

Where Do We Go from Here? The International Discourse on Israeli-Palestinian Peacemaking

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A. Introduction

The Israeli-Palestinian peace process has been in a prolonged freeze since talks between the sides on a permanent status agreement, promoted by US Secretary of State John Kerry, collapsed in 2014. During the Trump administration, Israeli-Palestinian relations further deteriorated and a rift was created between Ramallah and Washington. Recent changes in the domestic, regional and international arenas are expected to affect the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and subsequently, the efforts to resolve it. These developments, as well as the challenges and opportunities they offer, must be addressed when discussing the prospects of the peace process. Special attention should be paid to the impact of the normalization agreements between Israel and Arab states, the administration change in Washington and preparations for elections in the Palestinian Authority (PA).

This paper maps out the international discourse on advancing Israeli-Palestinian peace under the current circumstances, based on a series of dialogues conducted by Mitvim Institute experts in February and March 2021 with various European, Arab, American and UN diplomats and experts.¹ The paper offers an analysis of the positions and perceptions of international actors regarding the effects of the latest diplomatic developments on the Israeli-Palestinian arena, and their insights and conclusions about the measures the international community could undertake to advance Israeli-Palestinian peace that are feasible and desired.

B. The International Community: Post-Trump Recovery

The Trump presidency was characterized by disputes and friction between the US and other international actors regarding the Israeli-Palestinian arena. The Trump Administration promoted policy that deviated from traditional American positions and from international consensus on a series of issues, among them Jerusalem and the settlements. Leading actors opposed these trends and fought to preserve the accepted international principles regarding the conflict and its resolution, including the commitment to UN resolutions, international law, and agreed parameters, chief among them the two-state solution. International dynamics surrounding the conflict during the Trump administration were centered around these tensions.

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¹ The dialogues were conducted under Chatham House rules. Accordingly, this article does not mention participants' names and does not attribute direct quotes to them. The dialogues were led on the part of the Mitvim Institute by Dr. Lior Lehrs, Dr. Nimrod Goren and Victoria Solkovits.

Against this background, and in the wake of the change at the White House, leading international representatives have welcomed the return of the US to international consensus on the Israeli-Palestinian issue as they begin to recover from the clashes and concerns that underpinned ties with the previous administration. There is a sense of relief in the international community: Netanyahu's annexation plans, which generated grave concern worldwide, is off the table, and the civilian and security cooperation between Israel and the PA has resumed after being disrupted over the possibility of annexation. The international community is seeking to take advantage of the new conditions created by the change in administrations to consider how best to proceed, but there does not appear to be a sense of urgency or desire to lead a new diplomatic initiative in the near future.

C. Leveraging the Israeli-Arab Normalization Agreements?

There is pervasive agreement among the international community on the need to support the momentum generated by the 2020 normalization agreements between Israel and the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Morocco and Sudan, but to concurrently use them to promote Israeli-Palestinian peacemaking. This position espouses linking the normalization process to the Palestinian channel, contrary to the Trump Administration's policy that used the normalization measures to bypass the Palestinians. Proponents of this view include European and Arab representatives, as well as the outgoing UN envoy Nikolay Mladenov; the Biden Administration has expressed its support with this policy position as well.²

Past peacemaking efforts were based on the assumption that normalization with the Arab world would reward Israel only for significant progress toward peace with the Palestinians. In contrast, today's approach is different, using normalization agreements to pave the way for progress with the Palestinians. UN representatives with whom we spoke noted that this approach could be more effective given that Israelis have experienced normalization as a real and tangible asset and now want to bolster it, whereas in the past, normalization was perceived as a future, vague quid pro quo and thus the impact of promises to attain it was less significant.

However, despite international support for leveraging the normalization agreements to achieve progress in the Israeli-Palestinian channel, at this stage it remains a challenging and complex task. The tensions between the Palestinians, the UAE and Bahrain are one crucial obstacle, which persist despite the indications of improved relations, such as the PA's decision to send back its ambassadors to Abu Dhabi and Manama after recalling them to protest the agreements with Israel. A clear demonstration of these tensions is seen in the Palestinian veto in March 2021 of the UAE's request to join the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum as an observer.³ The tensions between Ramallah and Abu Dhabi also stem from the presence of Mohammed Dahlan in the UAE, a former top Fatah official and a bitter foe of Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas. Dahlan is increasingly involved in the expected PA elections, which will likely deepen the UAE-PA rift. Palestinian hostility has also been exacerbated by the UAE's less than clear position on the settlements in the West Bank, as reflected by the visit of a business delegation from settlements to Dubai and the declaration of the President of the Dubai Chamber of Commerce that his country would not

² "[Outgoing UN peace envoy: Palestinians can gain from Israel's normalization deals](#)," *Times of Israel*, 2 January 2021; [Declaration by the High Representative](#) on behalf of European Union on the announcement of a normalization of relations between Israel and the UAE, 15 August 2020; "[Jordan says Israel-UAE deal should prod Israel to accept Palestinian state](#)," *Reuters*, 13 August 2020; [State Department Press Briefing](#), 2 February 2021.

³ Jaffar Qassem, "[Palestine vetoes UAE membership in EastMed Gas Forum Israel said in September it proposed UAE's inclusion in EastMed Gas Forum](#)," *Anadolu Agency*, 10 March 2021.

boycott Israeli goods from the West Bank.⁴ Furthermore, various parties in the international arena have expressed doubts about the desire of states such as the UAE and Bahrain to be significantly involved in the Palestinian issue and about the importance these states attribute to the issue on their agendas.

Additionally, some also point to the fact that the normalization states are unfamiliar with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the situation on the ground and the international practices that have developed over time to deal with the sides to the conflict. This unfamiliarity is evident, for example, within the context of visits to the Temple Mount/Haram a-Sharif compound in Jerusalem. Whereas foreign diplomats tend to visit the site in coordination with the Waqf and without Israeli escorts, UAE representatives deviated from this custom and visited the compound with Israeli escorts and failed to coordinate with the Waqf, generating anger among Palestinians and Jordanians. Emirati representatives stress that they are trying to think outside the box and come up with innovative and creative ideas for resolving the conflict, but the Palestinians regard this approach as a deviation from the Arab line on the Palestinian issue.

The question that arises here is what variables could influence and facilitate ties between the different channels and leverage normalization for the advancement of Israeli-Palestinian peace. The presence of the new UAE ambassador in Tel Aviv is one possibility, which could have an effect by paving the way for ties with the Palestinians as well. His physical presence in Israel would enable him to familiarize himself with the complexities of the conflict and the situation on the ground (inter alia in Area C and East Jerusalem), which could subsequently affect UAE policy. The ambassador would take part in the activities of the international community in Israel and in meetings and briefings for foreign diplomats, exposing him to the intricacies of the conflict and the accepted modes of behavior toward each side.

Another possible variable is an effort by international actors, led by the US and Europe, to mediate and bring together the normalization states and the Palestinians in order to alleviate tensions between them. Barbara Leaf, the former Obama Administration ambassador to the UAE who was nominated recently as Assistant Secretary of State for Near East Affairs could play a key role in this context. If the new administration were to signal the importance it attributes to the involvement of the Gulf States in the Palestinian issue, it could also affect these states' considerations on the matter. The administration has resources and levers of influence it could use in order to move in that direction. While this does not appear to be high on the administration's current agenda, it may advance such efforts at a later stage.

The differences in attitudes towards the conflict between the various states that have joined the normalization bandwagon should also be noted. Morocco, for example, conducts itself differently on the Palestinian issue and clearly emphasizes the links between the two channels as illustrated by the reported insistence that King Mohammed VI will only visit Israel once negotiations resume with the Palestinians.⁵ Consequently, the Palestinian reaction to the agreement between Morocco and Israel was far less critical than its reaction to the other normalization deals.

⁴ ["Dubai trade official: We have no problem with Israeli products from West Bank,"](#) *Times of Israel*, 8 December 2020; ["Israeli settlers visit Dubai to discuss business ties,"](#) *Al-Monitor*, 11 November 2020.

⁵ Safaa Kasraoui, ["Visit of King Mohammed VI to Israel Depends on Re-Launch of Israeli-Palestinian Negotiations,"](#) *Morocco World News*, 18 January 2021.

D. The Biden Administration: A Return to International Consensus

The change in the US administration heralded the superpower's return to the international consensus on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and to its traditional position prior to the Trump era. Administration officials have expressed this shift in a series of declarations and comments since Joe Biden moved into the White House.⁶ Various international actors, especially from Europe and the Arab world, welcomed the renewed US alignment with international principles based on UN resolutions, international law and the accepted parameters for resolving the conflict within the framework of the two-state solution.

At the same time, however, the Israeli-Palestinian issue does not appear to be high on the administration's list of priorities, nor does it seem especially interested in involving itself in the issue anytime soon. The new administration, unlike its precursors, has not appointed a special envoy on Israeli-Palestinian affairs, a task that has been delegated to State Department officials, led by Deputy Assistant Secretary Hadi Amr. The administration faces a series of urgent challenges, chief among them domestic issues such as the coronavirus crisis, along with foreign policy issues such as the nuclear agreement with Iran, the war in Yemen and relations with China and Russia. The Palestinian issue is not perceived as a matter requiring an urgent response and the administration does not appear to be planning an investment of resources and political capital in the issue anytime soon.

The Americans are signaling to their colleagues around the world that they need time to put together the team and strategies concerning the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Israel's recent preoccupation with another election campaign, and now efforts to form a government, have provided another explanation, or excuse, for the American delay in actions on this matter. Furthermore, many office holders in the new administration were involved in the Israeli-Palestinian issue during the Obama Administration and are familiar with the failures of the various mediation initiatives undertaken at that time (from George Mitchell to John Kerry). As a result, they are not keen to encourage the President to embark on another adventure without appropriate preparation and in the absence of suitable conditions. The administration also wishes to separate the Iran nuclear issue from the Palestinian one. It is currently focused on Iran, which is perceived as a more urgent issue, and is trying to promote dialogue with Israel (as well as with other countries in the Middle East) on Iran, separate from the Palestinian context. This policy is evidently linked to the US' desire to avoid a return to the severe crisis regarding Iran issue that developed in the past between the Obama Administration and the Netanyahu government. However, events and developments in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict could force the administration to get involved against its will. For example, the decision by the International Criminal Court (ICC) in The Hague that paved the way for a war crimes investigation of Israel has already forced the administration to get involved in the issue.

The Biden Administration advocates a multilateral diplomatic approach based on cooperation with other international actors and is taking initial steps in various arenas to that end. It has not signaled its intention to advance a significant multilateral effort in the Israeli-Palestinian issue in the near future, beyond renewal of the regular meetings of the Quartet on the Middle East.

At this stage, US policy is focused on declarations underscoring the deviation from the Trump Administration's policy on the conflict, support for the two-state solution and interest in the resumption of the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. Its efforts are also geared toward

⁶ ["Biden wants two-state solution for Israel, Palestinians - White House," Reuters, 26 January 2021.](#)

rehabilitating relations with the Palestinian leadership after the Trump Administration severely undermined them. Deputy Assistant Secretary Amr has spoken with the Palestinian Minister for Civil Affairs Hussein a-Sheikh after a lengthy freeze in contact between the sides. On 25 March 2021, the US Ambassador to the UN, Linda Thomas-Greenfield, announced the transfer of 15 million USD to the West Bank and Gaza Strip to help the Palestinians confront the coronavirus epidemic,⁷ marking the resumption of US aid to the Palestinians, which was cut off by the Trump White House.

Additionally, the Biden administration has reportedly prepared an internal memorandum on restoring relations with the Palestinians, which recommends pulling back from steps undertaken by the Trump Administration (such as labeling goods made in the settlements as made in Israel) and opening a US representative office in the Palestinian Territories (given the previous administration's closure of the US consulate in Jerusalem, which was the administration's main point of contact with the Palestinians).⁸ The memo also recommended underscoring US support for the two-state solution "based on the 1967 borders with agreed and mutual territorial exchanges," a line signaling a return to the Obama Administration's stance and disregard for the positions of the Trump Administration.

E. What Should Be the Next Step in the Peace Process?

Considering recent developments and existing circumstances, what should be the next step to advance Israeli-Palestinian peace, and what measures should international actors undertake to that end? The international community seemingly agrees that this is not the right time for major initiatives; instead, small, cautious and realistic steps are required to improve conditions on the ground, build trust between the sides and maintain the feasibility of an eventual two-state solution. European diplomats noted that many efforts and initiatives launched over the years have failed repeatedly, that past mistakes must not be repeated, and that thorough preparation is required before proposing a new initiative. In their perspective, both sides to the conflict are not ready for progress on a final status agreement and therefore action is required on other levels. US Secretary of State Blinken expressed a similar approach soon after entering office, underscoring US support for the two-state solution but expressing doubts about the near term prospects of progress toward that goal.⁹ Middle Eastern diplomats noted that in the past, the peace process was based on an all-or-nothing approach – either attainment of a comprehensive final status agreement on all issues or a freeze. In contrast, they suggested a new approach of gradual progress and immediate implementation regarding matters both sides manage to agree on.

Practical measures on the ground could include confidence building measures and stronger cooperation, economic projects in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, and steps to prepare for negotiations and for bolstering the infrastructure of a two-state solution. This could include a handover of some land currently under Israeli control to the Palestinians (such as a change in the designation of territory from Area C to Area B or from Area B to Area A.) Importantly, these efforts need to preserve the vision of the two-state solution rather than disconnect from it. This approach echoes the recommendations of the July 2016 Quartet report,¹⁰ which pointed to the difficulties of achieving an agreement in the foreseeable future and called for immediate, practical measures on the ground rather than

⁷ Edith Lederer, AP, "[US Gives Palestinians \\$15 million to deal with Covid-19](#)," *ABC News*, 25 March 2021.

⁸ Joyce Karam "['The National' obtains US official document for Palestinian 'reset'](#)," *The National*, 18 March 2021.

⁹ "[Biden admin to seek 2-state solution to Israeli-Palestinian conflict despite skepticism of 'near-term prospects': Blinken](#)," *i24 News*, 19 January 2021.

¹⁰ [Quartet Report and Statement](#), July 2016.

focusing on a formula for a future agreement. The report proposed advancing efforts to reduce tension and violence, strengthening PA institutions, halting settlement expansion and encouraging interactions between Israelis and Palestinians.

The international community agrees that there are currently no grounds to discuss a new international framework of parameters for resolution of the conflict or to promote additional UN Security Council resolutions on the Israeli-Palestinian issue. European diplomats stressed that there is no need for new resolutions, but rather for implementation of existing ones, combined with the emphasis on confidence building between the sides and creating conditions for the resumption of negotiations. As for a future permanent status agreement, the international consensus over the two-state solution appears to have remained intact. Diplomatic sources in the US, Europe, Arab states and the UN remain committed to the two-state solution and reject calls for a different model. Whereas the Trump Administration deviated from this stance, the Biden Administration has reiterated the US commitment to the two-state model. Administration officials have insisted that this is the only solution that can ensure Israel's identity as a Jewish and democratic state, living in peace alongside a Palestinian state.¹¹ During our policy dialogues, international representatives stressed that this position is based on UN Security Council resolutions, that it is the only solution on which both Israelis and Palestinians have agreed and that it is still the option that garners the most public support on both sides of the conflict, despite its challenges. They also noted that the international community, as an outside party, cannot oppose the solution that both sides have proposed in the past, and must not be the first to propose an alternative.

Along with support for the two-state solution, there is growing concern around the world over the creeping Israeli territorial annexation that could preclude a two-state solution. Various international parties are conveying messages to Israel, both behind closed doors and in public, warning against unilateral moves, especially strategic ones, such as construction in the E1 area between Jerusalem and Ma'ale Adumim and in the East Jerusalem neighborhood of Givat Hamatos. Such moves would render the option of a sustainable Palestinian state and a two-state solution irrelevant. The world is particularly concerned by the demolitions of Palestinian homes and institutions in Area C and the evictions of Palestinian families in East Jerusalem, viewing these issues as a high priority.

Nonetheless, it remains unclear whether representatives of the international community will continue to settle for periodic condemnation of Israel's creeping annexation measures or intensify their opposition by creating consequences. While the international actors do not believe they can stop this process, they do hope to slow it down, to caution against it and to underscore its cost and repercussions. The Biden Administration has already emphasized its opposition to unilateral measures, both Palestinian and Israeli, warning that they heighten tension and hostility and undermine the two-state solution.¹² The administration's internal memo, as revealed in the media, proposes stronger US action against settlement expansion along with similar action to counter Palestinian incitement and PA payments to prisoners.¹³

F. The Quartet: The Only Show in Town

The Quartet on the Middle East, comprised of the US, Russia, EU and UN, is the leading international body involved in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. It was largely paralyzed during

¹¹ [Department Press Briefing](#), *US Department of State*, 23 February 2021.

¹² [Department Press Briefing](#), *US Department of State*, 1 March 2021

¹³ Karam, *ibid.*

the Trump years, which adopted independent policies opposed by the international community. The Trump Administration essentially demanded that the Quartet base its work on the President's so-called "Deal of the Century". The three other Quartet members refused, raising questions about the best international mechanism to lead and manage international diplomatic processes on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and whether the Quartet was the appropriate international mechanism for the task or if it should be changed or replaced. The policy dialogues we conducted indicate that several international actors view the Quartet as "the only show in town", one that must be preserved and restored to maximum operation. The Quartet is perceived as a mechanism with broad international legitimacy and untapped potential that plays a crucial role as the center of gravity of international efforts related to the conflict. The Quartet is designed to ensure coordination and alignment of the bodies involved and prevent a variety of initiatives and uncoordinated moves lacking a common framework.

Existing circumstances provide a special opportunity in this regard given the greater US willingness for multilateral activity on the conflict. Whereas in the past the US insisted on an almost exclusive role in advancing the peace process, relegating other actors to the sidelines, the current administration seems interested in cooperation. The Biden administration prioritizes a multilateral approach as a global strategy on other conflicts as well. According to European diplomats, the days of exclusive US mediation are over, as Washington has lost its traditional status of an honest broker. They argue that President Biden will be unable to play the role that the US played in the Clinton or Obama eras, even if he wanted to, and a broader framework is required involving European and Arab actors. Given the rift formed between Washington and Ramallah in the Trump era, the Palestinians have demanded shifting to a model involving additional international players, as well. Although the administration in Washington has changed and overturned Trump's policies, the wheel cannot be turned back to sole US leadership of the peace process, according to our European interlocutors.

After President Biden assumed office, UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres said that the Quartet has been unable to convene for a long time, but he believes the changes in Washington set the path for the group's activities to resume.¹⁴ Indeed, the Quartet resumed its frequent meetings in early 2021 and announced at the end of its March session that it was discussing efforts to renew negotiations on the two-state solution and on measures to advance "freedom, security and well-being" for Palestinians and Israelis.¹⁵ Three of the four Quartet representatives are ending their terms in the first half of 2021: The US representative was replaced due to the change in administration, the UN envoy Tor Wennesland has replaced Mladenov, and the EU representative's term ends at the end of April. The fresh members could introduce new motivations, ideas and directions for action.

In the current situation one can realize a classic collective action problem – everyone agrees on the need for action around a certain common goal, but each party is waiting for the other to start. Many international actors attribute importance to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, demand action and wish to be involved, but simultaneously expect other actors to lead the way and invest the resources. Whereas many actors are waiting for the Biden Administration to pick up the reins and move the process forward, the administration shows no signs of planning to invest in such moves anytime soon. Various parties, including Arab states that have normalized relations with Israel, are expressing willingness to take part and assist, but waiting for the key players to lead first. At this stage, it is still unclear who

¹⁴ Edith M. Lederer, "[UN chief sees 'hope' for Israel-Palestinian peace progress](#)," *AP*, 29 January 2021.

¹⁵ Edith M. Lederer, "[UN, US, Russia and EU meet virtually on Israel, Palestinians](#)," *AP*, 24 March 2021.

will assume the leadership role and when, and how the work will be divided among the US and other actors in the international efforts to advance peace.

Over the years, various ideas and proposals have been raised to expand the Quartet and add members, chief among them Arab states such as Egypt and Jordan. It appears, however, that international actors in the Quartet and elsewhere have reservations about this idea, arguing that expansion would pose problems and undermine the group's effectiveness. There has also been voiced concern that a change in its structure would turn the Quartet into a platform for declarations rather than action, making it more difficult to operate. Nonetheless, there is consensus regarding the need to improve coordination and cooperation between the Quartet and the four-member Arab Quartet (Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and the UAE). Russia recently proposed a 4+4+2 meeting to include the two Quartets and Israeli and Palestinian representatives. Egypt and Jordan wish to be involved in any future move and to prove that they are key regional players, especially in the Israeli-Palestinian context. The UAE has also expressed its desire for involvement and stressed that should the sides wish, it would be happy to assist. The EU's role in the Quartet comes up often against a challenge stemming from internal disagreements among the member states regarding the conflict, differences that were thrown into sharp focus during the Trump era. The disputes within the EU could present difficulties and undermine its ability to assume a leading role in the process, but European diplomats claim the member states are united on the fundamentals of the conflict, as expressed in the EU's sweeping opposition to the Trump plan and annexation intentions.

In light of the Quartet's paralysis during the Trump Administration, Germany, France, Egypt and Jordan formed a new, informal group called the "Munich Group" in order to preserve the core principles of the Israeli-Palestinian peace process and the two-state solution vis-à-vis the Trump plan and annexation intentions. The group's foreign ministers continued to meet after Biden's victory, working to promote confidence-building measures between Israelis and Palestinians.¹⁶ The diplomats we spoke to emphasized that the group was not meant as a substitute for the Quartet, but as an attempt to fill the vacuum created during the Trump era. They believe that once the Quartet resumes its regular activity, the new forum will probably no longer be needed. Another interesting international forum that has developed recently is the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum¹⁷ formed in 2019 by Israel, Egypt, Italy, Greece, Cyprus, Jordan and the PA, with France joining in 2021. Given the complete stall in the peace process, the presence of both Israeli and Palestinian representatives at a regional forum is particularly important. The forum is devoted to energy and economic issues, but in the future it may be possible to use its infrastructure for the advancement of diplomatic issues.

G. Palestinian Elections and Reconciliation: A Turning Point?

In January 2021, Palestinian President Abbas issued a presidential declaration announcing elections for the presidency, the legislative council and the Palestinian National Council (PNC). The previous presidential elections were held in 2005 and elections to the legislative council took place in 2006. The elections are expected to draw international attention to the Israeli-Palestinian arena in the months ahead. The international community has welcomed the decision, viewing it as a positive development that could preclude a breakthrough in the prolonged domestic Palestinian stalemate. The diplomats we spoke with view the

¹⁶ ["Egypt, Germany, France, Jordan meet to revive Mideast talks,"](#) *Ynetnews*, 1 January 2021.

¹⁷ Gabriel Mitchell, ["The Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum: Cooperation in the Shadow of Competition,"](#) *Mitvim Institute*, September 2020.

upcoming elections as an opportunity to provide the Palestinian leadership with new legitimization, advance reconciliation between Fatah and Hamas, and link the Gaza Strip once again to the Israeli-Palestinian diplomatic process. While they mentioned being initially skeptical about the prospects of the elections being carried out, with time the process appears to be moving ahead.

Along with the hope generated by the scheduled elections, however, they also create both challenges and risks. The bitter conflict between Fatah and Hamas is nowhere near resolution and Palestinian society is mired in despair and deep frustration; it is doubtful whether elections would create a positive change in this regard. Both sides in the Palestinian arena have yet to agree on terms for elections and on the connection, if any, between elections and reconciliation. Talks on this subject are at an impasse and the elections are only one component of a very long and complex process. The elections raise many questions that cannot yet be answered: will Hamas put a presidential candidate forward? Will Marwan Barghouti, who is serving a life-term in Israeli jails, run for president? There is also the question of Israel's willingness to allow elections to be held in East Jerusalem and to avoid involvement in the election campaign in the West Bank. The Munich Group members have issued a call for Israel to allow elections in East Jerusalem,¹⁸ whereas the Biden Administration has avoided taking a clear stance on the elections.

Regarding Gaza, there does not appear to be any significant change on the horizon in the international community's policy. In recent years, the UN Envoy and Egypt have led and conducted indirect negotiations between Israel and the Hamas government in Gaza, with the help of Qatar, while other international actors have avoided any involvement. The UN envoy has a crucial role in this process, a role that could be expanded to include other aspects of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. UN officials point to the fact that the UN Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process (UNSCO) has three important resources that other players do not: access to all sides (in Jerusalem, Ramallah and Gaza), a permanent presence on the ground, and ability to quickly and effectively mobilize the international community. The EU is committed to the principles the Quartet has presented Hamas as a condition for dialogue with the organization (recognition of Israel, a halt to terrorism and acceptance of the agreements between Israel and the PLO) and no change is expected on this matter, not even in the context of the Palestinian elections.

European diplomats pointed to the irony of the fact that while the EU adheres strictly to the policy that bans contacts and dialogue with Hamas, the Israeli government under Netanyahu conducts ongoing, intensive indirect negotiations with the Hamas government, during which various understandings have been reached. The US is not expected to change its approach to Hamas or to the Palestinian internal conflict anytime soon, and if it does decide to deal with the Gaza issue, it would likely focus on advancing infrastructural projects for the benefit of Gaza residents and not on policy issues regarding Hamas. The international community, led by the US and the EU, will have to examine its position on Gaza and Hamas in accordance with developments in the intra-Palestinian reconciliation process and the results of the elections. Among other issues it will have to address is the policy it will adopt if a Fatah-Hamas unity government is formed, or a government of technocrats acceptable to both sides.

¹⁸ ["Joint statement of the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of Egypt, France, Germany and Jordan at the meeting in Paris on the Middle East Peace Process," Reliefweb, 11 March 2021.](#)

H. Support for Civil Society Peacemaking

In December 2020, the US Congress approved the Nita M. Lowey Middle East Partnership for Peace Act, allocating 250 million USD over a five-year period for organizations and projects engaged in Israeli-Palestinian cooperation and dialogue and measures to bolster the Palestinian economy.¹⁹ The legislation is unprecedented in scope, and many around the world view it as an opportunity for long-term change in the conflict, comparable to a model that facilitated peace in Northern Ireland. There is broad international support regarding the importance of strengthening pro-peace civil society activity on both sides, and the bill enjoys bipartisan support in Congress. The outgoing UN envoy Mladenov underscored the issue of civil society engagement in peacemaking throughout his term, meeting with Israeli and Palestinian civil society groups. In addressing the UN Security Council, the incoming envoy Wennesland also referred to the importance of civil society pro-peace activity.²⁰ The EU attributes great importance to such activity as well, and has been instrumental over the years in strengthening civil society organizations on both sides and funding their activities. Nonetheless, the EU is not expected to increase the extent of its aid at this point in the wake of the congressional legislation. The UAE is also unlikely to use this support mechanism. Sources in the Emirates believe the UAE would prefer to provide ad hoc assistance when it identifies a project it seeks to advance rather than committing to a permanent and institutional multi-year investment as Congress has.

In the international community, support of civil society is perceived as a long-term measure, not necessarily as a focus for international diplomatic activity. The new US administration is unlikely to seriously engage in the matter beyond allocating the earmarked resources. Former US Ambassador to the UN Samantha Power, tapped as director of the US Agency for International Development (USAID), could play a key role in linking the aid program to administration policy. Effective use of the new resources will require confronting challenges such as the resistance by anti-normalization Palestinian groups, as well as preparing the civil society arena to ensure proper and effective management of the funds.

I. The International Criminal Court

The decision by the International Criminal Court (ICC) in The Hague to launch a war crimes inquiry against Israel is expected to have significant impact on the Israeli-Palestinian arena in the near future. While still too early in the procedure to assess its course, its influence seems likely to be complex. On the one hand, the procedure would restore the Palestinian issue to the Israeli and global agenda; on the other hand, it could add another obstacle to the already complex Israeli-Palestinian relationship and further hamper the resumption of the peace process.

Various international actors, chief among them the US and Germany, have announced their opposition to the Court's decision, arguing that it lacks the authority to investigate the matter. The Biden Administration expressed concern over the ruling and argued that Palestine was not a sovereign state and therefore could not seek membership in the ICC. Administration representatives also claimed that the future of peace depends on building bridges and dialogue channels, not on unilateral quasi-judicial actions that, in their view,

¹⁹ ["Breaking: Congress enacts historic funding for Israeli-Palestinian peacebuilding,"](#) *Alliance for Middle East Peace*, 21 December 2020.

²⁰ [UNSCO Twitter account](#), 25 March 2021.

increase tensions and undermine efforts to promote the two-state solution.²¹ The US is expected to continue to stress its opposition to the probe, but at the same time display a different attitude toward the ICC than the previous administration. The new administration lifted sanctions that the Trump administration imposed on ICC officials.²² The ICC itself, and the new prosecutor Karim Khan are also expected to attempt to improve relations with the US administration. Either way, the US has limited ability to influence the investigation, which is expected to become an additional issue in the conflict and in diplomatic efforts to resolve it.

J. Summary

The international discourse on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and peace process reflects the ongoing decline of its importance on the international agenda in recent years. The international community has identified more urgent priorities in the world, and in the Middle East specifically, especially with the outbreak of the coronavirus crisis that engaged most of the world's attention over the past year.

Many identify Israel's normalization agreements with Arab states and the election of President Biden in Washington as opportunities to renew diplomatic efforts to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Nonetheless, given current political circumstances in Israel and the PA, the prospects of a breakthrough on a permanent status agreement are slim. Given the bitter experience of failed peace initiatives over the years, international actors are not interested in proposing a significant diplomatic initiative on a permanent status agreement at this stage. They prefer, instead, to focus on practical steps on the ground to pave the way for resumption of the peace process down the line and to concurrently prevent deterioration or unilateral measures that would render the two-state solution null and void.

Even if the international community does not sense any urgency or desire for significant diplomatic measures at this time, events and developments in the Israeli-Palestinian arena could change their stance and push international actors, with the US at their head, into involvement in the conflict. The international community is clearly seeking creative ideas to promote a breakthrough; it is open to hearing new proposals from Israeli and Palestinian civil society and is also willing to promote multilateral steps based on cooperation among various international actors. There is also a sense in the international community that after years of stagnation in the Israeli-Palestinian arena, we are now facing a time of change and developments in domestic, regional and international terms that will have a significant impact on the conflict. These developments might require adjustments in traditional diplomatic patterns and could provide new opportunities and tools to promote peace.

²¹ ["The United States Opposes the ICC Investigation into the Palestinian Situation,"](#) Statement by Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken, 3 March 2021.

²² [Press Statement of Antony J. Blinken, Secretary of State,](#) 2 April 2, 2021.