

Can India Mediate the Middle East Peace Process?

P.R. Kumaraswamy*

Various leaders and personalities from the Middle East have been asking India, at regular intervals, to play a pro-active role in the Middle East peace process. Given India's political, economic, energy, cultural and strategic interests, the Middle East is too important to be ignored. Yet, is there a role for India in the Middle East peace process? What are the impediments for India in playing such a role?

Calls for Mediation

Palestinian Foreign Minister Nabil Shaath came to India in August 2003, just days before the visit of Prime Minister Ariel Sharon to New Delhi. The Palestinian leader visualised a role for India to bring about peace between Israel and the Palestinians because India is “a global player”.¹

Leading a delegation to India for the third round of the India-Arab League bilateral dialogue in May 2007, a senior League official urged India to give momentum to the stalled peace process, and thereby strengthen the prospects of stability in the region. According to Heshem Youssef, “We want India to use its weight in the international community and its contacts with other countries to advance peace in the Middle East... The voice of India is listened to with respect in the world. We want the voice of India to advance the Arab cause”. Describing India as “an emerging power” he also expressed support for India's candidacy for the permanent membership of the UNSC.²

In an exclusive interview to *The Hindu* prior to his visit to India in June 2008, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad felt India should be involved in the peace process because,

... it has two aspects. You can play a direct role between the two sides, Syria and Israel, and the Palestinians and Israel. That will make the region more stable, and that will affect India itself in the long run

***The Author** is Professor at the Centre for West Asian Studies, School of International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. He is also the Honorary Director of Middle East Institute, New Delhi

and the world at large, especially Asia. Second, it's about the role you can play through your weight as India, a big country, in dialoguing with other powers — the U.S., Europe, your region — about how the Middle East can be made more stable.³

According to Assad, "India has the credibility because of its objective position". On the question of the emerging close ties between India and the US, the Syrian President observed, "India has strong relations with most of the world, including the US...If India wants to use these relations for ushering peace in West Asia, that will be positive". Thus, Assad felt that New Delhi should "convince" the US as well as Israel to have peace on top of their agenda.⁴

Similar sentiments were reiterated a couple of months later by President Mahmoud Abbas who told the Indian media, "India, the second largest populated nation in the world and the biggest democracy with a booming economy, including hi-tech, could play an important role in the Middle East peace process".⁵

Indeed, earlier in September 2005, during his meeting with the then External Affairs Minister Natwar Singh in New York, the Palestinian Foreign Minister Nasser al-Kidwa suggested the India's special envoy to the region should be renamed as special envoy to the peace process.⁶

Even Israel was not far behind in joining this chorus. Rejecting any possibility of negotiations with Hamas in the wake of its victory in January 2006, Israel's ambassador in New Delhi, David Danieli, observed, "India certainly can contribute by having a dialogue with Palestinians and with Israel. India maintains equally good relations with both. So the ears of both sides are certainly open to hear Indian views and advise".⁷

Similar sentiments have been expressed by a number of Indian scholars and practitioners as well. Months after his appointment as the special envoy to the region, Chinmaya Gharekhan remarked, "We have a huge stake in West Asia. Peace is the overriding necessity in the region and it will certainly make our job easier to play a more effective role in the region".⁸ On another occasion, he told a conference in Manama, "The appointment of a Special Envoy for the Middle East process is an indication of the importance that the Government of India attaches to it as well as of our readiness to be of whatever help that we can render to the two parties".⁹ Later, in an interview to an Arab daily, he said, naming a special envoy was "indicative of the interest and concern that we have for the region and its people. The idea behind appointing a special envoy is to share with the people and the governments of this region

the problems that we all face and to express our solidarity with its people and governments".¹⁰

Similar sentiments have often been expressed by the Indian intelligentsia.¹¹ Writing on the eve of the Annapolis conference in November 2007, Radha Kumar observed:

... there is considerable scope for Indian contribution, so long as our policymakers remain soberly and clearly aware that (1) India's role is in the fourth tier, after the parties, the US and close allies, and the regional states; (2) there remains a very real danger of the Palestinian issue being sidelined by, for example, an Israeli-Syrian peace agreement on the Golan Heights; and (3) the critical issues — Jerusalem, the borders of the Palestinian state, the return of refugees and common security — are no easier to resolve than they were earlier.

Therefore, she argued that India

... can offer quiet diplomacy to help in those tracks where change is possible, and that itself will be something of a balm for those suffering from too much public diplomacy, which is the case with all of West Asia. Second, we can offer support where it is needed or welcomed, for example to the Palestinian Authority and Palestinian civil society, in coordination with other countries. If this seems a small contribution, think again.¹²

While some even attributed India's invitation to Annapolis to Abbas,¹³ others found fault with the international community for India's exclusion from the Quartet.¹⁴

Not all expressions of interest in the region were direct. Speaking on the occasion of the International Day of Solidarity with the Palestinians on 29 November 2009, then Minister of State for External Affairs Shashi Tharoor was candid, "Although we do not play a role as such in the peace process as we have not been requested to do so, we have vital stakes in the process and in the West Asian region".¹⁵

However, many of these statements about India playing a role in the Middle East peace process are little more than diplomatic niceties. Gharekhan, who has also expressed the salience of potential Indian contribution to the peace process, recognised the ground realities. Speaking at a conference in November 2007, he remarked,

During my visits to the capitals in West Asia, my interlocutors have invariably been generous in speaking highly of the role that India can play in the region. When pressed, they are understandably less specific than one would like. Nevertheless, I am convinced that India, with its close ties with all the parties and countries including Israel as well as Iran, is well placed to offer its good offices in the search for a peaceful solution to the various crises in the region. Additionally, India is perhaps a unique country with a fully functioning democracy, a multi-religious, multi-ethnic and multi-lingual pluralist society, with an enviable record of all sections of society living in harmony and prosperity with one another. India thus could provide a model to the societies in West Asia. Indeed, this possible role of a model has been emphasized to me by leaders in responsible positions in my conversations with them. It is in this spirit that India will participate in the Annapolis conference next week.¹⁶

What Prevents India

If one excludes diplomatic niceties, one stark question comes to the fore: can India mediate the Middle East peace process? To put it differently, what prevents India from mediating the Arab-Israeli conflict? One could identify four broad factors that have prevented India from playing any meaningful role in the Middle East peace process.

Historical Context

Until the normalisation of relations in January 1992, for nearly four decades, India often cited absence of relations with Israel. It frequently depicted Israel as the aggressor in the conflict and took the lead role in a number of anti-Israeli measures in the UN and other international forums. Indeed, 'non-relations' became the pre-condition for furthering its interests in the Middle East.

Without recognising the non-secular nature of much of the Arab world, Indian leaders justified their policy through their 'principled' opposition to a religion-based state. National aspirations of the Kurds never figured in Indian discourses, official or academic. Indeed, since the days of Jawaharlal Nehru, the tenets of dialogue and coexistence among different nations and states, the hallmarks of India's foreign policy, were never applied to the Arab-Israeli conflict. Even if it did not embrace the extremist Arab demands such as the destruction of the Jewish state, its prolonged non-relations with Israel prevented India from playing any role in the resolution of the conflict. India's

conversion to the dialogue process began only after the Madrid conference where the Arabs, including the Palestinians, agreed to seek a political settlement through negotiations. Though it did not support a military solution, until 1992 a negotiated settlement was also not part of its agenda vis-à-vis the Middle East.

This negative historic baggage towards Israel is a major impediment for India to establish its credentials as a friendly power, which is a precondition for being a mediator. While economic, cultural and military ties with Israel have improved, political exchanges have been minimal. In over two decades, there have been only two high level state visits- one by President Ezer Weizman in December 1996 and the other by Prime Minister Ariel Sharon in September 2003. Besides, there have been four visits by Shimon Peres, including two as foreign minister, and one could add to this the Deve Gowda-Benjamin Netanyahu meeting during Davos Economic Summit in February 1997. These apart, there have been no meetings at the higher political echelons of both countries. In contrast, since the days of Indira Gandhi's second innings in the 1980s, every Indian prime minister has met and hosted Chairman Yasser Arafat and later, Mahmoud Abbas. Without high-level political contacts with Israel, it is difficult for India to be a meaningful mediator in the Arab-Israeli conflict.

1992 Normalisation and Thereafter

India's decision to normalise relations, in January 1992, with Israel was, perhaps, also directly linked to the Arab-Israeli peace negotiations. It came just two days before the commencement of the multilateral talks in Moscow on 31 January 1992. The absence of formal relations with all parties to the conflict after the Madrid Conference, in this case with Israel, would have prevented India from attending the Moscow talks to discuss and resolve wider issues such as arms control, water sharing and regional cooperation.

The 29 January 1992 announcement on normalisation of relations with Israel, came literally hours before Prime Minister Rao's visit to New York to attend the summit meeting of the United Nations Security Council. It was an indication that India wanted to be a part of the most important international political development since the end of the Cold War. Relations with all parties was a pre-requisite to its presence on the high diplomatic table, and thus normalisation of relations with Israel was called for.

It should also be remembered that it is neither possible nor necessary for every mediation effort to be successful. While the US was successful in the

Camp David negotiations between Israel and Egypt in 1978, it could not repeat the same outcome in 2000 when President Bill Clinton hosted Prime Minister Ehud Barak and Chairman Yasser Arafat. Likewise, since 2003, China has been leading the six-party talks on the Korean crisis. Despite numerous rounds of talks, negotiations and incentives, no solution is in the offing. Despite the limitations, China's relevance to the international community concerning North Korea has not diminished. On the other hand, distant and relatively small Norway has shown that size and political clout are not preconditions for pursuing successful mediation.

Following normalisation of relations, India has been more balanced in responding to periodic bouts of violence in the Middle East. In the past, its responses scarcely went beyond indicting Israel for the state of affairs. Following the Entebbe risqué mission, for example, it criticised Israel but was silent on the hijacking. Likewise, on 25 May 1967, it called Israel the "aggressor", more than ten days before the start of the June war. It has not only been less critical of Israel in the post-1992 period but also been more accommodative of its security concerns. Its refusal to join hands with the Arab and Islamic countries in their condemnation of Israel during the August 2001 Durban conference against racism is another example of its unwillingness to go back to the yesteryears of anti-Israeli rhetoric.

During the Second Lebanon war of 2006, India's initial response was balanced and measured. Within hours of the kidnapping of the two IDF soldiers from inside Israel by Hezbollah, India condemned the incident. Before long, however, this changed largely due to the groundswell Arab support for Hezbollah. The ability of the Lebanese militant group to resist the Israeli onslaught and its success in firing rockets deep into Israel meant that Hassan Nasrallah's popularity soared quickly. This forced Saudi Arabia, which had admonished the group for its "adventurism", to rally behind Hezbollah. This shift in the Middle East was reflected in the Indian parliament. On 31 July, the Lok Sabha unanimously adopted the following resolution:

This House unanimously expresses its deep concern over the growing tension in India's extended neighbourhood of West Asia that has exacerbated an already complex and delicate situation in the region. It unequivocally condemns the large-scale and indiscriminate Israeli bombing of Lebanon that has been under way for many days, which has resulted in the killing and suffering of large number of innocent civilians, including women and children, and caused widespread damage to civilian infrastructure in Lebanon. This House conveys the deepest condolences, sympathy and support of the people of

India to the people of Lebanon at this difficult time. The people of India are ready to make their contribution in providing humanitarian relief to the victims of this tragic conflict.

Deeply concerned over the escalation of this conflict, which affects India's security and other vital interests, this House calls for an immediate and unconditional ceasefire, so that further destruction of Lebanon is prevented, and urgently needed humanitarian assistance can reach the affected people. We urge all parties to the conflict to eschew violence and return to the path of dialogue. This House is of the firm view that lasting peace and security in the region, which is a matter of interest and concern not only to the countries of the region but to the whole world, can be achieved only through a negotiated and comprehensive solution to the problems of this region that takes into account the legitimate interests and grievances of all the parties concerned.¹⁷

A few days earlier, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh had told the House:

On July 12, India had condemned the abduction of two Israeli soldiers by the Hezbollah cadres and called for their immediate release. Simultaneously, we had condemned in the strongest possible terms the excessive and disproportionate military retaliation by Israel. We had particularly expressed concern that the actions of the Israeli Defence Forces had resulted in the killing and suffering of innocent civilians, including women and children, that is likely to exacerbate an already tense situation. We also condemn the attacks that led to the deaths of 4 UN Observers in Lebanon.¹⁸

These responses were followed by UN Security Council Resolution 1701 when India refused to engage with Israel, while trying to shore up support for the UN-mediated ceasefire.¹⁹

Appointment of a Special Envoy

On 3 February 2005, the Ministry of External Affairs issued a statement announcing the appointment of Gharekhan as "Special Envoy for West Asia and the Middle East Peace Process".²⁰ It is essential to recognise that Gharekhan was serving as India's Ambassador to the UN when normalisation of relations with Israel took place in January 1992. Gradually, his designation underwent a change and the ministry began identifying him as 'Prime Minister's special envoy' to the region without explaining the context of the new nomenclature. No timeframe was announced, but at least since January 2010, the Indian

media began identifying him as “former special envoy”.²¹ Hence, it appears that his appointment lapsed when the tenure of the UPA I government ended in May 2009.

Notwithstanding the alterations in his official position leading to the eventual lapse of that role, it was Gharekhan himself, and not the government, who explained the reasons for this appointment in the first place. He observed in early 2005, “A few months ago Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh stated that Middle East, or West Asia to give the region its proper geographical description, had become the region of concern to India, and not just one of the regions. This is the reason why the Prime Minister decided to appoint a Special Envoy for the region, the first time ever that any Government in India has taken such a step”.²²

It is essential to examine the context of the creation of this new position. The appointment came a few months after the UPA came to power. The Congress-led coalition was under pressure from the Left parties that wanted “a course-correction” in India’s Israel policy.²³ The Left parties argued that under the previous BJP-led NDA government, India was dangerously close to Israel. Some attributed this apparent affinity between Israel and India during the NDA regime to the relative commonalities between the BJP’s Hindutva agenda and the nationalist sentiments of the Likud in Israel.²⁴ This line of argument was also vigorously pursued by the Indian communists and by the Leftist elements within the Congress.

Second, Arafat, who personified the Palestinian cause, had died the previous November and this had left a leadership void among the Palestinians. Here, it would stand in good stead to recollect that India’s recognition of the PLO in September 1975 was followed by Prime Minister Mrs. Indira Gandhi bestowing diplomatic status to its New Delhi mission in early 1980. Indeed, this was one of the first diplomatic moves initiated by her following her landslide victory in the December 1979 Lok Sabha elections. Since then, Arafat had been frequenting India and Indian leaders had been meeting him in the third countries, especially during the summit meetings of the Non-Aligned Movement. His demise brought to a close the historic and personal friendship that many Indian leaders shared with Arafat.

Moreover, even though it was novel to New Delhi, India was not the first country to name a special envoy to the region. Various American presidents have been naming special envoys to the region for a long time. Following the Madrid conference, the Middle East peace process appeared to be exclusively under American influence. Once it began to falter, other powers started naming

special envoys. In September 2002, amidst the al Aqsa intifada, China named Wang Shijie as its first special envoy to the Middle East; he was succeeded by Sun Bigan in March 2006 and by Wu Sike in March 2009. In June 2002, Russian Foreign Minister appointed Andrei Vdovin as his special envoy to the Middle East. Slowly, Russia began the practice of naming its deputy foreign minister as its special envoy of the President to the Middle East. Similar moves have been taken by the four-member Quartet, which appointed former President of the World Bank James Wolfensohn in April 2005, who was succeeded by former British Prime Minister Tony Blair in June 2007.

There is one fundamental difference between these examples and that of India. If it was serious about the role of the special envoy, the government could have either extended Gharekhan's tenure or appointed a successor. It did neither and allowed the position to lapse.

The Jerusalem Issue

Speaking about the Jerusalem issue, former special envoy Gharekhan recognised the complexity of the problem. Speaking at a conference in November 2007 he observed:

Jerusalem is yet another emotional and complex issue. It has an added complicating factor, in that Jerusalem has enormous significance for followers of three major religions. The Palestinian leadership, in particular, has to take into account the feelings of the Muslim community throughout the world. Highly creative minds on both sides have worked for the last two decades to find a solution. Any solution to the question of Jerusalem will not satisfy all the peoples on both sides. It will need courage and statesmanship for the leaders on the two sides to try and reach an agreement on all these questions. So long as the eventual agreement is broadly acceptable to the public opinion, in Israel as also in Palestine, I am confident that such courage and determination will be forthcoming.²⁵

Of late India has been vocal regarding Jerusalem. Speaking on the occasion of the International Day of Solidarity with the Palestinians in 2009, Shashi Tharoor observed,

... a just and comprehensive solution can be achieved resulting in a sovereign, independent, viable and united State of Palestine living within secure and recognized borders with East Jerusalem as its Capital, side by side and at peace with the State of Israel, as endorsed in the Quartet Road Map and the United Nations Security Council

Resolutions 1397 & 1515.²⁶

This formulation has been repeated by other Indian leaders. Unfortunately for India, however, neither the Quartet Road Map²⁷ nor the UNSC resolutions²⁸ describe East Jerusalem as the capital of the Palestinian state.

In such a complex situation, any solution would have to be based on a political compromise between the Israelis and the Palestinians, and between the Jews and the Muslims. It should be left to the parties to reach a compromise. Any other position in support of one of the two parties would amount to pre-judging the outcome and would eliminate the prospect of the country becoming a mediator. Retracting its stand that east Jerusalem should be the capital of the future Palestinian state would be unwise. India should settle for a more nuanced stance that endorses “a negotiated settlement to resolve all aspects of the conflict”.

What Can India Do?

The Federal Plan devised by India in 1947 and its fate in the UN in November 1947 offer an excellent lesson for India. Prime Minister Nehru outlined the federal idea within days after the sub-continent was divided along communal lines. That was a futile exercise. The Arabs rejected it because it gave too much autonomy to the Jews and the latter rejected it because it gave them civil and religious rights while they were demanding political rights and sovereignty. Indeed, rejecting the India-sponsored Federal Plan was the only issue on which the Arabs and the Jews agreed in 1947.

The Federal Plan for Palestine was no better than the unitary plan suggested by Mahatma Gandhi for India on the eve of the British withdrawal from the sub-continent. The partition was an unpleasant necessity for British India and the same holds true for Mandate Palestine. Anyone suggesting Arab-Jewish peaceful coexistence within a single political entity does not understand Middle Eastern history and the contours of ‘co-existence’ among different religious and national groups. Indeed, inclusive national identity has been alien to all the post-Ottoman states of the Middle East, including Turkey. Partition was an unpleasant necessity for the Indian sub-continent as well as Mandate Palestine. The Federal plan was akin to suggesting the restoration of the Ottoman Empire because the post-Ottoman states failed in their nation-building process as manifested by the Arab Spring. Thus, as Nehru lamented before the Constituent Assembly, even the Arabs rejected it.

This implies that India has to be realistic, not only of its strengths and

weaknesses, but also of the political viability of its suggestions. Such dispassionate realism is a pre-condition for any meaningful role for India in the Middle East peace process.

Notes

- ¹ Palestine for Indian Role in Peace Efforts; *Tribune*, 1 September 2003, <http://www.tribuneindia.com/2003/20030901/nation.htm#1>, accessed on 5 September 2013.
- ² “Arab League Urges India to Push West Asia Peace Process”, *KUNA*, 10 May 2007, <http://www.kuna.net.kw/ArticleDetails.aspx?id=1742908&language=en>, accessed on 5 September 2013.
- ³ President Bashar al-Assad’s Interview to Siddharth Varadarajan, *The Hindu* (Chennai), 12 June 2008, <http://www.hindu.com/2008/06/12/stories/2008061253671100.htm>, accessed on 5 September 2013.
- ⁴ ‘India can Play Role in West Asia Peace Process’, *Business Standard*, 19 June 2008, http://www.business-standard.com/article/economy-policy/-india-can-play-role-in-west-asia-peace-process-108061900056_1.html, accessed on 5 September 2013.
- ⁵ “India should Play a Role in Middle East Peace Process”, *Indian Express* (New Delhi), 6 October 2008, <http://www.indianexpress.com/news/india-should-play-a-role-in-middle-east-peace-process/369950/> accessed on 5 September 2013.
- ⁶ ‘India Ready to Play Bigger Role in West Asia’, *The Hindustan Times*, 29 September 2005, <http://www.hindustantimes.com/News-Feed/NM4/India-ready-to-play-bigger-role-in-West-Asia/Article1-36104.aspx>, accessed on 5 September 2013. From the very beginning however, Gharekhan was designated as a special envoy both to the region and the peace process.
- ⁷ “India can ‘Contribute’ to West Asia Peace Process: Israel”, *DNA*, 9 February 2006, <http://www.dnaindia.com/world/1012125/report-india-can-contribute-to-west-asia-peace-process-israel>, accessed on 5 September 2013.
- ⁸ ‘India Ready to Play Bigger Role in West Asia’, *The Hindustan Times*, 29 September 2005, <http://www.hindustantimes.com/News-Feed/NM4/India-ready-to-play-bigger-role-in-West-Asia/Article1-36104.aspx>, accessed on 5 September 2013.
- ⁹ India, MEA, Speech by Ambassador Chinmaya R. Gharekhan, India’s Special Envoy for West Asia, on Regional Security and International Cooperation, at 2nd IISS Regional Security Summit held in Bahrain, December 04, 2005, <http://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/2883/Speech+by+Ambassador+Chinmaya+R+Gharekhan+Indias+Special+Envoy+for+West+Asia+on+Regional+Security+and+International+Cooperation+at+2nd+IISS+Regional+Security+Summit+held+in+Bahrain>, accessed on 5 September 2013.
- ¹⁰ Siraj Wahab, ‘Don’t Give up Hope on Palestine: Gharekhan’, *Arab News*, 10 September 2007, http://www.arabnews.com/node/303162?quicktabs_stat2=0, accessed on 5 September 2013.

- ¹¹ Without directly referring to the Middle East peace process Umma Salma Bava visualises a role for India in the Middle East. See, 'India's role in the emerging world order', *FES Briefing Paper*, No. 4, March 2007, <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/iez/global/04372.pdf>, accessed on 5 September 2013.
- ¹² Radha Kumar, "India Can offer Quiet Diplomacy", *The Economic Times*, 30 November 2007, <http://economictimes.indiatimes.com/opinion/indias-role-in-west-asia-peace-process/articleshow/2583428.cms> accessed on 5 September 2013.
- ¹³ Saeed Naqvi, "This May be its Moment of Re-involvement", *The Economic Times*, 30 November 2007, <http://economictimes.indiatimes.com/opinion/indias-role-in-west-asia-peace-process/articleshow/2583428.cms?curpg=2>, accessed on 5 September 2013.
- ¹⁴ A. K. Pasha, "New Directions in India's Role in West Asia and the Gulf", *International Studies*, vol. 47, nos.2-4, 2010, p. 335.
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- ¹⁷ India, Ministry of External Affairs, Resolution Adopted by Lok Sabha (Lower House of Indian Parliament) on 31st July on Situation in West Asia, 31 July 2006, <http://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/4146/Resolution+Adopted+by+Lok+Sabha+Lower+House+of+Indian+Parliament+on+31st+July+on+Situation+in+West+Asia>, accessed on 3 September 2013.
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- ²¹ Karl F. Inderfurth and Chinmaya R. Gharekhan, “Afghanistan needs a surge of diplomacy”, *The New York Times*, 20 January 2010, http://www.nytimes.com/2010/01/21/opinion/21ihtedinderfurth.html?scp=1&sq=karl%20inderfurth&st=cse&_r=0 .
- ²² Speech by Ambassador C.R. Gharekhan, Special Envoy of India for West Asia and Middle East Peace Process at the Conference, November 15, 2005, <http://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/2700/Speech+by+Ambassador+CR+Gharekhan+Special+Envoy+of+India+for+West+Asia+and+Middle+East+Peace+Process+at+the+Conference>, accessed on 5 September 2013. Interestingly the MEA did not identify Netanyahu north of Tel Aviv as the venue of this conference.
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- ²⁸ For the text of UNSC Resolution 1397 see <http://daccess-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N02/283/59/PDF/N0228359.pdf?OpenElement>, accessed on 14 September 2013 and for Resolution 1515 see, <http://daccess-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N03/621/85/PDF/N0362185.pdf?OpenElement>, accessed on 14 September 2013.

