

International Involvement towards Israeli-Palestinian Conflict Resolution

A Policy Paper Submitted to the International Working Group to Advance Israeli-Palestinian Peacemaking

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Given ongoing stagnation in the peace process and the new American administration, the Mitvim Institute convened a policy-planning roundtable to discuss which steps the international community can take in order to promote Israeli-Palestinian peacemaking, and which mechanisms are required in order to carry out such steps. The roundtable was attended by experts from various pro-peace Israeli organizations. This document summarizes the discussion that took place. It does not necessarily reflect consensus among participants.

A. A New International Environment

1. The Paralysis of the International Community

Since Donald Trump assumed office, the international community has largely taken a backseat regarding the Israeli-Palestinian peace process and adopted a “wait and see” approach.

This is not just because of the different priorities and ambiguous positions of the new American administration; other countries are also occupied with internal affairs. In 2017, Germany, France, and the Netherlands will focus on their general elections, and the UK will focus on Brexit. The Israeli-Palestinian peace process will not be at the top of their agendas.

While UN Security Council Resolution 2334 reflected an internationally agreed position regarding the settlements, the January 2017 Paris peace conference failed to reach an international consensus on other aspects of the Israeli-Palestinian issue. Even the conference’s watered-down final statement was not endorsed by all countries present.

There seem to be very few issues concerning the peace process on which a broad agreement can currently be reached within the international community. The Israeli-Palestinian issue is becoming a dividing factor, rather than a source of international unity. This lack of consensus does not drive specific countries to act, but rather lessens diplomatic activism on the issue.

It is difficult to envision how the international community can take meaningful action at a point in which key actors are uninterested in moving things forward, and do not perceive that their involvement can bring about concrete achievements.

Due to the political situation in Israel, and the domestic challenges faced by the Palestinians, there is growing international skepticism regarding the possibility of persuading Israel and the Palestinians to reach an end-game agreement, or to even engage in meaningful

negotiations towards it. Such efforts are increasingly regarded as bound to fail, and their failure is feared to be a potential source of conflict and escalation.

The international community is paralyzed. It is not motivated to immerse itself in Israeli-Palestinian conflict management, and it does not believe that progress towards conflict resolution is currently possible.

2. The New American Administration

The new American administration seems to be inward-looking, and there is widespread uncertainty regarding its Middle East policies.

It is assumed that the Israeli-Palestinian issue will not be a priority for President Trump and that the US is unlikely to become deeply involved in Middle Eastern affairs. However, Trump's unpredictability may lead to surprises. He publicly expressed interest to reach the "ultimate deal" between Israelis and Palestinians, and appointed his son-in-law, Jared Kushner, to tackle the issue.

The fact that Trump has so far avoided major action on the Israeli-Palestinian issue (i.e. relocating the US Embassy to Jerusalem) is important in terms of damage control and preventing escalation on the ground. Nevertheless, over time, we may see a de facto withdrawal from traditional US policies, as was evident in the Trump-Netanyahu press conference in February 2017.

Netanyahu and his government are expected to benefit from Trump's presidency, as US policies on the Israeli-Palestinian issue will likely become more aligned with those promoted by the Israeli right.

3. Russia and the Israeli-Palestinian Issue

In recent months, Russia has shown growing activism towards the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. It has offered to host a summit between Netanyahu and Abbas, and managed to convene the various Palestinian factions in an attempt to promote reconciliation.

The Palestinians feel more at ease with Russian involvement than with American mediation. However, Russia's main regional interests lie elsewhere – including Syria and economic developments. The Palestinian issue is not a priority for them.

Nevertheless, involvement with the Israeli-Palestinian peace process can bring Russia political prestige, emphasize its leverage in the region, and send a signal to the US. US-Russia relations are now in a period of transition. The outcomes of this transition will influence Russia's future involvement in the Israeli-Palestinian issue.

4. The Role of Arab Countries

Egypt, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia have the ability to help shape events related to the peace process. For example, Jordan reportedly played a role in convincing Trump to walk back his campaign promise to relocate the US Embassy to Jerusalem.

However, major Arab countries seem eager to develop strong ties with the Trump administration, and may be willing to do so at the expense of the Palestinian issue, which does not top their agenda.

Still, the Israeli-Palestinian issue is more important to these countries (especially to Jordan and Egypt) than to most actors in the international community, and therefore the Arab world has potential to play a constructive role.

In contrast to the expectations of Netanyahu, and perhaps also to those of Trump, Arab countries are unlikely to substantially increase their relations with Israel before significant progress is made in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. These countries are also not in a rush to operationalize the Arab Peace Initiative. John Kerry did not succeed in convincing them to do so, and this is unlikely to change under the new administration.

B. Options for Future Policy Directions

As Israeli-Palestinian peace negotiations are not set to relaunch soon, what other policy directions can the international community pursue?

The options can be clustered into the following categories: (1) seeking a genuine breakthrough towards a final-status agreement; (2) preserving the two-state solution and promoting a two-state reality; (3) maintaining international interest in the peace process and promoting activism; (4) reversing negative trends on the ground and preventing escalation; (5) dismantling structural and political obstacles to conflict resolution.

In line with these categories, the international community can take the following steps:

- Seek a UN Security Council resolution defining parameters for an Israeli-Palestinian final-status agreement, even though it does not seem feasible at the moment.
- Encourage the Arab League to officially adopt (or at least react positively to, as some Arab countries have done) the principles for Israeli-Palestinian peace that Kerry introduced just before leaving office.
- Launch a significant international effort to promote Palestinian reconciliation and to recreate a unified Palestinian political system. This will remove a major structural obstacle on the way to a two-state solution.
- Define a global set of political and economic incentives, as called for by the French peace initiative and the EU's Foreign Affairs Council. This could be based on already existing incentives, such as the Arab Peace Initiative, the EU's Special Privileged Partnership, and US security guarantees.
- Engage in damage control regarding core issues of the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, especially Jerusalem and settlements, in order to preserve the two-state solution and prevent escalation and violence on the ground.
- Monitor events and identify opportunities. Reality is dynamic, and changes or major events that may occur in the next few years are likely to open windows of opportunity. These should be anticipated and prepared for.

- Encourage small steps by Israel and the Palestinians that can help bring the desired end-game closer, and that do not contradict it. Such steps can reverse negative trends, change reality on the ground, and create dynamics that preserve the two-state solution.
- Target public opinion, locally and internationally. Explain why maintaining the status quo is not an option anymore and why it is time for an historic decision; present different scenarios for future developments (including annexation and one-state), describe their anticipated consequences, and create public fora for debate on possible solutions to the conflict.
- Encourage and empower the new UN Secretary General to become a significant actor regarding the peace process. He is well positioned for this, and the UN is already increasing its involvement in issues of peace and security.

C. The Need for International Mechanisms

In recent years, there has been a growing understanding that the Israeli-Palestinian peace process requires broader regional and international involvement. However, this has yet to be translated into a concrete new international architecture.

The Quartet was not expanded to include Arab countries. An International Support Group has not been set up. Efforts to bring together a variety of international actors for joint discussions on the peace process did not prove effective.

Looking forward, key international actors appear unlikely to act independently on the Israeli-Palestinian issue in the coming year, and Trump's policies might harm the Quartet, the main international mechanism for promoting Israeli-Palestinian conflict resolution.

1. A New International Mechanism

The establishment of a new international mechanism to advance the peace process does not seem likely, due to the global environment. Nevertheless, such a mechanism – should it be put into place – has the potential to contribute to conflict resolution efforts by:

- Filling in for the US, challenging the traditional US-dominance regarding the peace process, and creating a broader international umbrella to promote the peace process.
- Providing space for joint action for actors in the international community that are still interested in pushing the peace process forward. This will also give Arab countries the opportunity to obtain a formal role in the peace process. Currently, their formal role is limited to consultations with the Quartet.
- Bringing together the international actors that are necessary in order to provide end-game and process-related incentives to Israel and the Palestinians. Currently there is no international mechanism that is capable of devising the “political and economic global set of incentives” and introducing them in an internationally coordinated manner.

- Constantly suggesting new ideas, providing fresh thinking, challenging long-standing paradigms, and proposing strategic moves that can assist conflict resolution in the long term.

2. Ad Hoc Partnerships

International activism to promote the peace process can also be conducted through ad hoc and flexible partnerships, not only through formal mechanisms that respond slowly to changing realities.

Instead of inventing something new, it is important to assess which individual states are capable of taking actions to promote the peace process, and to increase interactions and connections between them, even on an ad hoc basis. This can assist in blocking negative moves and in promoting constructive processes.

For example, the December 2016 summit between the European and Arab foreign ministers, which made reference to the Middle East peace process and to the Arab Peace Initiative, indicates that there may be value in an ongoing Euro-Arab dialogue on the Israeli-Palestinian issue, even if it is not part of a formal international mechanism.

The final declaration of the January 2017 Paris peace conference stated that “interested participants, expressing their readiness to review progress, resolved to meet again before the end of the year in order to support both sides in advancing the two-state solution through negotiations”. It is necessary to ensure that such a meeting actually takes place, and that it serves as a stepping stone for more effective international involvement in the peace process.

3. Unofficial Mechanisms

In parallel to the official channels, there is also room for new unofficial mechanisms, such as the International Working Group to Advance Israeli-Palestinian Peacemaking, that can advance the policy directions outlined in this document. Such unofficial mechanisms should:

- Include Israeli and Palestinian representatives, not just third-parties.
- Center around civil society actors – especially think tanks, as generators of fresh thinking, sound analysis, and innovative policy ideas.
- Serve as an incubator for new ideas and as a collective “testing ground” for evaluating and developing ideas raised in formal channels.
- Have good access to policymakers in relevant countries and international institutions.
- Bring together pro-peace actors from different countries and regions, and foster alliances between them at a time when their worldview is increasingly marginalized.
- Prepare the ground for future progress once the regional and international environment changes and the peace process is resumed.