

The EU's Muddled Involvement in Mideast Affairs

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Brief Analysis

If the Europeans continue to act independently of local actors' wishes, they could further complicate matters in a region already beset by daunting challenges.

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The recent French initiative to resume Israeli-Palestinian peace negotiations met with controversy and only limited interest from either involved party. And two months after the June 3 conference in Paris held between the Quartet, Turkey, and Arab countries, it is clear that the initiative's decision to exclude officials from Israel or the PA from the talks did nothing to resuscitate negotiations.

The office of Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu insisted that "Israel adheres to its position that the best way to resolve the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians is through direct, bilateral negotiations," adding that "Israel is ready to start immediately without any preconditions."

The Palestinian side also failed to support the deal unequivocally. While the Palestinian Authority (PA) supported the deal, Hamas rejected it. For the PA, a deal represented potential gains and a welcome distraction from domestic woes. Hamas argued that "the French initiative is detrimental to the Palestinian people and its national interests" and that the initiative was attempting to revive failed negotiations.

Nevertheless, the conference's participants have declared that they will call for an international conference between Israelis and Palestinians before year-end, a move largely supported by European Union (EU) foreign ministers during their last meeting in Luxembourg. Both Israeli president Reuven Rivlin and Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas were invited separately to the EU capital of Brussels to hold meetings with European officials and give speeches before the European parliament.

Both visits highlighted how directly the EU has involved itself with the Middle East through the French initiative and other plans, such as the JCPOA. However, the visits also highlighted how European views of the region have strayed

from the Middle East's own concerns, with potentially damaging consequences. In his June 22 speech to the European Parliament, Rivlin warned that "the French peace initiative will inevitably fail and will lead to a deepening despair among Israelis and Palestinians." Rivlin expressed his concern about the growing criticism of Israel in the European parliament, saying that it stemmed from a lack of tolerance and understanding of Israel's situation. He added that "there is a sense that EU criticism lacks objectivity and integrity."

Abbas positioned the peace process in the context of the international fight against terrorism, claiming that "terrorism all over the world would be eradicated if Israel withdrew from the West Bank and East Jerusalem." This seemed an attempt to leverage the state of fear prevailing in Europe due to recent terrorist attacks, but again highlights the primacy that other concerns have achieved in the Middle East -- a fear of growing instability that trumps states' former focus on the peace process.

Abbas's claim touches on a challenging reality of Europe's position in both the peace process and in its relations with the Middle East. The primary driver of terrorism is not Israel's presence in the West Bank and East Jerusalem as Abbas has claimed, despite terrorist groups' common use of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as a pretext for their actions. Instead, the boiling sectarian conflicts and past mistakes of the Europeans during the colonial period, in particular the Sykes-Picot Agreement, are much greater historical drivers of the current international role of terrorism.

Europe has continued to indirectly decrease the stability of the region. By helping draft and through supporting the P5+1 nuclear deal with Iran, Europe has strengthened the latter's influence in the region and caused an escalation of various sectarian conflicts. By supporting a move that ostensibly appears geared towards rapprochement, European governments have increased both current and imagined threats that motivate Arab actors to respond and provide fodder for extremism. This in turn will only increase Europe's exposure to the psychological and physical chaos that international terrorism has brought into previously unaffected North American and European communities.

European leaders must take a good look at the region and reconsider regional countries' priorities to avert disastrous consequences for the EU. Moreover, the EU faces its own structural issues; the recent withdrawal of the UK and increased interest of other nationalist parties to follow suit suggests a disconcerting and cloudy future for the EU. This interest in decentralization will only increase as EU policies prove increasingly inefficient and incapable of dealing with Europe's recent immigration crisis resulting from the war in Syria and regional sectarian conflicts.

Europe and its leaders also need to understand when outside efforts will and will not create positive change. In particular, the EU should understand that despite its increased interest in the peace process, the Palestinian cause is no longer at the forefront of the regional agenda, due to the much greater existential threats facing Arab countries, from Iran to ISIS. While Arab officials have not yet publicly advocated for normalization with Israel, General Anwar Eshki's visit to Israel is only the latest in a series of implicit acknowledgements of the importance of strategic cooperation with Israel. This shift has come without any progress on the peace process, and appears primed to proceed regardless of what occurs with the peace process in the future.

Israel has also confirmed Director General of the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Dore Gold, in his speech at the annual Herzliya Conference. Gold noted the deepening relations between Israel and several Arab countries, which he refrained from naming due to Arab public sensitivities about normalization, confirmed through his meetings with several Arab officials without official ties to Israel. He also spelled out that for both Israel and most of the Arab World, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is low on the agenda when compared to the region's abundance of terrorist attacks, civil wars, sectarian violence, and toppled governments.

Given these regional realities, the EU should attempt to listen to those in the region, rather than attempt to set the agenda in a way that only echoes its member states' past as colonialist powers. If the EU continues to act

independently of the wishes of regional actors, it could complicate things further in a region with already extremely complex challenges, leaving the EU itself exposed to the chaos that fills any vacuum.

Ramy Aziz is an Egyptian journalist based in Europe. This article was originally published on [the Fikra website](http://fikraforum.org/?p=9989&lang=en#.V6hcMvkrLIV) (<http://fikraforum.org/?p=9989&lang=en#.V6hcMvkrLIV>). ❖

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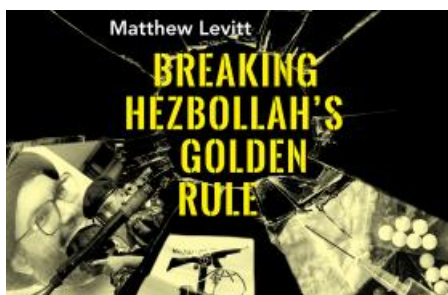
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