



Israel and a possible International Support Group for the Middle East Peace Process

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The international community is currently exploring an initiative to establish an International Support Group (ISG) for the Middle East Peace Process, which is supposed to help create conditions for the return to meaningful Israeli-Palestinian negotiations. However, the ISG initiative faces significant skepticism, and still lacks clear definition and goals. It is unclear whether the group will actually come to fruition or not. This paper analyzes the diplomatic context to this initiative, identifies potential benefits from forming such a group, and discusses how Israel should respond. It was written by Dr. Nimrod Goren, based on a roundtable discussion at the Mitvim Institute's Foreign Policy Advisory Team.

A. The Diplomatic Context

The French initiative to put forward a United Nations Security Council (UNSC) resolution that would include parameters to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has run into difficulties in recent months. Not only has the United States not joined the effort, but it has also become clear that there is no agreement between members of the international community as to which parameters would be included in such a draft resolution.

The assumption that the parameters of an Israeli-Palestinian agreement are known and acceptable to the main international actors, and that all that is necessary is to put them in writing and submit them to the UN, has turned out to be incorrect. Negotiations between these actors, including Arab states, have been taking place over the past months, but have not led to a breakthrough or to an agreed-upon draft resolution. Moreover, Israel and the Palestinians have made clear that they oppose the language of the proposed resolution.

The current impasse has also stemmed from the different ways in which the United States and France view the introduction of a resolution at the UN. While the Americans are interested in emphasizing the degree of progress that was made during the negotiations led by US Secretary of State John Kerry, the

French view this resolution as an attempt to create a wide umbrella under which new efforts to advance the peace process can be launched.

In addition to a possible UN Security Council resolution, efforts have been made throughout 2015 to revitalize the Quartet and make it more relevant to the peace process. The intention of these efforts is that the Quartet will continue to operate in its current composition but that its modus operandi will change. To this end, it will include regular and direct outreach to Arab states, and will emphasize the Arab Peace Initiative (API).

Throughout 2015, Quartet representatives held meetings in [Cairo](#) (June), [Amman](#) (July), and [Riyadh](#) (September) ahead of their meeting (also attended in part by representatives of Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and the Arab League) during the [2015 UN General Assembly](#). These meetings focused on how to preserve the two-state solution, to promote concrete steps on the ground, and to create conditions that will enable Israel and the Palestinians to return to meaningful negotiations with the goal of achieving such an outcome.

B. The ISG Initiative

In light of these developments, France has begun promoting an alternative idea to UNSC resolution: the establishment of an ISG for the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. At its core, this initiative calls for the expansion of the Quartet to include a number of Arab and European countries. These countries would join the body whose current membership includes the US, the UN, the EU, and Russia.

The creation of such a model is influenced by the success of the negotiations conducted by the P5+1 with Iran, which proved that an international coalition could achieve the diplomatic goals it sets out for itself. However, a notable difference between the two cases is that while the P5+1 were one of the parties to the negotiations regarding Iran's nuclear program, the ISG will serve as a third-party to any peace talks and will not include members of the parties to the conflict, i.e. Israelis and Palestinians.

Reportedly, Federica Mogherini, the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, did not warm to this idea initially (primarily because of her desire to preserve the Quartet's current configuration). However, she did present it at the July 2015 meeting of the EU's Foreign Affairs Council, where [she was asked to explore options](#) for implementation of this initiative with regional and international actors and to report back in September.

The US has thus far refrained from stating a position regarding such an entity and the Government of Israel has indicated on various occasions that it opposes the formation of such a group. On the other hand, the UN Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process [expressed his support publicly for the idea](#) in July. The Special Coordinator's remarks align with the UN's official position that

there is no point in pushing the Israelis and Palestinians back to the negotiation table at this time. According to the UN, what is needed now is [a comprehensive approach on three levels](#) – on the ground, in the region, and with the international community. The combination of these three elements is supposed to create conditions that will allow negotiations to resume in the future.

Past experience indicates that establishing an international mechanism to aid Israeli-Palestinian negotiations does not necessarily yield the desired results. [The Quartet](#), founded in 2002, indeed led to the publication of the [Road Map](#) in 2003 but did not have significant impact aside from that. In recent years (until recent attempts to revitalize it), the Quartet's influence and scope of activities have declined. The fact that no replacement has been announced for Tony Blair as the Quartet's representative since he stepped down in May 2015 does not bode well for the organization's prospects and standing.

These facts, combined with the ongoing stagnation of the peace process, have increased skepticism in Israel as to the purpose of creating a new mechanism whose mission is the promotion of Middle East peace. It is unclear whether the creation of such an entity is necessary, whom it is supposed to support, what its mandate would be, and what it would attempt to promote.

The answers to some pivotal questions about the group are also unclear thus far. For example, would this support group apply pressure on Israel and the Palestinians to return to the negotiating table despite the fact that such efforts are currently futile? Would it act to sustain and bolster a two-state solution and international support for such an outcome with the parties and amongst members of the international community? Or would it, alternatively, focus on promoting change on the ground, with an emphasis on the reconstruction of Gaza and the promotion of Palestinian reconciliation between Fatah and Hamas?

C. Possible Benefits from Forming an ISG

Despite the skepticism, some possible benefits from forming an ISG are:

1. In the absence of negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians, and in light of the growing frustration with the peace process, the erosion of support for a two-state solution and the likelihood of the realization of such a reality, the mere establishment of a body whose goal is to promote peace should be seen as a positive development.
2. The creation of such a body could motivate other actors – governmental and non-governmental alike – to create positive momentum. It could replace the ongoing stagnation with efforts to seek out new directions and opportunities to promote peace. Nevertheless, as long as there is no political will to make progress between the sides to the conflict, these efforts will have limited impact.

3. Institutions can prove useful in the long term, even though they might not contribute constructively in the short term. There have been cases in the past in which dormant institutions suddenly became relevant as a result of changes in the political environment. In these cases, it can be easier to wake a dormant institution rather than establish a new one.
4. This ISG would be the first international entity created to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to include representatives from the Arab world. Thus far, Arab delegates have only been invited to participate in specific events and have never been a permanent part of an established mechanism. Such a mechanism was, for example, noticeably absent during the Camp David Summit in 2000.
5. Recently, the regional element has become an increasingly integral part of efforts to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. This rise in importance is evident in the Arab Peace Initiative and the Special Privileged Partnership incentives proposed by the EU to Israel and the Palestinians in 2013. An ISG could contribute to the creation of regional frameworks whose goal would be to support Israeli-Palestinian peacemaking.
6. In its current format, the Quartet is a tired institution that is incapable of creating change and efforts to rejuvenate it are unlikely to change this substantially. It is possible that bringing new members into the Quartet (even if this results in renaming it as an ISG) could reinvigorate the institution and increase its output.
7. The ISG could generate events with increased visibility – perhaps even of a theatrical nature – in order to create a perceptual change regarding the conflict within both Israel and the Palestinian Territories. An example of one such event could be a gathering of world leaders to re-assess international policies towards the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.
8. The ISG could also create a coordinated international incentive package, which would then be presented to the Israelis and Palestinians, serving as a mega-incentive for peace. As of today, a number of incentives are on the table. These have been proposed by different parties in an uncoordinated manner and have yet to have had the desired impact. There is a need to update these incentives, to combine them into one holistic package, and to collectively put them to use. This is a task that a new international entity, such as the ISG, could set out to achieve.
9. It is important that the creation of an ISG does not diminish the efforts and abilities of existing international organizations and various states to separately promote the peace process. If done unwisely, the creation of a new international entity could potentially harm independently taken steps and retard progress that has already been made.

D. How Should Israel Respond?

Despite the fact that Israel is not supposed to be part of an ISG, it would be wise for the Israeli government to take a positive approach to this initiative.

Israel should be willing to discuss the ISG initiative with the international community, and refrain from ruling it out altogether. Israel should cooperate with the entity if formed, and think about how it could benefit from the ISG. However, it is likely that the current Israeli government will see this group as another international organization whose goal is to criticize Israel and to pressure her into making concessions, and will thus try to block the formation of an ISG.

The Israeli government will want to ensure that the US plays a central role in leading an ISG, if created, and that such a group will include countries that Israel views positively and cooperates with. However, in order for the group to have a influence over the various actors in the region, and in order for it to be able to promote initiatives such as the reconstruction of the Gaza Strip or reconciliation between Fatah and Hamas, it is important that the group also include states that have access to Hamas.

The Israeli public will only perceive this group as relevant and worthy of attention if it is believed to represent something different than which characterized past international efforts. In this regard, the involvement of Arab countries can be seen as a positive development. Advocates of a two-state solution should support the creation of such an entity because its end goal will be to promote precisely such a solution.

Additionally, it is important that an informal support group exists alongside the official one. This group should include civil society actors, namely think tanks from the various international actors represented in the ISG. However, it is also important that such a group, unlike to formal one, will also include Israelis and Palestinians. The voices of the parties to the conflict are vital. Such a group could accompany the work of the ISG, and contribute significantly by informally examining ideas and solutions, as well as by proposing relevant policy recommendations.

Israel could also reap benefits from yet another group, in which Israelis and Palestinians were members, alongside representatives of other conflict-ridden countries around the world. Despite the prevalent tendency in Israel to see its conflict with the Palestinians as unique, taking a comparative view of conflicts and peace processes around the world could be beneficial while seeking a breakthrough in the Israeli-Palestinian relations.