

swiftly and decisively, while its informal structure gave it the flexibility needed to navigate crises and adapt to changing developments on the ground.

Yet, despite the high expectations that accompanied its formation, and some modest success early on, the Quartet has little to show for its decade long involvement in the peace process. Israelis and Palestinians are no closer to resolving the conflict, and in the few instances in which political negotiations did take place, the Quartet's role was usually relegated to that of a political bystander. Meanwhile, the Quartet has failed to keep pace with the dramatic changes that have occurred in the conflict and the region in recent years, particularly since the advent of the Arab Awakening. Having spent most of the last three years in a state of near paralysis, and having failed to dissuade the Palestinians from seeking UN membership and recognition in September 2011, the Quartet has finally reached the limits of its utility.

UNITED STATES

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It has been ten years since the four most powerful players in the Middle East peace process—the United States, the European Union, Russia, and the United Nations—came together under the diplomatic umbrella known as the Quartet. Formed in response to the outbreak of the second intifada in late 2000 and the collapse of peace negotiations a few months later, the Quartet appeared ideally suited for dealing with the seemingly intractable conflict between Israelis and Palestinians. Its small but powerful membership allowed it to act

The Quartet's Track Record

Of all its interventions, none are more illustrative of the Quartet's performance and modus operandi than the Roadmap and the Quartet Principles, the two most important and consequential actions taken by the group to date. The publication of the Roadmap in April 2003 sought to correct three fundamental shortcomings in the Oslo peace process of the 1990s. In addition to calling for parallel (rather than sequential or conditional) implementation of each side's obligations and insisting on monitoring and accountability for both sides, the Roadmap sought to articulate a more clearly defined end game. Whatever theoretical or potential benefits the Roadmap might have offered, however, were negated by the fact that it was for all intents and purposes a dead letter.

The Israeli government, already highly suspicious of the Quartet, rejected the entire Roadmap exercise precisely because of its emphasis on parallelism and monitoring. As a result, despite ostensibly agreeing with the Quartet consensus regarding both of these principles, the George W. Bush administration worked systematically to block or hinder them. Having enthusiastically backed the Sharon government's

“security first” doctrine, key elements within the Bush administration agreed to make Israel’s implementation of the Roadmap conditional on the Palestinians meeting their obligations first. Similarly, despite the strenuous efforts by various actors to set up an official monitoring structure, no Quartet monitoring mechanism was ever established.

Instead, in keeping with Israel’s objections to international or independent monitoring, only the United States was allowed to monitor implementation and compliance. And even then, such missions were given low priority and were sporadic and highly constrained in their operation—for example by not publicizing their findings or even sharing them with the other three Quartet members.

The Roadmap was eventually discarded altogether by the Bush administration’s—and later the Quartet’s—support for Israel’s Gaza Disengagement Plan, a primary objective of which was to neutralize the Quartet plan. The fact that it was the United States rather than the Quartet that ultimately subverted the Roadmap meant little in light of EU, UN, and Russian acquiescence at each stage of the process. The subversion of the Roadmap later proved to be the Quartet’s “original sin,” with far-reaching consequences that are still felt today. The consensus that had been so painstakingly forged around the Roadmap was exposed as a farce. Any benefits the plan may have offered were nullified by the divergent goals of the United States and the other three Quartet members, along with their desire to maintain the unity of the group at all costs.

Within months of Israel’s withdrawal from the Gaza Strip, the Quartet faced an even greater challenge after the surprise election victory of the Palestinian Islamist faction Hamas gave it control over the Palestinian Authority (PA) in January 2006. In response, the United States, the European Union, the United Nations, and Russia called for three criteria to be met—nonviolence, recognition of Israel, and acceptance of previous agreements—for the new Hamas-led government to receive recognition and support. While on the surface the Quartet Principles reflected a

consensus among all four of the group’s members, major divisions surfaced almost from the start and have persisted ever since.

Despite attempts by Alvaro de Soto, the UN envoy at the time, to argue that the principles were never intended as conditions on international donor assistance to the PA, the Bush White House made sure they would be implemented as precisely that. The U.S. and EU decisions in 2006 to withhold international aid, which virtually all donors including Arab states complied with, amounted to an international sanctions regime. This, combined with Israel’s nearly simultaneous decision to withhold valued added tax (VAT) revenues collected on Palestinian imports that accounted for some 60 to 70 percent of all PA revenue, triggered a severe economic and humanitarian crisis throughout the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

Once again, despite the apparent consensus among the four powers, it soon became clear that the Quartet members each had a very different understanding of what the new policy meant, or how to put it into effect. These differences spanned the entire spectrum, from the U.S. insistence on a “no aid/no contact” policy to the Russian call for engaging Hamas in a dialogue in the hope of moderating its positions, with the EU position leaning more toward the American one and the UN position more toward the Russian one. Despite the apparent similarity in the U.S. and EU positions, in practice the goals of the United States and the European Union diverged sharply: whereas the Europeans have sought compromises by which to continue channeling aid into Palestinian hands, the United States has been far less flexible. The intense disagreement over the Quartet Principles, which almost caused the group to break up, only added to the sense of confusion regarding its mission and further undercut its standing. Ironically, Hamas’s takeover of Gaza in July 2007 may well have saved the Quartet by removing the single most potent source of internal conflict it had ever had to face.

Two other experiences offer additional insights into the Quartet’s handling of crisis situations and its overall

approach to conflict management: the May 2010 flotilla tragedy and the role of the Quartet representative. For many of its proponents, the Quartet's true value was demonstrated in the wake of the deadly May 2010 Israeli raid on an international aid flotilla attempting to reach Gaza, which subsequently led to an easing of Israel's blockade of Gaza. A UN-led initiative propelled by American power and influence and put into effect by the official Quartet representative was seen as a clear case of "the Quartet at its best." This perspective, however, ignores the central role of the Quartet in creating the conditions that led to the blockade and that gave rise to the flotilla in the first place, namely the adoption of the Quartet Principles followed by years of Quartet inaction in the face of worsening conditions in Gaza. The flotilla crisis also highlighted another of the Quartet's major failings: its inability to shape events rather than merely respond to them.

Then there is the anomaly known as the office of the Quartet representative, currently held by former British prime minister Tony Blair. The post was first held by former World Bank president James Wolfensohn, who was appointed by Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice in April 2005 to oversee the Gaza disengagement process. Although both Wolfensohn and Blair were given relatively narrow mandates focused on assisting Palestinians in areas of economics and institution-building, the two missions could not have been more different.

Whereas Wolfensohn sought to play a very political role throughout his tenure, Blair has been content mostly to remain inside his "tight box." Despite the differences between the two envoys, the two missions have one important thing in common: both were initially conceived not as integral components of the Quartet's mission but as alternatives to it. Overall, the role of Quartet representative, particularly under Tony Blair, has helped to reinforce American dominance of the process while making the Quartet more palatable to Israel by channeling EU, UN, and Russian involvement away from the diplomatic process and by depoliticizing the role of the Quartet generally.

Why the Quartet Does Not Work

The Quartet's failings stem mainly from three factors: its loose, informal structure; the imbalance of power and interests in its composition; and a lack of genuine consensus among its members. The group's highly malleable structure and lopsided membership has hobbled its ability to function as an independent actor. While these structural constraints have not been the primary source of its ineffectiveness, they have provided an enabling environment for a far more damaging and entirely self-inflicted defect: the willingness of its members to paper over genuine and often far-reaching disagreements in the interest of maintaining group cohesion. The fact that the Quartet could be all things to all people allowed its most powerful and vested member, the United States, not only to dominate the institution itself but to effectively transform it into something other than what it was originally intended to be.

All Things to All People

As with other contact groups, the informal and ad hoc nature of the Quartet was intended to bypass some of the structural constraints imposed by formal international mechanisms like the UN Security Council. The absence of an organic, institutional structure was also seen as essential to the Quartet's proper functioning, maximizing the collective impact of its members while maintaining their individual freedom of action. The Quartet's loose, informal structure has been a double-edged sword, however. While it is true that there have been no formal constraints on individual Quartet members, their freedom of action can be, and often has been, impeded by their involvement in the group. This is partly due to the fact that Quartet positions necessarily reflect the lowest common denominator, usually represented by the United States, and to the group's diminished credibility as a result of the other three members' acquiescence to U.S. demands.

Imbalanced Membership

The Quartet's composition is rather unique among contact groups. Its membership includes two permanent members of the UN Security Council (the

United States and Russia) and two supranational organizations (the United Nations and the European Union), but no regional actors or other direct stakeholders in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In addition, two of its members, the United States and the European Union, are also the largest donors to the peace process. This unusually top-heavy arrangement was a direct response to the conditions under which the group emerged, namely the intense violence of the second intifada and the need to assemble the most powerful actors in the most efficient configuration in the shortest amount of time. The Quartet was also a way for the European Union, the United Nations, and Russia to lobby the United States to reengage in the process and to try to influence U.S. positions once it did.

Despite the apparent complementarity of the group's membership—former UN envoy Terje Rød-Larsen famously described it as the perfect marriage of American power, European money, and UN legitimacy—the Quartet suffers from a fundamental imbalance that directly affects how it operates, irrespective of its stated or normative positions. The asymmetry has been most evident in the unmitigated dominance of the Quartet by the United States, which is both its most powerful member and the one with the highest concentration of interests in the conflict. The absence of any regional powers that might offset this imbalance has only compounded this imbalance. Thus, while the United States, the European Union, the United Nations, and Russia were, on the surface, bound by a common desire to end the conflict, they each had their own motivations for joining the effort that were not necessarily tied to a resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

For the United States, the Quartet has served several distinct but overlapping purposes. In addition to channeling the interventions of the major international powers, the Quartet was also used to advance other regional objectives like the 2003 invasion of Iraq. The fact that the United States had both the ability and the will to act unilaterally has also made the Quartet's role, to a great extent, a function of broader U.S. policy

priorities in the region, including its bilateral relationship with Israel. While the United States typically has worked closely with Israel, it has been less bound by the need to coordinate with its Quartet partners. This was particularly true under the Bush administration but has persisted under the Obama administration as well, as demonstrated by the latter's decision to exclude the other Quartet members from the launching of direct negotiations in September 2010.

American dominance of the Quartet would not be possible, however, without the parallel tendency of the European Union, the United Nations, and Russia to acquiesce to the United States, even when serious disagreements existed and when the stakes were high. This, combined with the unwillingness of the United Nations, Russia, and especially the European Union to use their substantial leverage as a counterbalance to U.S. unilateralism, earned the group the unflattering nickname of the "Quartet *sans trois*." Even if they could not compete with American power and influence, there was little to lose and much to gain from being part of even an ineffective group, particularly for the European Union.

As the largest single donor to the Palestinian Authority and Israel's second largest trading partner, the European Union had long sought to translate its substantial economic clout into a meaningful political role, if not on par with that of the United States than at least significantly greater than it had played in the past. The United Nations, which had not played a serious political role in the Arab-Israeli conflict since 1968 and whose involvement in the region was largely confined to peacekeeping and other operational matters, also hoped for an entrée into the diplomatic process. Finally, Russia's involvement stemmed from a desire to enhance its regional stature as well as its leverage with its traditional European and American rivals on a range of regional and international issues. Ironically, it was this wish to be "relevant" that has helped consolidate American dominance of the Quartet.

Though there were obvious advantages in having other international powers like the European Union and

the United Nations sign on to its positions, the United States could afford to act on its own when that backing was not there. The three weaker members, by contrast, have rarely been in a position to shape the peace process independently of the United States, not just because they lack its power and influence, but because doing so risks freezing them out of the process. Instead of leveling the diplomatic playing field as expected, the Quartet has actually reinforced American dominance by giving greater weight and legitimacy to U.S. positions, while simultaneously downgrading the value of individual EU, UN, and Russian positions in comparison to those of the Quartet. A similar dynamic exists between the parties to the conflict. Whereas Israel has the ability to shape developments on the ground unilaterally, such as through settlement expansion or military action, the Palestinians by and large do not. Thus, the two actors that seem to have derived the most benefit from the Quartet—the United States and Israel—are also the ones that are the least bound by it.

Consensus for Its Own Sake

The Quartet's greatest strength—and the one most frequently cited by its proponents—is its ability to speak to the parties with a single, authoritative voice. In addition to minimizing the possibility of competing interventions, it also reduces the ability of the parties to play one actor against another.

This assumes, of course, that its members are genuinely of one mind with regard to the goals of the group, which was usually *not* the case with the Quartet. Beyond the superficial “vision” articulated in the Roadmap, there is very little common understanding among Quartet members regarding its objectives, means of operation, or overall role in the peace process. Indeed, the group has been deeply divided on nearly every crucial issue it has taken up since its creation. As a result, what should have been the Quartet's greatest asset in reality has been a serious liability.

Although deep divisions were present from the very start, nowhere was the lack of alignment among Quartet

members more evident—or more damaging—than in the cases of the Roadmap and the Quartet Principles, and in the disparate treatment of the two. Even as the Quartet allowed implementation of the Roadmap to fall by the wayside, it has held scrupulously to the letter of the Quartet Principles. Although only the former was officially enshrined in a Security Council resolution (UNSCR 1515), it was the latter that assumed quasi-legal status. In both cases, a consensus was negotiated among all four actors and established as official Quartet policy.

And yet, in both cases, differences in how Quartet members understood that consensus were substantial enough that they nearly caused the group to break up. In the case of the Roadmap, disagreements over implementation were papered over and eventually overtaken by a new “consensus” around the need to get behind the Gaza disengagement. When it came to the far more formidable divisions over the Quartet Principles, however, the lack of genuine consensus was simply subordinated to the desire to maintain unity at all costs. Indeed, since the split between Hamas and Fatah and the siege of Gaza in the summer of 2007, both outgrowths in no small measure of the Quartet Principles, the Quartet has become increasingly inactive, if not irrelevant.

What Quartet officials often failed to realize, however, is that such hollow—and in some cases *illusory*—consensuses were often more harmful than not reaching a consensus at all. Likewise, contrary to the Quartet's credo, collective action can be less effective, and in some cases more damaging than individual members acting on their own. Instead, the goal became a “consensus” for its own sake.

The Palestinian UN membership bid of September 2011 finally exposed the myth that a Quartet “consensus” was synonymous with strength, as well as the fallacy that the Quartet enhances rather than dilutes EU and UN influence in the peace process. Despite months of deep divisions across the Atlantic and within the European Union, the lack of consensus did not produce the apocalyptic outcomes that Quartet enthusiasts in the EU and elsewhere had feared. On

the contrary, there may be strength in disunity that could lead to a more honest debate and create new opportunities for moving the process forward.

If the Quartet's greatest strength was its ability to marshal the collective resources of its members and speak with one authoritative voice, its principal weaknesses was its tendency to be all things to all people. The malleability of the Quartet allowed its most powerful member, the United States, to dominate the mechanism so completely as to effectively transform it in virtually every way. Once conceived as a multilateral framework for resolving the conflict, the group was now little more than a tool of American foreign policy.

The Quartet's original mission as a vehicle for mediating between two parties has been replaced by one focused mainly on managing the affairs of one of them—the Palestinians. In the process, it also shifted from a more comprehensive and integrated vision aimed at conflict resolution to one that is more reactive and disjointed even in its attempts at conflict management.

The Bottom Line

In the end, the Quartet's greatest sin was not that it failed to achieve what it had set out to accomplish but that it insisted on maintaining the pretense that it would or even could. In the process

of becoming all things to all people, the Quartet has ceased to be anything at all.

The current mechanism is too outdated, dysfunctional, and discredited to be reformed. Instead of undertaking another vain attempt to "reactivate" the Quartet, the United States, the European Union, United Nations, and Russia should simply allow the existing mechanism to go quietly into the night. In the short term, this means the office of the Quartet representative will need to be folded into the existing donor/aid structure. In the medium to long term, however, it will require the United States and its international partners, both inside and outside the region, to work together to forge a new international consensus around the requirements for a just, lasting, and comprehensive peace between Palestinians and Israelis, as well as devise a new peace process "architecture" that is more coherent, strategic, and balanced than the current arrangement.

One possible way forward would be to convene an international peace conference (modeled on the 1991 Madrid Conference), perhaps during the first half of 2012, bringing together its former Quartet partners, key regional allies (particularly Egypt, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia, and possibly others like Qatar and Morocco), along with other relevant stakeholders (i.e., Norway, Turkey, World Bank, etc.).