



## **The Paris Initiative and US Middle East Policy: Paving the Way for the 4<sup>th</sup> Intifada? Why justice is the only roadmap to peace**

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In the middle of the US presidential election season, France has elected to take the opportunity and break the US monopoly over the Middle East peace process, calling for an international summit on the two-state solution and a final UN resolution on the matter. Meanwhile, the Obama Administration is increasingly critical of Israeli settlement activity and is reported to push for a UN resolution, amid reports of an upcoming international document to be released by the Middle East Quartet in late May or June expressing harsh criticism of Israeli settlement policy. What exactly are the parameters of the French initiative, what is the US position, and what are its likely outcomes and repercussions on the ground?

### **The Paris Initiative**

In an attempt to revive the Palestinian-Israeli talks and recover whatever is left of the so-called “peace process,” France has proposed a new initiative to hold a conference on the two-state solution. The French proposal, which started circulating since 2015, was publicly presented by Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius in January 2016, and later adopted by the new French Foreign Minister Jean-Marc Ayrault. The French plan involves a three-step approach, starting with consultations with Palestinians and Israelis, followed by a preparatory meeting in Paris on May 30 involving the Middle East Quartet (UN, US, EU, and Russia), the Arab League, and 20 foreign ministers, to discuss the parameters of the peace deal. This meeting is planned to set the stage for an international peace conference to take place at the end of the summer.

The Paris initiative follows a series of failures of US-led talks and comes at a time when there is a policy vacuum presented by the US presidential elections season. Moreover, the initiative comes after a surge in violence in the West Bank and East Jerusalem over the past seven months. The primary motive behind the French move is to contain the violence and prevent a full-blown widespread intifada and another war in Gaza, while taking advantage of the US policy gap.

As outlined by French Ambassador to the UN Francois Delattre, the Paris initiative is committed to the two-state solution. The confidential French [draft resolution](#) outlines a plan for achieving a “just, lasting and comprehensive peaceful solution that fulfills the vision of two independent, democratic and prosperous states” based on the 1967 borders with “mutually agreed limited equivalent land swaps.” The proposal also includes a provision for an “agreed, just, fair, and realistic solution to the refugee question, including a viable mechanism to provide for repatriation, resettlement, compensation and other agreed measures for a conclusive resolution,” while Jerusalem is envisioned as “the shared capital of the two States.” The draft resolution also hints at an “agreed settlement of other outstanding issues,



including water.”

While Israel is unlikely to agree on any provisions regarding the illegal Israeli settlements, Jerusalem, and the Palestinian refugees, Israeli opposition to the French proposal claims that it involves no Palestinian concessions and that peace is only achieved through direct bilateral negotiations with the Palestinians. This bilateral arrangement, between two parties of unequal power as the occupier and the occupied, essentially eliminates any process of accountability for Israel to commit to any international agreements, UN resolutions, and human rights laws. Palestinian officials, on the other hand, have welcomed this initiative as they seek international support and wish to bring the Palestinian issue back on the global agenda. The proposed international conference would realize the internationalization strategy adopted by the Palestinian Authority (PA) to remedy unequal power dynamics in bilateral processes. Hamas, however, rejected the proposal calling it “a waste of time.”

The Palestinian public, in contrast to the Palestinian Authority, have shown little interest in yet another initiative that will not be enforced. In fact, 60% of Palestinians expressed opposition to the French proposal in a [poll](#) in late 2015. The items of serious concern include the provision for an unarmed Palestinian state alongside a fully armed and militarized Israeli state. The proposal also conveniently omits any discussion of Israeli control of the airspace and Israeli insistence on maintaining troops in the Jordan Valley in the West Bank, which are likely intentionally overlooked in order to cover Israeli security concerns. In addition, Israel and the US insist on the need to recognize Israel as a “Jewish State” in any resolution, thus officially legitimizing Israel’s ethnocentric policies (such as the 80 Israeli laws discriminating against Palestinian citizens of Israel) and the relegation of 20% of its non-Jewish Palestinian population to second-class citizen status. Regarding the Palestinian refugees, land swaps, and other pressing matters like water and control over borders, the draft proposal is too vague to ensure Palestinian rights. In addition, the French proposal does not uphold UN Security Council resolutions such as Resolution 194, which was adopted in December 1948 and resolved that Palestinian refugees should have the right to choose whether to return to their homes or receive compensation.

France has not yet secured support from major European allies, such as Germany and Britain, due to fear that the US and Israel will not accept the resolution. However, Paris is determined to move forward with the resolution and outlines a 24-month period to attain a solution after the adoption of the resolution by the UN Security Council. Fulfilling the first step of the plan, French Foreign Minister Ayrault met with Palestinian and Israeli officials on Sunday May 15, and said that Israeli opposition will not weaken French efforts and that the international conference will take place in the summer as planned.

### **US Position and the Upcoming International Report**

In March 2016, US Vice President Joe Biden returned from meetings with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas discouraged about the prospects for peace. More recently, Biden expressed “overwhelming frustration” with Israel, stating that “they are moving in the wrong direction,” while he maintained that the US remains committed to Israel’s security. Reports in recent months have established that President Barack Obama will not leave the White House



with a failure in the Middle East peace process. While the Obama Administration has been reportedly considering a push for a UN resolution endorsing a two-state solution during Obama's last months in office, others speculate that the presidential elections are likely to take the focus away from the Palestinian-Israeli issue. President Obama may be content with a UN resolution dedicated to the specific issue of the Israeli settlements.

A report is expected to be released in the next month by the Middle East Quartet (US, UN, EU, and Russia) outlining the obstacles to peace. The report is said to criticize Israeli settlement construction as well as Palestinian incitement and violence against Israeli citizens. Similar reports have been issued in the period since the Quartet was created in 2002 without any call to action, however the upcoming report is anticipated to include record criticisms of Israeli settlement policy as a serious and primary obstacle to a peace agreement.

With regard to the French proposal, the US administration has reportedly not asked Paris to refrain from pursuing the initiative and has been informally advising France over the resolution, although Washington and Paris are yet to engage in official talks over the plan. Amid reports of the Obama Administration seeking to create a legacy in Middle East peace in its remaining few months, the Paris initiative provides the administration the opportunity to set a viable framework for the next administration. While some argue that the Paris initiative marks the end of American monopoly over the peace process, it is premature to predict any success of the French proposal.

The seriousness of the Paris proposal is still unclear, but information has emerged that Washington is discreetly supporting the initiative. Moreover, Fabius has initially threatened to officially recognize Palestine if faced with Israeli rejection, although Paris has retracted this statement following the official Israeli reactions. France has not yet managed to garner international momentum to make the summer conference happen. Therefore, although the US is a biased party on this issues and has failed for decades to achieve any viable solution, US involvement remains essential for the progress of this plan - at least for now. With regard to future considerations, the French initiative marks the beginning of a move towards internationalization, neutrality, and credibility of mediation. In fact, a recent 2016 [poll](#) shows that a large percentage of Palestinians prefer EU mediation (22.5%), Egyptian (19.2%), the Quarter (16.3%), and UN (17.9%), over US mediation (4.9%). In this context, hopes are on the rise that international efforts could model after the Iranian deal and succeed in reaching a settlement.

Nonetheless, while France and the PA are moving in full force, they must acknowledge that this wishful thinking cannot materialize without US support. The US, after all, is a major invested player that can obstruct such a proposal and block a UN resolution on the matter. The French proposal in itself is perceived to come out of good intentions (in the form of international effort) and a progressive design (compared to previous proposals), but does not recognize nor incorporate the importance of US involvement. Some suggest testing the international waters with a UN resolution on the Israeli settlements. Overall, this bold move might change the rules of the game including the end of US monopoly, introducing France as a key player, and transforming the peace talks into a collective process, however the upcoming Paris Summit on May 30<sup>th</sup> (which is still planned despite Netanyahu's



opposition) will determine whether the French initiative can survive.

### **The Palestinian Reality**

Most international efforts and official discussions of the peace process over the past two-decades have disproportionately focused on two issues: the Israeli settlements and Palestinian violence.

The US administration and European nations regularly criticize the PA for failing to stop what they call “anti-Israel violence,” while ignoring the context and the continuous Israeli violations of international law and human rights that lead to Palestinian violence. Placing the responsibility of violence on the Palestinian Authority is unproductive, and expecting that another peace initiative without real change can contain the violence is misguided. Moreover, highlighting Palestinian violence as “terrorism” while overlooking Israeli army violence and war crimes as “self-defense” and ignoring ongoing settler extremist violence, all contribute to the perception of “double standards” that have characterized international responses for decades.

In 25 years of summits, peace initiatives, and renewed talks, Palestinian youth remain trapped under siege, unemployment and poverty, and have limited access to basic human rights and resources. Ignoring the ongoing apartheid system and 68 years of ethnic cleansing will only exacerbate the situation on the ground. Even the Israeli military’s deputy chief of staff, Maj. Gen. Yair Golan, has warned that Israel is showing signs reminiscent of policies and behaviors of Nazi Germany. When Palestinians’ lives and daily activities are obstructed by the occupation and Palestinians are stripped of their rights, property, livelihoods, and dignity, the solution and the road to a final settlement can only be achieved through justice and human rights.

The Palestinian society and especially youth, which make up more than 60% of the population, are increasingly discontented with both the Palestinian Authority and Hamas. The rising desperation among Palestinian youth is unlikely to be contained by yet another peace initiative that promises nothing but a prolonged occupation and the maintenance of the status quo. If Paris and Washington are serious about a final resolution and the prevention of violence, the only path to peace is justice.

### **Recommendations**

Following the failure of Kerry’s US-led talks in 2013/2014, a French initiative in December 2014 failed to make it to the UN Security Council due to Israeli and US opposition as well as Palestinian objection over language. In 2015, then French Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius tried to push a UN resolution condemning Israeli settlements, but that also failed to see the light.

While there is no reason to believe that the French initiative is any different, it might be high time for international efforts to place pressure on Israel and reach an agreement. Some argue that the newly proposed French move is a turning point in the US role in the Middle East, whereas many are skeptical about the significance of this initiative as well as its potential. The Paris initiative may have been dead



even before it started, however the implications for a future peace process are important to consider.

First, as approval ratings of the Palestinian president and the PLO among Palestinians have been rapidly declining (e.g., a 2015 [poll](#) shows that two thirds of the public demand the resignation of president Abbas), a different mechanism is needed to incorporate true representation of the Palestinian people. An initiative that does not consider and involve the Palestinian civil society is unlikely to contain the eruption of violence, which is the main goal behind this French-led proposal.

Second, half solutions at this stage of the process are completely insignificant. In order to avoid falling into the “Oslo trap” again, the initiative should be comprehensive and explicitly address all the key issues of the conflict. If yet another initiative fails, it will lead to more disappointments and desperation on the Palestinian side and increased violence.

Third, any attempt must include international accountability and mechanisms to enforce the implementation of past and future agreements. In the Paris initiative, there is no clear indication that Israel will be held accountable for its violations of international and human rights law, nor for violations of the provisions of any upcoming agreement or resolution. The plan must include a system to ensure that both parties fulfill their obligations under the agreement.

As Paris is motivated by preventing a widespread armed Intifada and Washington is motivated by achieving serious progress, the proposal must shift the focus to a justice-based approach and be more engaged with the reality on the ground. Violence is the symptom of injustice, and the only way to achieve peace is through enforcing justice, whether in a one-state, two-state, or a five-state proposal.