Given the previous point about the perceived pro-Palestinian bias of the EU, it is not at all surprising that Israel immediately dismissed the idea of the EU as a co-sponsor and actually refused to take part initially when it seemed as though the EU would be designated the co-sponsor with the US. This led the US to negotiate with Israel on the choice of a co-sponsor that would ensure Israeli attendance at the conference. As a result of this process, Russia was chosen as the co-chair and the EU found itself side-lined as much as possible as the US in order to allow for continued Israeli participation in the process. However, the US did realise that it needed to have some level of EU support, and subsequently financial involvement, and therefore did appease the Europeans by granting the organisation the chairmanship of REDWG – the Regional Economic Development Working Group. It must be presumed that the US saw the EU as the ideal candidate for this position given the experience of the EU with economic cooperation in its own sphere and the emerging idea that the EU would be the main source of funding to be channelled to the Palestinians once the Madrid Conference had achieved a final settlement, as was foreseen. Indeed, despite the fact that the ultimate breakthrough in the Middle East Peace Process came about through the secretive Oslo Process, this idea of using the EU to distribute funding to the nascent Palestinian Authority remained the case. However, it is interesting that the United States chose Russia to be the co-sponsor of the conference given the circumstances that existed in the country at the time, with the aftermath of the fall of communism, for example. This raises the question of why the US chose Russia for this role given that Russia itself was in a state of political upheaval. But the Israelis accepted Russian co-chairmanship and perhaps considered that it gave them a

second ally at the conference. Perhaps this goes some way to providing an explanation as to why very little progress was actually made during the official Madrid process.

The element of competition between the EU and the US can further be seen with the evolution of the Barcelona Process following the “success” achieved through the Madrid Conference and the Oslo Process. It could be argued that the Europeans proposed the idea of the Barcelona process in order to counter-act the US leadership of the MEPP that had been established in the preceding years.

A third example of competition can be found with respect to the situation regarding the publication of the so-called Quartet Roadmap in 2003.<sup>15</sup> As has already been mentioned, the Bush administration had made it clear on coming to office in January 2001, and even before assuming office, that it would be withdrawing from the peace process.<sup>16</sup> Even following the September 11th terrorist attacks, the US continued to remain detached from the attempting to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. It was, therefore, clear that the Bush administration would have preferred to publish the Roadmap document as its publication meant that the US would have to become actively involved in the process; thereby invalidating the argument it had made previously. However, Bush was forced to publish the document by Tony Blair in order to secure support for the unvasion of Iraq in 2003. But by the time of its publication, many of its requirements were clearly never going to be met on time.<sup>17</sup> Under the Roadmap, the European Union had a more prominent role than it had been given under the Madrid Peace Conference process. Effectively the role assigned to the EU under the Roadmap was to oversee Palestinian compliance with the document; while the US would undertake the same role with regard to Israel. Can this example then be seen as representing a measure of cooperation between the EU and the US?

A further example of competition that has been identified related to the differing reactions of the EU and the US to events such as the construction of the Security Fence and Israel’s invasions of Lebanon and Gaza. In all of these cases, the US continued its policy of not openly criticising Israel, although it was less supportive of the Gaza Incursion in late 2008. This could, however, be due to the fact that a change in White House administration was imminent and so Bush had nothing to gain electorally from offering whole-hearted support to Israeli actions. In fact, comments from both sides in relation to the Gaza incursion showed a more cooperative tone between the EU and the US. On the other hand, the EU immediately issued strong condemnation of Israeli actions in all of these cases. In the case of the Security Fence, the EU strongly supported those who took Israel to the International Court to have construction halted. In contrast, the US refused to condemn Israel and agreed with Israeli claims that it would end suicide bombings. Again, there were clear tensions over the 2006 war in Lebanon when the US again supported Israel’s actions as they were justified as being part of the war on terror. The EU immediately called for an end to the conflict.

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<sup>15</sup> The Quartet consists of the EU, the US, Russia and the United Nations.

<sup>16</sup> Condaleezza Rice had made this point clearly in her article “Promoting the national interest” in *Foreign Affairs*, Jan/Feb 2000, Volume 79, Issue: 1.

<sup>17</sup> Full text of the Roadmap can be found at <http://www.un.org/media/main/roadmap122002.html>

The final case that is to be examined could be described as showing competition and cooperation. This refers to the reaction of the EU and the US to Hamas gaining power in Gaza in 2006. Initially both were opposed to any contact with Hamas and continued to deal with the Fatah government in the West Bank. The two agreed that EU funding would only be distributed to Mahmoud Abbas' Fatah government. However, over time a gradual shift has occurred. There is now an emerging debate within the EU about whether this position should be changed to allow for negotiation. This is particularly relevant given recent attempts to form a unity government between Fatah and Hamas. The US continues to see Hamas as purely a terrorist organisation and had no contact with it but it does not seem to be criticising the EU for debating a change of approach. Perhaps this is a sign of the emergence of some type of cooperation between the European Union and the United States.

### Conclusion:

It is clear to see from the discussion above that there are more instances of competition than cooperation between the European Union and the United States with respect to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. As has been alluded to, this is primarily due to the different roles that the two actors play in the region. For example, it is obviously the case that the United States is the more dominant political player. This is supported when you consider that the vast majority of peace initiatives are put forward by the US government, regardless of whether there is a Democrat or Republican president. In the context of this paper, the Madrid Peace Conference is the clearest example of how the US can, on its own, move political events forward. Effectively, the US organised the conference down to the last detail and it was the only actor with the ability to convince all the participants to attend. In contrast, it can clearly be argued that the European Union is the more dominant economic player. As was discussed earlier, the US took advantage of the EU's own experience in bringing about peace through economic integration following World War II when it assigned the EU to be the chair of the REDWG group during the Madrid Process. Subsequent to the Oslo Accords being signed, it was the EU that was primarily responsible for distributing the financial aid to the fledgling Palestinian Authority that allowed Yasser Arafat to begin constructing the infrastructure that it was anticipated the PA would need with the completion of a final settlement agreement between the Israelis and Palestinians. This emphasis on economics on behalf of the EU was again demonstrated with the introduction of the Barcelona Process in 1995 and again in 2003 with the launch of the previously mentioned European Commission Paper "Communication on a wider Europe" and the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) that developed from this paper. In 2007 the EU developed the financial instrument that those countries who are a party to the ENP can avail of to fund programmes to bring their regulations into line with those that exist in the EU; this is called the European Neighbourhood Policy Instrument. All of these actions confirm the idea that it is the United States that is the political player in the region and that the European Union is the payer for the Palestinian Authority. The EU has never produced a purely political initiative, such as a Madrid Conference-style process, in order to assert itself as being a genuine political actor in the conflict.

While the US sees the EU as performing a vital function in ensuring the distribution of financial aid to the Palestinian Authority, it also sees the EU as having a role in persuading the Palestinians to return to, or remain at, the negotiating table. Presumably this is as a result of the pro-Palestinian bias that the US and Israel both feel is demonstrated by the EU. On the reverse, the EU ironically sees the US as performing the same function with respect to the Israelis; again presumably a manifestation of the long-running pro-Israeli position of the US as was previously discussed.

In relation to the question of what impact competition or cooperation between the United States and the European Union has on resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, it could be argued that these factors have little role in deciding whether or not progress towards a final settlement can be reached. For example, this paper highlighted the idea that the EU proposed the Barcelona Proces to run parallel to Madrid/Oslo, when it could be considered as a competing process, and both the Israelis and Palestinians sent delegates to this and cooperated on certain issues within this framework. However, it must also be pointed out that more progress was made within the Barcelona Process when the wider Middle East Peace Process was working well. In this respect, it could, perhaps, be argued that the word 'coordinated' should be placed before both cooperation and competition to describe the involvement of the European Union and the United States in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

When it comes to putting forward recommendations as to how to achieve progress in resolving the substantive issues of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, one could, perhaps, suggest that more cooperation between the US and the EU, as almost a joint third party, would present a better option for achieving some progress. However, this must be accompanied by improved conditions on the ground on behalf of the Israelis and Palestininans. It has been suggested that cooperation between the EU and the US alone will not resolve the problem; that, in fact, it will take an Israeli leader who is prepared to make previously unthinkable sacrifices in order to convince the Palestinians that it is worth negotiating seriously.<sup>18</sup> Perhaps what will ultimately resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is a combination of these two ideas.

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<sup>18</sup> Phone interview with former Israeli Deputy Foreign Minister, November 2010.