

# Activism in the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict: Clouds and Wind, but No Rain?

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Brief Analysis

**The recent flurry of international and regional activism may ultimately result in parameters and UN resolutions that dictate the agenda for the next U.S. administration, so Washington and other actors should weigh each initiative carefully.**

**W**ithin days, the principals of the Middle East Quartet (the UN, the United States, the EU, and Russia) are expected to release a report on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that includes recommendations on "the best way to advance the two-state solution." Together with the June 3 Paris peace conference, this effort shows that while the conflict has been marginalized amid dramatic regional upheaval, it is not off the international agenda. Recent months have seen a surge in the number of actual and contemplated initiatives relating to the conflict, and this burst could ultimately dictate the peacemaking agenda for the next U.S. administration. In addition to the French effort and the Quartet report, there has been talk of a potential Arab initiative under Egypt's sponsorship. Moreover, the Palestinians, the United States, or other actors may push later this year for a UN Security Council resolution (UNSCR) on issues such as settlements, parameters for resolving the core issues, or recognition of Palestinian statehood.

## THE QUARTET REPORT

**T**he Quartet first announced that it would prepare a report on the conflict in February, and from what is known so far, most of the document will likely deal with developments on the ground that are hindering a two-state solution. While this will include mention of Palestinian political divisions, incitement, and terrorist attacks, most of the onus will probably be on Israel, being the stronger party. In this context, the report is expected to concentrate on Area C, the roughly 60 percent portion of the West Bank that is under full Israeli control -- the Quartet will likely

criticize Israeli settlement activities and house demolitions there, arguing that they erode the potential for a two-state solution embodied in Area C. Israel contends that this potential still exists, and that there is no deliberate policy on the ground designed to close the two-state window.

In her June 6 speech before the UN, European Union High Representative Federica Mogherini defined the report's main goal as rebuilding the confidence and conditions necessary to return to meaningful negotiations. It remains to be seen what those recommendations will be, and in what form the report will be adopted by the UN, as is widely expected.

## THE FRENCH INITIATIVE

The stated goal of the French effort, launched early this year, is to salvage the two-state solution and revive the peace process by providing an international envelope to the parties. The June 3 gathering served as a preparatory conference at the foreign minister level -- twenty-eight countries attended, along with the UN secretary-general and EU high representative, but the Israelis and Palestinians were deliberately excluded. It concluded with a brief, general statement lacking meaningful substance.

France intends to convene a broader conference before year's end, this time inviting the parties themselves. Until then, working groups will develop recommendations on immediate measures to preserve the two-state solution, as well as economic incentives and regional security assurances.

While the substance and specific goals of this initiative remain publicly elusive, its ultimate aim is to formulate international parameters for resolving the conflict's core issues, which will serve as a basis for future negotiations between the parties. The French disclosed their intentions to Israeli and Palestinian leaders and stipulated them in the "non-paper" distributed to participants ahead of the Paris conference.

As the French government strives to assert itself diplomatically and boost its international standing, it seems driven by two main impulses: to fill the void created by Washington's weakened role in the region, and to sway domestic constituencies ahead of the 2017 French national elections. Conceptually, its efforts are informed by the classic, misguided view that resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is essential to regional stability, and by the notion that a broad international coalition will enable a resolution that the parties have been unable to reach on their own -- an idea seemingly born of the recent P5+1 effort to secure a nuclear agreement with Iran.

For their part, Israelis and Palestinians have shown diametrically opposed attitudes toward the initiative. Israelis reject it as an unwarranted external dictate that will give the Palestinians a means of evading direct negotiations. They also believe that any international consensus will represent an imbalanced position that disregards core Israeli concerns. As proof of such bias, Jerusalem cites the failed French draft UNSCR of December 2014, which defined parameters for a solution along Palestinian lines, as well as the French yeas vote on the April UNESCO resolution ignoring historic Jewish ties to the Temple Mount area, for which Paris later apologized. Israelis also strongly suspect that France has a hidden agenda of securing formal recognition of a Palestinian state, as disclosed in January by then-foreign minister Laurent Fabius and later retracted. More recently, the French non-paper insisted that future negotiations will be based on clear timetables, which struck Israelis as a cover for such recognition, assuming the parties are unlikely to meet these timetables.

In contrast, the Palestinians strongly endorse the initiative, which is in line with their current strategy of internationalizing their cause. They are determined to get the international community to deliver what they could

not extricate from Israel themselves, whether directly or through the United States. They prefer a broad, European-led coalition in which Washington's role is minimized, in contrast to the traditionally dominant, often exclusive U.S. role. They have therefore worked hard to ensure wide international participation in the French initiative.

Yet there has been little enthusiasm for the initiative in the United States, Europe, or the Middle East. Secretary of State John Kerry accepted the invitation to the conference with reluctance, and his counterparts in Russia, Germany, and Britain did not attend. The international community is preoccupied with more pressing matters, and many regard France as unsuitable to play the leading role in this sensitive issue. Nevertheless, the initiative seems to be gaining momentum; on June 20, the EU foreign ministers endorsed it and decided to partake in preparing incentive packages for the parties. Indeed, many international actors are concerned about the continuing viability of a two-state solution and see no better alternative at this phase. Ultimately, the initiative's fate will be decided in Washington.

## **THE BIG PRIZE: A SECURITY COUNCIL RESOLUTION**

**A**pparently, France's ultimate goal is to upgrade its planned peace parameters through a UNSCR. Yet there is tension between this goal and President Obama's desire to leave behind his own legacy parameters for resolving the conflict's core issues, through either a speech or a UNSCR. From that perspective, Kerry's participation in the Paris conference did not signify active support for the initiative so much as a desire to make sure it does not stand in the way of potential U.S. moves in the administration's final months. Even so, French and U.S. goals may still converge at some point.

In the meantime, the Palestinians have prepared a draft UNSCR banning Israeli settlements, and they hope to persuade the Obama administration not to veto it. They agreed to postpone their move so as to give the French initiative a chance, but they will likely renew the UN push later this year.

## **A REGIONAL INITIATIVE?**

**W**hile there is no updated Arab Peace Initiative on the table, there is much talk in the region about an Egyptian-sponsored regional peace effort with Israeli participation. President Abdul Fattah al-Sisi alluded to the possibility in an exceptional speech on May 17, calling on Israelis and Palestinians to seize the existing opportunity by unifying domestically and prioritizing progress toward peace. He also vowed to support the parties in such efforts. Israeli prime minister Binyamin Netanyahu quickly welcomed the speech and offered his own positive (albeit conditional) response to the Arab Peace Initiative first proposed by Saudi Arabia in 2002.

In Israeli public discourse, talk of a regional peace initiative has become fashionable and resonant -- a function of growing doubts about achieving a bilateral breakthrough, disappointment with the Obama administration's regional policies, and important converging interests with major Arab actors. Arab steps toward normalization have become more meaningful to Israelis than anything they would expect from the Palestinians, allowing Israeli officials to present a paradigm shift: instead of obtaining Arab-Israeli normalization through Israeli-Palestinian peace, they could try to provide space and cover for peacemaking with the Palestinians through convergence with Arab states.

Lacking a political initiative of its own and facing international initiatives it dislikes, Israel sees an Egyptian-sponsored regional effort as a welcome opportunity. Yet Cairo and its Arab partners will not put their credibility on the line or test their sensitive domestic constituencies unless they are convinced the parties are ready to invest in the process and seriously delve into the substantive issues. In their eyes, this includes the formation of a broader, more centrist coalition in Israel. Yet the chances of such a government emerging in the foreseeable future are anybody's

guess.

## CONCLUSION

Is the recent burst of peace activism much ado about nothing? The answer lies primarily in the Middle East and Washington. If circumstances ripen for a regional initiative, it would likely marginalize all other efforts, creating significant reason for Washington and others to invest in it. On another level, the U.S. decision on whether to sponsor or veto a UNSCR will have a decisive impact on which initiative moves forward. Thus, it would be wise to carefully consider whether the initiatives in question can produce a balanced and broadly supported outcome that would be of future benefit to Israelis and Palestinians alike.

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