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# **Muscat, Madrid, Ulster, and the Holy Land: The MEDRC Model of Environmental Peacebuilding in a Revived Middle East Peace Process**

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## **Abstract**

Mandated to assist the Middle East peace process through environmental diplomacy, MEDRC, the last surviving institution of that process, has survived through an institutional and operational approach to conflict resolution separate from the rest of the process. Understanding its transferable approach is important in fields of environmental diplomacy and conflict resolution not only in the context of combating transboundary climate and environmental threats but of using these threats as entry points into a peace process. As the international community grapples with the need for a credible solution to the intractable conflict in Israel and Palestine, the MEDRC approach has implications for the process design of a revived and reformed Middle East peace process. The aim of this article is to present for the first time the detailed elements of the MEDRC Model and underpinning Conflict Resolution Process Guidelines, and to examine implications for environmental peacebuilding in general and a for a revived Middle East peace process.

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**MEDRC** is a multilateral international organization, headquartered in Muscat, Oman and mandated to assist the Middle East peace process through environmental diplomacy.<sup>1</sup> Established in 1996 out of the multilateral Middle East peace process, known the Madrid Process, it is all that remains of that effort. It has succeeded in retaining the support and cooperation of all parties to the conflict because of an approach to conflict resolution entitled the ‘MEDRC Model.’ This multilateral institutional model, based on equality and balance, is unique in the context of the Middle East peace process and the wider field of environmental peacebuilding.

The MEDRC Model is designed to be transferable to benefit states seeking to use transboundary environmental issues in the service of the peace process. In the context of the Middle East peace process it can be regarded as an alternative approach to the Abraham Accords, in placing Palestinian inclusion and agency at its core alongside all other member states. More immediately, the approach has the potential to influence and improve a revived Middle East peace process where it offers a practical and proven operational framework to underpin high-level diplomatic initiatives such as a revived Arab Peace Initiative or any variation on the Madrid Process.

The article will trace the development of the model and its potential future utility in the process design of a revived Middle East peace process. This has implications for the resolution of other intractable conflicts and for future work on environmental diplomacy where greater understanding of the potential links between environment-related projects and peace is necessary.<sup>2</sup>

## **Muscat**

The MEDRC institution is headquartered in Muscat, in the Sultanate of Oman, and its processes are inspired by the Omani tradition of dialogue and diplomacy. Based on concepts of *shura* (consultation), *ijmae* (consensus), and *sablah* (council), the tradition emphasizes long-term, normative processes built around balance, resilience, and equality as a basis for social cohesion and peaceful international relations.<sup>3</sup> Its roots and practice are millennia deep and rooted in its unique geography, trade, and diversity.

The Sultanate of Oman sits where the Indian Ocean meets the Gulf and where Iran meets Arabia. Shaped by a geopolitical reality quite different from the rest of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), with the vast majority of its coastline facing into the Indian Ocean and Gulf of Oman, the Sultanate historically looked outward to the Indian Ocean as much as to the interior of the Arabian Peninsula and the Levant.<sup>4</sup>

Occupying this diverse regional and inter-regional contact zone, the Sultanate has developed a sophisticated system of balances and counterbalances between the various forces that cut through its neighborhood.<sup>5</sup> Distinctive in the Arab world in its non-Ottoman past and its unique Ibadi identity, Oman is religiously tolerant, its jurisprudence and avowedly anti-sectarian stance emphasizing the values and principles of mediation, social equality, and equality before the law.<sup>6</sup>

Arguably, the clearest and most accessible insight into the workings of this Omani approach lie not in the field of diplomacy, but in the Omani *falaj* system of water management. In an arid desert environment, water is the most immediate and precious prerequisite for life. The system for distribution of water is an elemental social system that shapes and defines society, culture, and state.

Oman’s system of water management is based around a resilient system for equitable distribution. In simple terms, the *falaj* system is the means of sharing water from an aquifer, spring, or wadi among a community. It involves a canal dug into the ground to carry water by gravity to

villages and farms. Each water shareholder receives the flow of water for a length of time rather than by volume. The length of time depends on the area of land owned and the contribution to the construction of the *falaj* system. During dry periods the flow will be low, but the time share will remain the same, leading to equity among irrigators.<sup>7</sup>

This system of water management has been inextricable from the social and economic structure that has permitted it to function successfully and largely unchanged for centuries.<sup>8</sup> It can be considered a hydro-political system that has become a social contract deeply rooted in religious principles.<sup>9</sup>

The *falaj* system then, has been a significant factor in defining and shaping Oman's socioeconomic structure and community relations.<sup>10</sup> As with the international relations of Oman, it is part of a tradition that favors long-term balance and normative processes around equality and resilience over short-term zero-sum outcomes. In international relations Oman's traditions have long been recognized as showing how 'balancing interests, tolerance toward differences, and a determined search for mutual benefits can open international doors and keep them open, even during conflict.'<sup>11</sup> Today, trusted by Iran, the United States, and Saudi Arabia alike, Oman holds to its long tradition of diplomacy through consultation, consensus, and council.<sup>12</sup>

The concepts of balance, symmetry, and resilient systems in peace processes or diplomacy are obviously not unique. The role of inclusion, participation, and mitigating asymmetry is a central part of peacemaking.<sup>13</sup> The Irish peace process operationalized balance through concepts such as the role of British and Irish governments as 'joint guarantors.' It was also evident in the concept of 'coequal partnership' between parties, and in particular between first and deputy first ministers. Similarly, the concept of 'parity of esteem,' was conceptually central to the success of the Irish peace process at individual, community, and regional levels.<sup>14</sup> Similar to Oman, these are not formal legal codices but have created a positive set of norms that underpin a resilient positive peace based on balance, in place of 'negative peace, based on structural violence, a hierarchy of humanity, or even Carthaginian destruction.'<sup>15</sup>

What sets Oman apart however, is the extent to which these values and principles of balance, social equality, and equality before the law, evident across national and international policy and practice, are deeply ingrained in national culture.<sup>16</sup> The Omanis are known as *Ahl al Shura*, People of Consultation, for a reason.<sup>17</sup> This unique culture was very much in evidence in the establishment of MEDRC.<sup>18</sup>

## **Madrid**

The Madrid Process brought the Omani approach into first contact with the formal structures of the Middle East peace process, with the convening of the Madrid Peace Conference in 1991. In the shadow of the first *intifada* and end of the Cold War and the first Gulf War, the US and USSR issued letters of invitation stating that the negotiations would proceed on the basis of UN Security Council Resolution 242 of November 22, 1967 that incorporated the principle of trading land for peace.<sup>19</sup> The process would have two tracks:

- a bilateral track between Israel and Syria, Jordan-Palestine respectively, launched in Madrid on October 30, 1991 and,
- a multilateral track, launched in Moscow on January 28, 1992, involving the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), Israel, and thirteen Arab governments in multilateral working groups focused on i) water, ii) refugees, iii) economic development, iv) the environment, v) arms control, and regional security.<sup>20</sup>

Opening the Madrid Conference, Prime Minister Shamir of Israel ruled out land for peace. This set the tone for the bilateral track where the parties restated fixed positions. Madrid did open the door however to the Oslo Accords agreed between the PLO and Israel in 1993 and 1995 respectively.<sup>21</sup> These would come to replace Madrid as the bilateral Israel-Palestine track in the Middle East peace process.<sup>22</sup>

The multilateral track was attended by thirty-six parties. First and foremost, the multilaterals were to provide a supportive framework for the bilateral negotiations; the latter were the crux of the peace process.<sup>23</sup> The process then was theoretically balanced, with Arab parties stating that progress in the multilateral process was dependent on progress in the bilaterals.<sup>24</sup>

In that context, Oman participated actively in the Multilateral Working Group on Water Resources, keenly aware of the diplomatic, regional, and technical importance of water. Addressing Oman's role in the talks in 1995, Oman's current foreign minister, Sayyid Badr bin Hamad Al-Busaidi, then under-secretary at the Foreign Ministry, referred to the lessons of the *falaj* approach to water needs of the region and to the vision of MEDRC.<sup>25</sup> In June of 1995 US vice president Al Gore and Omani foreign minister Yusuf bin Alawi bin Abdallah released a joint US-Oman communiqué confirming that each would fund the establishment of MEDRC and inviting others to join.<sup>26</sup>

The following month, a joint meeting of the Multilateral Working Groups on Water Resources and the Environment met in Amman, Jordan and noted, in a the press statement of the gavel-holder that, "the United States and Oman announced that each would commit 3 million dollars to establish the Middle East Desalination Research Centre in Muscat, Oman. The center is a concrete manifestation of regional cooperation created through the multilateral peace process."<sup>27</sup> By that stage the balancing Israel-Palestine track, the Oslo process, was already weakening with negotiations between the PLO and Israel consistently undermined by Likud, the settlers, and Hamas.<sup>28</sup>

## **Peace Process Collapse**

The Israeli rejection of Oslo in the May 1996 election and the subsequent backtracking of the Benjamin Netanyahu government, coupled with a spiral of mutual violence, ended any possibility of balance between the tracks.<sup>29</sup> The widespread perception of the demise of Oslo then rendered the balancing multilateral track diplomatically and politically inoperable.

The last meeting of the Multilateral Working Group on Water Resources was held in Hammamet, Tunisia in May 1996. The final press statement of the gavel holder, while optimistically noting that the multilateral track was intended to complement and support the bilateral negotiations, stated that several of the group's members had pledged a total of fifteen million dollars in support of MEDRC.<sup>30</sup> MEDRC then, was born into a political and diplomatic crisis when launched formally in December 1996.

As an international organization its membership was limited to states and other international organizations. An international establishment agreement set out its core mandate, to assist the Middle East peace process, and was signed by the initial member states: Oman, the United States, Japan, Israel, and Korea. It then concluded a headquarters agreement with the Sultanate of Oman. Under this agreement, MEDRC was recognized as a diplomatic mission with the standard diplomatic protections offered to its headquarters seat. Oman and the United States would jointly chair. All initial members provided a matching three million dollars and, in the initial decade of

its operations, MEDRC issued calls for proposals for research into desalination technologies across the Middle East and North Africa.

Sustained by the initial core funding, its concrete institutional status, and its focus on technical desalination research at the outset, MEDRC survived. A crucial sustaining factor during these years was hope of a rebirth of the Israel-Palestine track in the form of the 2000 Camp David Summit, the Quartet Roadmap, and ongoing state building activities in Palestine. In that context, Palestine and Jordan joined in 2002.

By the end of the 2010s however, the lack of a credible Israeli-Palestinian track and the failure of all other multilateral initiatives brought MEDRC to an increasingly precarious state. The organization began concerted efforts between 2009 and 2013 to broker joint training and dialogue between the parties in the water sector, and in particular to aid the delivery of the Central Gaza Desalination Plant, but without significant success.

The collapse of the Israel-Palestine track was reflected in the state of dialogue and joint action around water between the Israeli and Palestinian sides. This was not surprising; the water conflict between Palestine and Israel is inseparable from the broader political context and the roots of the conflict.<sup>31</sup> Article 40 of the Oslo II Accord replicated and codified the occupation-era status quo in the West Bank and allocated eighty-seven percent of the West Bank's transboundary groundwater yield to Israel with just thirteen percent to the Palestinians.<sup>32</sup>

Under Oslo II, in the West Bank only water systems that had previously 'related solely to Palestinians,' and were 'held by the military government and Civil Administration,' would be transferred to the Palestinian Authority, with all other systems, including those for settlements, remaining under Israeli control.<sup>33</sup> For Gaza, an enclaved territory too small to have sufficient natural water resources for its large refugee population and thus, a built-in dependency on Israel, full responsibility was handed to the Palestinian Authority.<sup>34</sup> This was, and remains, the essential shape and status quo on the issue of water relations between Israel and Palestine.

By early 2014, against the backdrop of the failed peace talks organized by US Secretary of State John Kerry, MEDRC had more or less contracted completely and member states led by the joint-chairs agreed to a rethink and new strategy. Relying on external balance, in the form of an Israel-Palestine track that no longer existed, had become untenable. A new approach, separate from the existing process design of the Middle East peace process, was required.

## **Ulster**

The new strategy took inspiration from the balanced Omani tradition and the similar practices underpinning the Irish peace process. In the absence of a balancing external Israel-Palestine track, MEDRC had to create one internally. Building on its efforts between 2009 and 2013, the core focus of the organization became Palestinian-Israeli conflict resolution. A MEDRC trilateral program would focus on Israel-Palestine issues. This MEDRC chaired process would involve Palestine, Jordan, and Israel and support, where possible, dialogue, negotiations, and joint activities using water and the environment as an entry point. A MEDRC bilateral Palestine program would see MEDRC support the water, environmental, and state building activities of the Palestinian side. A small technical bilateral program with Jordan would exist also.

The new processes and programs were normative; no matter what the political situation outside, in MEDRC, the parties, at a minimum, would meet and engage as absolute multilateral equals. Using the approach of the Irish peace process, member states would be joint owners, joint guarantors, and coequal partners of MEDRC and its processes. This allowed member states

without diplomatic relations to share ownership of the institution and recognize one another as such.

Strategically, equality and balance, including between the core parties of the peace process, became the bottom line. Operationally, a commitment to parity of esteem and the concept of an ‘overtly balanced outcome’ became central to all MEDRC actions.

Encompassing the new strategy was a new mandate: “to be a model organization for states seeking to use transboundary environmental issues in support of a peace process.”<sup>35</sup> This mandate allowed MEDRC to look beyond the process design constraints and path dependency of the Middle East peace process.

The new mandate empowered MEDRC to work on the basis of best practice in terms of conflict resolution, public management, peacebuilding, and environmental diplomacy. It served also to enable it to seek to fill the lacuna in agency around multilateralism in environmental and water diplomacy.<sup>36</sup>

Since 2014, MEDRC has conducted its activities in line with the new transferable model approach, outlined below.

## **The MEDRC Model**

Similar to the *falaj* model, the MEDRC Model should be imagined as a resilient system in balance.<sup>37</sup> It is built on an insistence on equity and symmetry. The external political environment is the flow. The MEDRC Model takes that flow and creates peacebuilding actions based on a political framework of equality and parity of esteem. It can accommodate various strategies and aspects of conflict resolution using water, environmental diplomacy, and peacebuilding activities.<sup>38</sup>

The model is transferable. It is designed to be used by states to establish similarly resilient multilateral centers in any transboundary conflict using any transboundary environmental issue as an entry point to support a peace process or improved relations. Beyond the environment, the approach could be used to create a resilient institutional underpinning for any final status area of negotiation in an established peace process. It does not wait for or depend on conflict ripeness but expands and contracts in line with the flow of the political situation. The approach is iterative or adaptive.

In 2020 MEDRC began a project funded by the German Federal Foreign Office entitled *Using Transboundary Environmental Issues in the Service of a Peace Process*. As part of that project, independent external consultants conducted a review of this model and found that MEDRC was the only such multilateral organization doing such track one work and that the model was transferable to other conflicts using other transboundary environmental issues. Under this project MEDRC disseminates the model to governments engaged in peace process activities. The central institutional and operational elements of the replicable model are outlined next.

## **The MEDRC Model: Multilateral Centers to Support Peace Processes**

In practice the MEDRC Model is an institutional multilateral framework based on equalizing contact between the core parties to a conflict. It is a set of diplomatic practices and a resilient institutional core, together proposed under the term “multilateral center.” The approach is not rigid or prescriptive. Different cultures, conflicts, and capacities must shape any successful intervention.

In that context, the following are general guidelines for the establishment and operation of a MEDRC Model multilateral center.

### **Engaging the Core Parties to a Conflict**

The process of engaging the core parties to a conflict and securing their agreement to participate will vary depending on the conflict. In an established political track this can begin via a confidence building measure. In more intense conflicts it can be seen as an initial diplomatic contact group activity that later institutionalizes. In conflicts where contact and cooperation are limited by narrow treaty agreements, it can be used as a way to broaden dialogue. In an established peace process, establishing a variation of the model on each of several final status issues would also be of benefit.

### **Selecting a Transboundary Environmental Issue of Joint Concern**

The multilateral center should have a broad peace process mandate and a secondary environmental mandate focused on a transboundary environmental issue of joint concern to the parties to the conflict. This environmental mandate area should not be so narrow that it limits dialogue. In an established political track, the issue might be a final status issue, such as water. In an early or less structured process, the issue might be a less contentious topic. The mandate may be expanded in due course, reflecting the flow of the political environment.

MEDRC was initially mandated to focus on desalination, then water, and from 2022 on, all transboundary environmental issues including climate change. This ‘creeping mandate’ approach facilitates the iterative and pragmatic approaches to peacebuilding and underpins resilience.

### **Involving Surrounding States**

As an international organization, the multilateral center should aim to attract member states in addition to the conflict parties. The role of supporting states is to ensure and strengthen adherence to multilateral norms and to help bring diplomatic balance to potential disparities between core parties. They also provide financial support as core institutional funding or project support. Prospective member states may be geographic neighbors, states with a historic interest or role in the conflict, or states with an interest in conflict resolution, development cooperation, or the policy focus.

MEDRC contains a mix of the original participants in the Multilateral Working Group on Water Resources in the 1990s. Some states with a diplomatic focus on water diplomacy as well as states with an expertise in stabilization have subsequently joined.<sup>39</sup>

### **Establishing the Institution**

Institutions are more stable and resilient than frameworks, networks, or contact groups. In environmental peacebuilding, joint institutions are acknowledged channels of communication and conflict resolution.<sup>40</sup> In the wider area of conflict prevention there is a recognized clear need for the institutionalization of preventative policies and strategies.<sup>41</sup> There are two main actions here to institutionalize the model:

(i) The establishment agreement: this international agreement provides the legal structure for the multilateral center. It sets out its independent juridical status and its diplomatic status as an international organization. It should set out the high-level mandate to assist the peace process. It should also establish a governing executive council of member state diplomats that links the center to the broader peace process and international system.



(ii) The headquarters agreement: this agreement sets out the diplomatic status and protections afforded the organization and its headquarters seat in the host country. For particularly sensitive matters, this is crucial because it establishes the practical reality of the center's independence and separation from the host country.

### **In Strategy, Tactics, and Operations being a Resilient Channel in Balance**

Again, analogous with the *falaj* approach, the center is the channel; it is the system in balance. The political environment will define the flow of peacebuilding activities. In time of kinetic war, there will be only the diplomatic precedent of multilateral equality. In a slightly improved scenario, there will be equal status contact. Leading up to a process, there will be confidence building measures and in the context of a political track there can be a broad array of peace building activities. The practical institutional characteristics underpinning this approach are the following:

- **A Coequal Partnership:** All member states, including core parties to the conflict and supporting states, are joint owners, joint guarantors, and coequal partners in the institution and its processes.
- **A Diplomatic Structure:** Diplomatic status, inviolability of the headquarters seat and status of center director as head of mission underpin the insistence on diplomatic norms, independence, and respect.
- **Independence:** The independence of the center is paramount and stated in the establishment agreement. While an executive council approves strategic plans, the center is wholly independent, tactically and operationally. It does not seek agreement of all parties on minutiae but rather consults with all and decides on a balanced approach that should be equally agreeable or disagreeable to all.
- **A Clear Mandate:** A broad, clear mandate principally to assist the peace process is preferable. This will empower the center to respond to the external political environment and follow an iterative approach. A frequent issue with treaty-based transboundary water organizations is narrowness of the mandate, which can limit broader peacebuilding activities.<sup>42</sup>
- **Working Primarily With Government Officials:** As a multilateral organization linked to the core parties of the conflict, the center can engage with and feed into deliberations of diplomats and government officials. MEDRC categorizes these as follows.
  - Track I activities involve officials from line departments.
  - Track I+ activities involve officials from line departments and diplomats.
  - Track I++ activities involve officials from line departments and diplomats in a normative process based on equality and balance.

Ideally, there should be a focus on Track I++, which is exceptionally difficult to achieve. A governing executive council of member state diplomats should underpin the Track I nature of the organization.

- **Addressing Capacity Disparities:** In addition to peacebuilding activities that involve core party contact, the center should engage in bilateral activities to address disparities in technical, institutional, or negotiations capacity in the mandate area.<sup>43</sup> Asymmetry and capacity disparities between core parties are harmful to building a sustainable peace. An imbalanced negotiation is less likely to produce an equitable agreement. This is particularly

relevant in MEDRC's work; the asymmetry between Palestine and Israel is severe, playing a highly decisive role in peace process failure.<sup>44</sup>

## **Using the Model for Conflict Resolution**

Breaking the cycle of intractable conflict demands societal change and a new repertoire that enables reaching agreement with a past rival.<sup>45</sup> The model is designed to support the entire repertoire. At a minimum, it institutionalizes the contact hypothesis, where equal status contact, sanctioned by institutional supports focused on common interests and common humanity, can minimize prejudice.<sup>46</sup>

Depending on flow, or degree of political will, the model, as a resilient channel, should be able to enact the complete array of technical and political peacebuilding initiatives including design and delivery of confidence building measures, contact groups, joint monitoring and evaluation, negotiations, track three, two, and one activities, joint gap-analysis, and final status negotiation support.

## **The Model in Practice**

Since 2014 MEDRC has conducted its activities, from diplomatic executive council meetings to micro-initiatives such as one-person research projects, on the basis of this approach. The activities are presented below in a reductive form and are limited to activities pursued in the period immediately prior to the current Israel-Hamas war.

They comprise a Trilateral Program that is peace process focused and two bilateral programs focused primarily on Palestinian development assistance and state building support.

### **Trilateral Program**

The MEDRC Trilateral Program was, in past years, the last formal process involving Palestinian and Israeli officials. The program is multilateral and engages Palestine, Jordan, and Israel in a MEDRC chaired process around transboundary environmental issues. The process involves diplomats and officials from line ministries. It is normative because it is multilateral and based on equality and balance. All activities take place in neutral locations, predominantly outside of the region. The program has been supported by the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA), the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the German Federal Foreign Office. The activities are reviewed by the MEDRC Executive Council.

Under this program, MEDRC convenes an annual Trilateral Coordination Meeting comprising senior officials of Palestine, Jordan, and Israel. The parties meet in the MEDRC framework as joint owners, joint guarantors, and coequal partners in a process chaired by MEDRC. Each of the three member states makes a presentation on pressing environmental issues. The meeting then conducts a joint gap-analysis of environmental issues of concern or interest. Typically, areas of focus might include climate change, models of regional cooperation, or the water-energy nexus.

The meeting agrees on four or five areas of joint concern. These form the focus for four or five trilateral workshops held at neutral venues in Europe in the following year. Each member state is requested to nominate five delegates at the principal officer/director level or above. Again, these meetings are multilateral and members meet as equal parties. All activities are reported to the MEDRC Executive Council by means of a memorandum for information.

Such activities create a cohort of civil servants in key position across the core parties' administrative systems who have engaged in structured and repeated official contact based on equality. This is only feasible in a political framework around equality and multilateralism.

MEDRC also provides regular written briefings for officials of core party countries on issues around transboundary environmental issues, environmental peacebuilding, and public management.

### **Bilateral Program**

The MEDRC bilateral program contains two streams of activity, focusing on Palestine and Jordan respectively. These member states are on the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Development Assistance Committee (DAC) list and are thus entitled to direct bilateral support from international donors through MEDRC in areas where the organization has specific technical expertise.

These programs function as confidence building measures, underlining the ownership role of these states in MEDRC and the investment MEDRC makes in state and capacity building by working through local ministries and agencies. They also seek to equalize imbalance in capacity between core parties that may hinder future negotiations. Finally, they serve as a model for the delivery of development capacity support effectively and efficiently in the context of ongoing conflict.

These activities have been funded by the Qatar Fund for Development, SIDA, German Federal Foreign Office, and Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The partners are the ministries in Palestine and Jordan that are also members of the MEDRC Executive Council.

Regarding bilateral activities in Palestine, for more than a decade, MEDRC has supported a fellowship program that supports environmental research in Palestine and Jordan. Activities are conducted in Palestine, in cooperation with the Palestinian Water Authority (PWA), the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Expatriates, and Palestinian universities. All research is conducted at Palestinian universities under the supervision of Palestinian academics. Under this program, a biannual call for proposals is issued through the PWA for research in areas of national priority set by the PWA. Final selection is done through a joint committee of MEDRC, the PWA, and universities. MEDRC contracts the research activities directly with the researchers.

Since 2011 more than five hundred research projects have been supported in this way. MEDRC also supports a PhD program in water science in cooperation with the Islamic University of Gaza and the Al-Azhar University of Gaza. It has supported the capital costs for laboratory and testing equipment at the universities.

A continuous multiannual training program for officials and practitioners in desalination, wastewater, and non-revenue water, selected by the PWA, systematically builds and maintains a cohort of national experts trained to a high international standard. These are conducted in Palestine and at MEDRC headquarters in Muscat.

As a result of these activities, prior to the current war, MEDRC considered the capacity gap between Palestine and Israel in seawater desalination, non-revenue water, and waste water treatment to be closed. Huge disparities persisted in access to materials, fuel, and technology but they are a function of politics, not technical capacity.

## **The MEDRC Conflict Resolution Process Guidelines**

All MEDRC conflict resolution activities above comply with the MEDRC Model approach. In designing and delivering these activities, MEDRC uses its own Conflict Resolution Process Guidelines that are designed to ensure that the peacebuilding activities operationally and tactically stay true to the model strategy and the commitment to achieving an overtly balanced outcome. They are designed to be transferable and are set out below.

### **The Rational-Reality Gap—The Test for Inclusion**

A rational-reality gap occurs where a policy, project, or process is ineffective because it does not sufficiently account for realities, power-structures, or imbalances on the ground. This can occur when program or process design is conducted at a geographic or cultural distance or without balanced local input or understanding. In the peacebuilding field, this has been evident in recent decades in ineffective programmatic interventions designed to cure conflicts by creating liberal Western systems, in Iraq and Afghanistan especially but also across the Middle East, Balkans, and Africa.<sup>47</sup>

In response, MEDRC activities and processes should ensure that all conflict resolution activities and processes are owned by and co-developed with relevant core parties on the basis of strict equality and balance.

### **The Solution Looking for a Problem—The Test for Resilience**

Peace processes are messy interactions of people, personalities, systems, and cultures. In all such complex human endeavors, people and organizations can be solutions or choices looking for problems.<sup>48</sup> In peace process practice this can lead to a short-term or risky focus on high-profile mediation and back-channel activities by individuals in place of longer-term, resilient, normative and institutional approaches. Conflicts attract all manner of interveners: activists, advocates, mediators, researchers, and enforcers.<sup>49</sup> The system of intervention is more important than the individual.

In response, MEDRC's activities and processes should

- Fit into the strategy to be a replicable model organization.
- Prioritize resilient systems not individual initiatives.
- Prioritize bureaucratic not charismatic leadership.

### **Transboundary Cooperation is Not Peace—The Test for Equality**

Cooperation across borders or between warring factions is not necessarily synonymous with peace. In certain conditions, cooperation can embed neo-colonialism, dependency, or occupation. Broadly, environmental cooperation or joint management may create isolated islands of technical cooperation or symbolic rapprochement with little spillover into actual peace.<sup>50</sup> In conditions of conflict asymmetry, traditional problem-solving techniques such as cooperation can reinforce the relative power of the hegemon.<sup>51</sup> This is especially the case in a situation of profound power imbalances, where proposing 'confidence building' measures and mediation strategies may not only be inappropriate but also ineffective.<sup>52</sup>

In a violent or intractable conflict, the existence of a credible peace process or a political track is the difference between possible cooperation with a partner and impossible collaboration with an enemy.

In response MEDRC activities and processes should

- Utilize the equalizing political framework of joint and equal ownership and a commitment to an overtly balanced outcome.
- Insist on tactical and operational independence by management to secure balanced outcomes on the basis of dialogue with all.

### **Government is the Operating System—The Test for Multilateral Diplomacy**

The Middle East peace process, like most major peace processes, involves multilateral tracks and issues around state recognition, rights, and obligations. States will be signatories, partners, and guarantors. Conflict resolution processes linked to, involving, and feeding into government efforts are especially valuable. In a world of declining multilateralism there is a responsibility to maintain and showcase its effectiveness.

In response, MEDRC activities and processes should

- Feed into diplomatic peace process efforts via the MEDRC Executive Council and briefings to member state foreign ministries.
- Prioritize Track I++ initiatives.
- In bilateral processes, prioritize delivery through state partners and agencies.
- Showcase positive normative effects of the MEDRC model to government systems through their involvement.

### **Ignoring Politics is Political—The Test for Impartiality**

Politics is the ghost in the machine of transboundary dialogue and cooperation. In the peacebuilding field, there is significant acceptance now that peacebuilding is essentially political, not technical and programmatic.<sup>53</sup> Similarly, international deals on shared water resources are always linked with other issues.<sup>54</sup> Water development management or use cannot be purely technical and apolitical.<sup>55</sup>

In response, MEDRC processes should

- Adhere to the equalizing political framework around the joint owner, joint guarantor, coequal partner approach.
- Ensure that all processes, by adhering to this approach, are positively normative, supporting equalizing contact, and further embedding multilateral precedents around balance and equality.
- Be non-aligned and impartial in delivering the mandate, though not necessarily neutral which is non-political.<sup>56</sup>

### **The Academy is Not Society—The Test for Impact**

Academic cooperation around narrow technical issues can be straightforward but often has little read-across to a peace process and conflict resolution. Linking such cooperation and broader political and diplomatic processes is important.

In response, MEDRC activities and processes should

- Engage in bilateral academic projects that are conducted through state partners as part of state capacity building.
- Ensure any trilateral academic processes, if possible, feed into and are part of a political process.

### **The Institutional and Agency Lacuna—The Test for Best Practice**

There is an absence of internationally mandated institutions or actors in this field. There is also no formal peace process or political track between Palestine and Israel. Against that backdrop MEDRC processes need to be taken from universal best practice that is onward transferable to other conflicts and also to other parts of a future Middle East peace process.

In response, MEDRC activities and processes should

- Aim for international best practice and be transferable.
- Be capable of dissemination as part of the MEDRC Model.

Ideally then, for researchers and practitioners of environmental diplomacy, the MEDRC Model and associated Conflict Resolution Process Guidelines can provide greater insight and inspiration on new potential links between environment-related projects and peace. For states, it can provide a proven path to support international relations through joint action on areas like climate, water, and desertification.

Its most urgent and practical benefits are in the precedent it has set and its potential to play a role as part of a revived and reformed Middle East peace process.

### **Implications of the MEDRC Approach: Middle East Peace Process**

The MEDRC capacity to operationalize balance, which elsewhere might be seen as unremarkable, is potentially transformative in the context of a revived Middle East peace process.

The most effective way to end the conflict in Palestine and Israel is through a balanced process that equalizes Palestinian and Israeli agency. That means a commitment to delivering an overtly balanced outcome that contains equal degrees of self-determination, security, and statehood for Palestinian and Israeli people alike. Past efforts failed because, ultimately, the Palestinian side was not offered actual statehood and self-determination. In the aftermath of the current war in Gaza, a reversion to the imbalanced approach is not tenable.

Based on the MEDRC approach, the following measures would indicate a level of seriousness and commitment that could help restore confidence and provide a framework for peace, reconstruction, and reconciliation.

#### **Commit to a Revived Process Based on an Overtly Balanced Outcome**

- a. The asymmetry and imbalance in the process over four decades is not a foundation for actual positive peace.
- b. An agreement promising a Palestinian state in name only will not work. The usual process ending in last minute high-stakes pressure on the Palestinian side to accept an agreement that delivers unbalanced rights to security, water, economy, or borders will fail.
- c. The revived process must be normative and balanced, based on equal status contact with institutional support and balanced international pressure.

- d. It must be clear at the outset that a Palestinian state must have the same freedoms, powers, and responsibilities as Israel. It must have the power to guarantee its territorial integrity in the event of a change of Israeli government or future rejection of the peace agreement on the part of Israel.
- e. Any legitimate security concerns on either side must be met through joint multilateral structures involving Palestine, Israel, and guarantor states and the UN as joint guarantors and coequal partners.
- f. If two equal states are not delivered, the same equality and rights must be shared in one. Inequality on the grounds of religion or race is intolerable.
- g. The people of Palestine and Israel must see equal degrees of gain and loss in any final text. This balance was the key reason the Irish peace process worked.

### **Normalization with Palestine**

- a. Credibly initiating a revived and balanced peace process requires recognition of a Palestinian state on the 1967 lines at the outset by all who recognize Israel.
- b. Where that is not immediately politically possible by all, the imbalance brought about by the Abraham Accords should be reversed. Several Arab states normalized with Israel in the hopes that their actions would progress the peace process. This has not come to pass. To rebalance the process it is the turn of a similar number of Western states that do not recognize Palestine, but want to, to normalize now.
- c. These Western states that normalize now with Palestine should do so with the public non-opposition of the US and the EU. This will provide a strong signal that the international commitment to self-determination and statehood for Palestinians is real.

### **Launch a Multilateral Peace Conference**

- a. It is appropriate to launch a revived peace process through a multilateral peace conference that would agree on a joint declaration committing to an overtly balanced outcome and equality of the parties to the process.
- b. As envisaged in the EU peace conference concept, in the event that Palestine or Israel are not present at the initial phases, it is important that the international community progress and establish the normative framework of balance and begin work.

### **The New Track**

- a. The traditional Middle East peace process design included two supporting tracks: Israel-Palestine and Israel-Arab region. This approach is out of date.
- b. A revived process requires a new, third US-EU–Palestine track to balance the Israel-Arab track and should include supports for state building, Gaza reconstruction, and long-term development cooperation elements of the settlement and statehood for Palestine.
- c. This track implicitly recognizes the responsibility of the West toward Palestine while balancing the responsibility of the Arab nations toward Israel in the context of a final status agreement as envisaged in the Arab Peace Initiative.

### **New Multilateral Centers**

- a. A multilateral peace conference should establish or lend support to a series of resilient multilateral working groups based on the MEDRC approach.
- b. In time, multilateral centers based on the MEDRC Model could be established, on each of these negotiation tracks or working group areas initially, or possibly on final status issues later on.
- c. These would institutionalize progress and establish the new norm of balance.

### **Communicating the New Reality**

- a. In South Africa and Northern Ireland the truth that the status quo could no longer hold was a powerful precursor to compromise on the part of the dominant community.<sup>57</sup>
- b. Continued settlement expansion, structural and kinetic violence, and what many consider a one-state reality means, already, that a two-state solution will be exceptionally difficult to secure.
- c. In that context, it must be abundantly made clear that the focus on balance and equal degrees of self-determination works for two states or one. Failure to deliver equal degrees of self-determination in two states will inevitably lead to the establishment of equality in one state.

### **Conclusion**

The shape of the Middle East peace process has not significantly changed in more than four decades. Since 1976, when the PLO first supported a draft United Nations Security Council Resolution on two states, the weaker Palestinian side has offered essentially the same concrete outcome; a state on the 1967 lines in return for peace and Arab recognition.<sup>58</sup> The stronger Israeli side has offered a staged process based around variations on the Palestinian autonomy approach contained in the 1978 Camp David Accords, autonomy of inhabitants in a state-minus, in a smaller territory.

The significance of MEDRC is its demonstration that another approach is possible. In a revived Middle East peace process, it is a model based on balance, parity of esteem, and multilateralism. Globally, in the area of environmental peacebuilding it is a model for states seeking to use transboundary environmental issues in the service of a peace process.

However, such models and systems are empty vessels without human agency and political will. The *falaj* is not the flow. The process is not the peace. A peaceful settlement to an intractable conflict requires that the majority of society members who participated in the conflict see the settlement as providing a fair and just solution.<sup>59</sup> In the context of the Middle East peace process, that means communities and leaders globally and locally uniting around the reality that for peace to exist there can be no hierarchy of humanity in the Holy Land.

### **Notes**

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<sup>1</sup> Established formally in 1996 as the Middle East Desalination Research Centre (MEDRC), by virtue of its significantly altered area of focus and mandate, the organization today uses only the original abbreviation MEDRC. In branding the organization uses 'MEDRC: Water – Environment – Peace.'



- <sup>2</sup> Florian Krampe, Farah Hegazi, and Stacy D. VanDeveer, “Sustaining Peace through Better Resource Governance: Three Potential Mechanisms for Environmental Peacebuilding,” *World Development* 144 (2021): 105508, 2, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2021.105508>.
- <sup>3</sup> James Worrall, “‘Switzerland of Arabia’: Omani Foreign Policy and Mediation Efforts in the Middle East,” *The International Spectator* 56, no. 4 (October 2, 2021): 142, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03932729.2021.1996004>.
- <sup>4</sup> Jeffrey A. Lefebvre, “Oman’s Foreign Policy in the Twenty-First Century,” *Middle East Policy Council*, March 22, 2010, <https://mepc.org/journal/omans-foreign-policy-twenty-first-century>.
- <sup>5</sup> Valeria Fiorani Piantentini, “The Growth of the Relationships between Oman, the Gulf and the Western Waters of the Indian Ocean. Oman: the Corner-Stone of a Maritime History,” in *Oman and Overseas*, ed. Michaela Hoffmann-Ruf and Abdulrahman Al Salimi (Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlag, 2013), 143.
- <sup>6</sup> Aman N. Ghazal, “Oman: The Arab View,” in *Oman and Overseas*, ed. Michaela Hoffmann-Ruf and Abdulrahman Al Salimi (Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlag, 2013), 342; Douglas Leonard, “Oman’s Unique Approach to Mediation: A Solution for Sunni-Shia Conflicts?,” The Centre for Security Studies at ETH Zurich, April 4, 2017, <https://isnblog.ethz.ch/uncategorized/omans-unique-approach-to-mediation-a-solution-for-sunni-shia-conflicts>; Hussein Ghubash, *Oman – The Islamic Democratic Tradition* (London: Routledge, 2006), 206.
- <sup>7</sup> Abdullah S. Al Ghafrī et al., “Towards Sustainability and Equity in Access to Water: Design and Practices for Aflāj in Oman,” *The Journal of Oman Studies* 18 (2014): 28, [https://www.academia.edu/13597984/Towards\\_Sustainability\\_and\\_Equity\\_in\\_Access\\_to\\_Water\\_Design\\_and\\_Practices\\_for\\_Aflāj\\_in\\_Oman](https://www.academia.edu/13597984/Towards_Sustainability_and_Equity_in_Access_to_Water_Design_and_Practices_for_Aflāj_in_Oman).
- <sup>8</sup> Zaher bin Khalid Al Sulaimani, Tariq Helmi, and Harriet Nash, “The Social Importance and Continuity of Falaj Use in Northern Oman,” *International History Seminar on Irrigation and Drainage* (Tehran, May 2–5, 2007), 7, <https://ore.exeter.ac.uk/repository/bitstream/handle/10036/15174/Iran%202007.pdf>.
- <sup>9</sup> Tarek Majzoub, “Water Laws and Customary Water Arrangements,” in *Arab Environment: Water; Sustainable Management of a Scarce Resource*, ed. Mohamed El-Ashry, Najib Saab, and Bashar Zeitoun (Beirut: Arab Forum for Environment and Development: 2010), 139, <http://www.afedonline.org/en/reports/details/water>.
- <sup>10</sup> Jeremy Jones and Nicholas Ridout, *Oman, Culture and Diplomacy* (Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2012), 55.
- <sup>11</sup> Joseph A. Kechichian, “Oman: A Unique Foreign Policy Produces a Key Player in Middle Eastern and Global Diplomacy,” RAND Corporation, 1995, 1, [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_briefs/RB2501.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_briefs/RB2501.html).
- <sup>12</sup> Benjamin Barthe, “Oman Acts as a Discreet Architect of Peace in the Middle East,” *Le Monde in English*, July 13, 2023, [https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2023/07/13/oman-a-discreet-architect-of-peace-in-the-middle-east\\_6052064\\_4.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2023/07/13/oman-a-discreet-architect-of-peace-in-the-middle-east_6052064_4.html).
- <sup>13</sup> Barney Afako, *A Field of Dilemmas: Managing Transitional Justice in Peace Processes* (New York: United Nations, 2010), 15, <https://peacemaker.un.org/sites/peacemaker.un.org/files/SG-GuidanceNote-Brief-Field-Dilemmas-digital.pdf>.
- <sup>14</sup> Simon Thompson, “Parity of Esteem and the Politics of Recognition,” *Contemporary Political Theory* 1, no. 2 (2002): 203–20.
- <sup>15</sup> Johan Galtung, “Violence, Peace, and Peace Research,” *Journal of Peace Research* 6, no. 3 (1969): 167–91.
- <sup>16</sup> Ghubash, *Oman – The Islamic Democratic Tradition*, 202.
- <sup>17</sup> Katariina Simonen, *Ancient Water Agreements, Tribal Law and Ibadism: Sources of Inspiration for the Middle East Desalination Research Centre – and Beyond?* (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2021), 182, <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-85218-4>.
- <sup>18</sup> Simonen, *Ancient Water Agreements*; Chapters 6 and 7 provide a detailed background.
- <sup>19</sup> Avi Schlaim, “Prelude to the Accord: Likud, Labour and the Palestinians,” *Journal of Palestine Studies* 23, no. 2 (1994): 5–19, <https://users.ox.ac.uk/~ssfc0005/Prelude%20to%20the%20Accord%20Likud,%20Labour%20and%20the%20Palestinians.html>.
- <sup>20</sup> Abdel Monem Said Aly, Shai Feldman, and Khalil Shikaki, *Arabs and Israelis: Conflict and Peacemaking in the Middle East*, 2nd ed. (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022), 232.
- <sup>21</sup> Said Aly, Feldman, and Shikaki, *Arabs and Israelis*, 225.
- <sup>22</sup> The Oslo Accords, agreed between the PLO and Israel in 1993 and 1995 respectively, established a limited Palestinian self-governing entity within parts of the occupied territories, which became known as the Palestinian Authority. The premise of the Accords was that final status issues would be resolved within five years during which time the PLO would gain administrative experience and both sides would prove good faith. Though silent on the

core issues of borders, settlements, the right of return, and the status of Jerusalem, it held out the potential of ending Israeli rule over the Palestinians living in the West Bank and Jordan and to pave the way to a two-state solution.

<sup>23</sup> Etel Solingen, “The Multilateral Arab-Israeli Negotiations: Genesis, Institutionalization, Pause, Future,” *Journal of Peace Research* 37, no. 2 (March 2000): 170, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022343300037002004>.

<sup>24</sup> Solingen, “The Multilateral Arab-Israeli Negotiations,” 171.

<sup>25</sup> Jones and Ridout, *Oman, Culture and Diplomacy*, 243.

<sup>26</sup> Simonen, *Ancient Water Agreements*, 179.

<sup>27</sup> “Middle East Peace Process Multilateral Working Groups on Water Resources and the Environment, Amman, Jordan, June 22, 1995, Press Statement of the Gavelholders,” accessed March 14, 2024, <https://1997-2001.state.gov/regions/nea/ppmwg2.html>.

<sup>28</sup> Amnon Aran, *Israeli Foreign Policy since the End of the Cold War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 85.

<sup>29</sup> Aran, *Israeli Foreign Policy*, 163.

<sup>30</sup> “Press Statement of the Gavelholder, Middle East Peace Process Multilateral Working Group on Water Resources, Hammamet, Tunisia, May 16<sup>th</sup>, 1996,” accessed March 15, 2024, <https://1997-2001.state.gov/regions/nea/ppmwg1.html>.

<sup>31</sup> Mark Zeitoun, *Power and Water in the Middle East: The Hidden Politics of the Palestinian–Israeli Water Conflict* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2012), 63.

<sup>32</sup> Jan Selby, Gabrielle Daoust, and Clemens Hoffmann, *Divided Environments: An International Political Ecology of Climate Change, Water and Security* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 254–55.

<sup>33</sup> Jan Selby, “Joint Mismanagement: Reappraising the Oslo Water Regime,” in *Water Resources in the Middle East: Israel-Palestinian Water Issues – From Conflict to Cooperation*, ed. Hillel Shuval and Hassan Dweik (Cham: Switzerland: Springer, 2007), 4.

<sup>34</sup> Selby, Daoust, and Hoffman, *Divided Environments*, 254.

<sup>35</sup> MEDRC, “The MEDRC Conflict Resolution Model,” 2023, 1, <https://medrcstabilization.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/MEDRC-INTRO-PAMPHLET-6.pdf>.

<sup>36</sup> Dané Smith and Kirsten Winterman, “Models and Mandates in Transboundary Waters: Institutional Mechanisms in Water Diplomacy,” *Water* 14, no. 17 (August 2022): 2662, 4, <https://doi.org/10.3390/w14172662>.

<sup>37</sup> A detailed discussion on the MEDRC Model is in Smith and Winterman, “Models and Mandates in Transboundary Waters.”

<sup>38</sup> Marko Keskinen, Erik Salminen, and Juho Haapala, “Water Diplomacy Paths – An Approach to Recognise Water Diplomacy Actions in Shared Waters,” *Journal of Hydrology* 602 (November 2021): 126737, 3, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jhydrol.2021.126737>.

<sup>39</sup> MEDRC Member States are the United States, Oman, Japan, Korea, Qatar, Palestine, Israel, Jordan, Germany, the Netherlands, and Spain.

<sup>40</sup> Tobias Ide, “Environmental Peacebuilding,” *Capaz Working Papers* 2021, no. 1 (2021): 12, <https://usercontent.one/wp/www.instituto-capaz.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/DT-2-2021-Ingles-V3.pdf>.

<sup>41</sup> Alice Ackermann, “The Idea and Practice of Conflict Prevention,” *Journal of Peace Research* 40, no. 3 (May 2003): 344, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022343303040003006>.

<sup>42</sup> Smith and Winterman, “Models and Mandates in Transboundary Waters,” 15.

<sup>43</sup> Mark Zeitoun et al., “Transboundary Water Interaction III: Contest and Compliance,” *International Environmental Agreements: Politics, Law and Economics* 17, no. 2 (May 2016): 280, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10784-016-9325-x>.

<sup>44</sup> Alpaslan Özerdem and Roger Mac Ginty, “Conclusion: What Have We Learned,” in *Comparing Peace Processes*, ed. Alpaslan Özerdem and Roger Mac Ginty (London: Routledge, 2019), 344.

<sup>45</sup> Daniel Bar-Tal, *Intractable Conflicts: Socio-Psychological Foundations and Dynamics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 323.

<sup>46</sup> Krampe, Hegazi, and VanDeveer, “Sustaining Peace through Better Resource Governance,” 5.

<sup>47</sup> For a more detailed critique: Cedric de Coning, “Adaptive Peacebuilding,” *International Affairs* 94, no. 2 (February 2018): 301–17, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iix251>.

<sup>48</sup> Michael D. Cohen, James G. March, and Johan P. Olsen, “A Garbage Can Model of Organizational Choice,” *Administrative Science Quarterly* 17, no. 1 (1972): 1–25, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2392088>.

<sup>49</sup> Tom Woodhouse et al., eds., *The Contemporary Conflict Resolution Reader* (Cambridge: Polity, 2015), 376.

<sup>50</sup> Ide, “Environmental Peacebuilding,” 17.

<sup>51</sup> Woodhouse et al., *The Contemporary Conflict Resolution Reader*, 63.

<sup>52</sup> Mandy Turner, “Israel and the Palestinians,” in *Comparing Peace Processes*, ed. Alpaslan Özerdem and Roger Mac Ginty (London: Routledge, 2019), 250.

<sup>53</sup> De Coning, “Adaptive Peacebuilding,” 303.

<sup>54</sup> Tony Allan, *The Middle East Water Question* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012), 253.

<sup>55</sup> Clemens Messerschmid and Jan Selby, “Misrepresenting the Jordan River Basin,” *Water Alternatives* 8, no. 2 (2015): 274, <https://www.water-alternatives.org/index.php/alldoc/articles/vol8/v8issue2/290-a8-2-13/file>.

<sup>56</sup> Woodhouse et al., *The Contemporary Conflict Resolution Reader*, 379.

<sup>57</sup> Daniel Bar-Tal, *Intractable Conflicts*, 337.

<sup>58</sup> Colter Louwerse, “‘Tyranny of the Veto’: PLO Diplomacy and the January 1976 United Nations Security Council Resolution,” *Diplomacy & Statecraft* 33, no. 2 (April 2022): 303–29, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09592296.2022.2062127>.

<sup>59</sup> Bar-Tal, *Intractable Conflicts*, 336.