

**PEACE IN THE MIDDLE EAST*****Regional Instability, Global Implications***

The Middle East, straddling vital transportation links at the confluence of three continents, has long been a region of strategic importance. More recently, unrivalled concentrations of oil have bestowed on this region a vital role in the world economy. The persistent violence and conflict that have plagued the Middle East for over forty years, and the tragic human costs they have entailed, are thus naturally a critical concern for the entire international community.

The Arab-Israeli Conflict

The causes underpinning the problems of this region are many and complex. A central (though by no means the only) element has been the conflict between Israel and its Arab neighbours: a formal declaration of war has been upheld by most Arab states against Israel since its founding in 1948. Since the 1967 Six-Day War, this conflict has been entangled with controversy over the issue of the status of the Israeli-occupied territories in the West Bank, the Gaza Strip, the eastern sector of Jerusalem, and the Golan Heights, and the related question of the rights of the Palestinian people. Aside from the Camp David Accords and the Israel-Egypt peace agreement of 1979, leading to Israeli withdrawal from the Sinai in 1982, attempts to overcome these differences have repeatedly failed.

The Madrid Peace Process

The Madrid Peace Process, launched by the USA and the then-USSR on October 30, 1992, represents the latest effort to find solutions to the Arab-Israeli conflict, building on the opportunities inherent in the post-Gulf Crisis and post-Cold War era. For the first time since the creation of Israel, Madrid brought together at one table representatives of the Arab states, of Israel and of the Palestinians to address the question of peace. It crossed an even more critical threshold by setting in train a series of bilateral negotiations between Israel and its respective participating neighbours.

Two initial sessions of bilateral negotiations have now taken place, in December and January in Washington. If they are to succeed, these negotiations will inevitably be long and difficult, reflecting the depth of emotions on all sides and the compromises that must be made to ensure a durable peace.