
FRIENDS OF ISRAEL INITIATIVE

Europe: pressure on Israel,
indulgence on the Palestinians

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Introduction

On 3rd June the French government convened a meeting in Paris to discuss the Middle East peace process. The invited parties included officials from the Middle East Quartet, the United Nation, the Arab League and representatives from more than 20 states. The United States was represented by Secretary of State John Kerry.

The meeting was ostensibly called because, as French Foreign Minister Jean-Marc Ayrault warned the meeting, there was a ‘serious danger’ of hopes for a ‘two-state solution’ were disappearing. ‘We must act, urgently’ he informed the conference. The party that was absent from this multilateral conference was the State which is being asked to make compromises in its security in order to achieve this diplomatic solution: the State of Israel. It remains the view of this Israeli government, as it has previously been consecutive previous Israeli governments, that a final-status peace-deal between Israel and the Palestinians is only possible through direct negotiations between the two sides, without any preconditions. Any deal imposed upon them from the outside would not only be illegitimate but would be wholly incapable of bringing about the peace that the Israeli government and others seek.

But this French initiative appears not to be simply another exercise in treading diplomatic water. It is of concern because it is potentially a precursor for something else, namely a United Nations Security Council Resolution which would seek to enforce a deal on the State of Israel with or without the State’s approval. Such a move – like the French initiative – is not only presumptuous, but dangerous, compromising as it does the possibility of genuine two-party talks and rewarding Palestinian intransigence and violence.

The Paris meeting

The 3rd June multilateral meeting in Paris was only one part of the French initiative to force a deal between the Israelis and the Palestinians. Ahead of the meeting French diplomatic sources briefed that the parameters of the Paris discussion would reflect those of the 2002 Saudi peace initiative. That earlier plan had proposed Arab recognition for the State of Israel in return for the creation of a Palestinian state along the lines of the 1967 borders.

French President Francois Hollande opened the Paris meeting by warning of the dangers of doing nothing. ‘This initiative has one aim’, he announced: ‘To advance the Israeli-Palestinian peace process’ which he said was only achievable through a two-state solution. ‘There’s war in Syria and in Iraq and terror in the regions. There are those who interpret this as a chance to abandon the Israeli-Palestinian issue, but I claim the opposite.’ He went on to criticise the building of settlements on land he said Palestinians wanted for a state. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Palestinian officials praised the Paris initiative – which made no such demands on them – as ‘a very significant step’. Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erekat told reporters that:

‘I think President Hollande really pinpointed the issue here: if we continue our failure in the peace process, if this Israeli government continues its policies of settlement and dictations and fait accompli policies, the day after will be the day for the extremists.’¹

The official French account of the meeting claimed that it had ‘reaffirmed that a negotiated two-state solution is the only way to achieve an enduring peace.’ It expressed itself ‘alarmed that actions on the ground, in particular continued acts of violence and ongoing settlement activity, are dangerously imperilling the prospects for a two-state solution.’ It further stated that:

‘The participants underscored that the status quo is not sustainable, and stressed the importance of both sides demonstrating, with policies and actions, a genuine commitment to the two-state solution in order to rebuild trust and create the conditions for fully ending the Israeli occupation that began in 1967 and resolving all permanent status issues through direct negotiations based on resolutions 242 (1967), 338 (1973), and also recalling relevant United Nations Security Council resolutions and highlighting the importance of the implementation of the Arab Peace Initiative.’²

The communique also stated that the discussions had included the question of ‘meaningful incentives to the parties’ and stressed that participants had ‘welcomed France’s offer to coordinate’ as well as the prospect of a further ‘international conference’ before the end of the year.

The Brussels meeting

Following on from the Paris meeting, there was a meeting in Brussels on 20th June made up of the European Union’s Foreign Affairs Council which

Europe: pressure on Israel, indulgence on the Palestinians

comprises the 28 foreign ministers of the EU's member states. This meeting praised and endorsed the French 'peace initiative'. The published conclusions said that the meeting had agreed that:

'Both parties to the conflict need to demonstrate, through policies and actions, a genuine commitment to a peaceful solution in order to rebuild mutual trust and create conditions for direct and meaningful negotiations aiming at ending the occupation that began in 1967, and resolving all permanent status issues.'

In pursuit of this goal it stated that:

'The Council invites the Commission and the EEAS [European External Action Service] to present proposals, including on economic incentives, without delay. The Council also reaffirms the European proposal, as endorsed in the Council Conclusions of December 2013, of an unprecedented package of political, economic and security support to be offered to and developed with both parties in the context of a final status agreement.'³

The December 2013 package to which this refers is a proposal that would, among other things, offer to upgrade Israel's diplomatic status within the EU to that of 'special and preferred partner.'

EU Foreign Minister

Even before the Paris talks began it was clear that the EU was planning a more interventionist policy towards the Israel-Palestinian issue. At least in part this would appear to be due to the new EU Foreign Minister. In mid-May Frederica Mogherini – then six months into her tenure in the role – made her first visit to the region of the Middle East. She was careful to confirm that 'My very early visit has a political meaning'. Clarifying this statement, she continued, 'The European Union is ready and willing to play a major role in a relaunching of this process on the basis of the two-state solution.' The timing of this intervention was important for two reasons. Firstly because it attempted to seize the initiative on a Middle East peace plan at a time when such a plan was widely seen to be lacking from Washington and so presenting the Europeans with a potential diplomatic opening and potential prize. And secondly, because it came after another European state – this time the Vatican City – decided to unilaterally recognise the existence of a Palestinian state. The perception of opportunity

Europe: pressure on Israel, indulgence on the Palestinians

as well as a feeling of momentum were clearly both things that Mogherini herself was eager to play into.

Both during and immediately after her first visit to the region the EU Foreign Minister declined to be drawn on what precisely her plan for Middle East peace might entail. However she did declare, ‘One thing is clear to everyone in the region. That the status quo is not an option.’⁴

After that visit, and days after the Paris meeting, Mogherini used a speech in front of the United Nations Security Council on 6th June to further expand upon this issue. On that occasion she described a Quartet report first announced in February as being intended to rebuild confidence and the conditions necessary for negotiations to restart. And she also stressed that:

‘The proliferation of conflicts and crisis in the region of the Middle East is not a reason to forget about the fate of the Israelis and the Palestinians. On the contrary. The new security threats in the Middle East should push everyone to renew our efforts towards ending this conflict. Europe is doing its part.’⁵

The Quartet

Mogherini’s citation of the Quartet (US, EU, Russia, UN) report is a clear attempt to add extra ballast and momentum to the EU’s campaign to push for a unilateral deal.

Of the little that is known about the Quartet report so far it is believed that it deals with perceived blocks to the successful implementation of a two-state solution. As with most reports from international bodies it is expected to focus its area of blame on the Israelis rather than the Palestinians.

In particular it is expected to focus on questions around what is known as Area C (that majority portion of the West Bank currently under full Israeli control). The Quartet is expected to use its report to once again condemn Israeli settlement building and to claim – contrary to the assurances of the Israeli government – that the aim of such building is to prevent a two-state solution from being viable on the ground. However we will obviously have to wait for publication to be sure of the precise contents of the Quartet report.

Europe: pressure on Israel, indulgence on the Palestinians

The Security Council

In any case this build-up activity, not only from the EU Foreign Minister but from constituent and affiliated groups, suggests a deliberate and concerted build-up of activities designed to build momentum. What is the aim of this momentum? Many close observers recognise that in the absence of a fresh US initiative certain Europeans aim to seize the prize of solving the conflict. Or if not of seizing this prize then to at least achieve the goodwill and praise that most such attempts can entail from international bodies. The combination of the French initiative, the swift back-up from Brussels and the ability to cite and cross-reference parallel but related initiatives suggests a concerted build-up. But it is build-up which appears to be heading towards one particular goal: the UN Security Council.

It should also be said that there is a clear possibility that this build-up is not a home-grown European initiative. Rather it is possible that instead of being separate they are in fact connected to the US inability to achieve a breakthrough in the peace process.

The US involvement

It is widely believed that President Obama – like previous US Presidents before him – is keen to make a final push at solving the Israeli-Palestinian dispute to form a part of his legacy. Some observers and participants in this process regard the French government in particular of being able to pursue rhetoric and lines of argument that would be more sensitive or controversial were they to come from the government in Washington. To that extent it seems plausible that the Paris initiative is intended to finally bring matters to a head before the Security Council where the US can then present itself as being besieged by such an overwhelming array of international allied opinion that it cannot help but pass whatever resolution is on the table. This way the US administration could avoid the charge of being the driver of the situation, rather hiding behind the French and other initiatives.

It should additionally be noted that the Palestinian Authority has simultaneously prepared a draft resolution to put before the Security Council demanding a ban on Israeli settlements. This plan was postponed by the Palestinians in a deal with the French government to allow the Paris initiative to proceed first. But as with the French initiative the Palestinians have the

ultimate aim of persuading the US administration not to exercise its veto powers.

The flaws in this approach

Whoever is the driver behind the Paris initiative, the problems it presents are the same problems that all such initiatives consistently present. As with previous rounds of attempts by US Secretary of State John Kerry and others, the reality remains that top-down international efforts to force a solution on either party in the Israel-Palestinian dispute is forever doomed to failure. Unless negotiations consist of both sides voluntarily sitting down face-to-face no permanent resolution to the conflict could possibly be found. In addition unless such negotiations are not merely desired on both sides but also arrived at without prior preconditions then the possibility of success is zero. Previous attempts have consistently floundered before this reality. Even if it was possible to agree a certain aspect of the imbroglio in the absence of the two principal partners, there is no reason why they should then adopt it, and no feasible way in which they could be forced to – whatever the ‘incentives’ – if it was against their will. Additionally, the sticking points between the two parties are so fundamental and raise such long and short-term security concerns that it is impossible to see how any government could have ‘solutions’ to such questions forced upon them. Questions of final-status borders, the so-called ‘right of return’, the status of Jerusalem and many other questions have caused stalls in every previous set of face-to-face negotiations between the parties. There is no reason to expect that an outside agreement at which the parties are not present could possibly achieve what they have not yet achieved together.

It must also be said that there is a degree not only of presumption but of hubris to this European initiative. Foreign Minister Mogherini in front of the UN as well as on many other occasions has talked constantly of the need to ‘move forward’, increase ‘pressure’ and so on. This is a wholly false rhetoric. Mogherini is no more capable of ‘moving forward’ than was her predecessor Catherine Ashton or any other EU official. Such language suggests a clout and importance that they simply do not have. Bringing peace to the Middle East is simply not in such a figure’s unilateral gift. Nevertheless, Mogherini, like her predecessor, indulges in language and thus suggests that the EU possesses lever after lever in the Israel-Palestinian dispute whereas they in fact possess no such thing.

Yet still Mogherini is not the only EU official to indulge in such a language. After a meeting at the EU headquarters in Brussels with Reuven Rivlin on June 21st European Union Council President Donald Tusk announced that ‘a lasting peace in the region remains a top priority’.⁶ Two days later the United Kingdom public voted to leave the European Union itself, throwing the whole bloc into crisis and leading to a cascade of demands from European politicians for similar plebiscites on EU membership in their own countries. That the EU should be aiming to impose a diplomatic solutions on the Israelis at the very time that they most need diplomatic solutions at home demonstrates a serious gulf between the EU’s perception of its capabilities and the realities.

The timing of these events ought to be a wake-up to the remaining EU countries. There is something not merely hubristic, but actively delusional about a political entity seeking to impose a peace solution on a foreign power when it cannot keep its own bloc together at home. If the EU representatives such as Mogherini and Tusk had spent more time practising diplomacy towards the British than they spent seeking to dictate terms to the Israelis then perhaps a majority of the British people would not have voted to leave the EU on 23rd June. As for the period ahead, all the diplomatic skills of Brussels will now need to be employed to determine how to avoid other central and even founding members of the EU from walking out in the same manner as the UK has just done. In such a situation representatives of the EU lecturing Israel on how its long-term security can be assured is like the captain of a sinking ship shouting sea-faring advice to passing vessels.

Conclusion

The Paris initiative is just the latest in a long line of attempts by outside parties to force a final-status settlement on the Israeli government and the Palestinian leadership. All such initiatives have failed, as this process will. This is not a coincidence. Nor is it due to a lack of determination, drive or energy on the part of those making the various attempts. Rather, it is because the problem remains the same. No unilaterally decided deal can be forced upon the parties by any outside body, however august, competent or well-meaning.

But there are dangers from all such initiatives. With their emphasis on Israeli, rather than Palestinian, intransigence they embolden the Palestinian leadership to continue on the path they are on and evade the genuine steps

Europe: pressure on Israel, indulgence on the Palestinians

necessary for a path to peace. While it was criticised by the Israeli government, the Paris initiative – as with previous initiatives – was approved of by the Palestinian representatives for just this reason. In order for any real, lasting peace initiative to work the Palestinian leadership has to recognise that they, as well as the Israelis, will have to make concessions. Processes like that in Paris duck this reality, allowing the Palestinians to believe that if there are enough unilateral initiatives of this kind then they may one day get a favourable solution without having had to give up anything.

Whether a unilateral deal is ‘approved’ in Paris, or even passed at the United Nations, it would make no difference to the facts on the ground. And it could never be a replacement for the only route that could possibly work – full face-to-face talks without preconditions between the only two parties who can, between them, solve this sensitive but important dispute.

Notes

1. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-36441313>
2. <http://www.franceonu.org/Middle-East-Peace-initiative-Joint-communique-Paris-June-3-2016>
3. <http://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2016/06/20-fac-conclusions-mepp/>
4. <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-israel-palestinians-eu-idUSKBN0O31W320150518>
5. <http://tvnewsroom.consilium.europa.eu/event/eu-united-nations/speech-by-eu-hr-mogherini-at-the-un-security-council-extracts>
6. EU to back Mideast peace push with ‘unprecedented’ support

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