



France's Counterproductive "Peace Initiative"

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Francois Hollande's desire to leave office with a foreign policy accomplishment under his belt notwithstanding, the French "peace initiative" will not achieve a rapprochement between the Israelis and the Palestinians. On the contrary: it is dangerous to both Israeli and Palestinian security, and conveys the harmful message that obstructionism, violence and incitement are effective policy tools.

The "peace initiative" launched in Paris on June 3, 2016 was accompanied by an impressive display of French diplomatic fanfare, but the final statement did not match its originators' stated aspirations to formulate parameters for the conflict's core issues (borders, security, Jerusalem, refugees) and to set a rigid timetable for the attainment of an Israeli-Palestinian agreement.

France remains committed to the initiative nonetheless. It has created working groups to discuss the core issues and devised economic incentives intended to bring the sides to the table and ultimately to an agreement. The follow-up conference is to be convened on January 15, 2017, with about seventy states in attendance.

Paris appears to be obsessed with its diplomatic role as mediator in this conflict. It is similarly fixated on sticking to what it considers to be the only possible formula for resolution: two states, living side-by-side in peace within the 1967 borders. This formula allows for slight territorial exchanges, and labels East Jerusalem the Palestinian capital.

The French are not shy about flaunting their supposed success in promoting international diplomatic support for the two-state solution, claiming that its

peace initiative can potentially restart the peace process and contribute to the security of Israel, the Palestinians, and even the whole region.

The Palestinian Authority, but not Hamas, has warmly endorsed the initiative. It hopes it will pursue the line set forth in UNSC Resolution 2334 and the December 2016 speech of US Secretary of State John Kerry, which condemned the Israeli settlements in Judea and Samaria. Israel opposes the initiative, claiming that direct dialogue between the two sides in the conflict, with no preconditions, is the only way to reach an agreement. Jerusalem also maintains that it and only it can or should be charged with ensuring Israel's security. Israel does not appear to trust the French initiative.

In a nine-point document presenting its position on the conflict, the French foreign ministry (the Quai d'Orsay) underlines that "France is a friend to both Israel and Palestine." This phrase reflects the French ambition to play an influential role by serving as an impartial intermediary. However, during the almost fifty years that have followed the 1967 war, France has demonstrated time and again its pro-Palestinian bias.

In 1967, for example, France had already adopted its own, albeit incorrect version of UNSC Resolution 242. This resolution calls for Israel's withdrawal "from territories occupied in the recent conflict," not from "**the** territories", as it appears in the French translation of the resolution. During the debate that preceded the passing of the resolution, it was clarified that the called-for withdrawal did not include all of the territories. In addition, the called-for withdrawal is linked to another clause that calls for the end of belligerency, and for the recognition that every state in the area has the "right to live in peace within secure and recognized boundaries free from threats or acts of force." (Interestingly, the Palestinians were not mentioned in the resolution, which contains a clause calling for a just settlement of the refugee problem, which includes Jewish refugees who fled the Arab states.)

Throughout the following years and up to the present, Paris has initiated diplomatic moves or voted in favor of the Palestinians, despite their perpetual acts of terror against Israelis and repeated calls for Israel's destruction. . By way of example, in November 1974, two years after the Munich massacre of 11 Israeli athletes, France voted in favor of recognizing the PLO as an observer at the UN.

In March 1982, French president Francois Mitterrand was the first foreign leader to declare during his Knesset address in Jerusalem that the Palestinians had the right to a homeland of their own. He emphasized his friendship with

Israel and its right to security, and offered France's "good offices" in mediating between Israel and the Palestinians.

In October 2000, shortly after the launch of the Palestinian war of terror (euphemized as the "al-Aqsa Intifada"), President Jacques Chirac encouraged Yasser Arafat not to sign a US-mediated agreement to end the violence and to insist instead on an international enquiry commission to investigate Israel's reactions to Palestinian acts of terror. In the subsequent years, Paris directed its criticism mainly toward Israel's defensive measures rather than the Palestinian terror attacks.

In 2010, France upgraded the diplomatic status of the Palestinian delegation in Paris to a diplomatic mission headed by an ambassador who presents his credentials to the French president. Two years later, Paris voted in support of the unilateral Palestinian initiative at the UN General Assembly to be recognized as a UN state observer. This move contradicted numerous declarations regarding French support for direct Israeli-Palestinian dialogue rather than unilateral moves.

In 2014, during the summer war between Israel and Hamas in Gaza, Paris declared that Israel had the right to defend its citizens from Hamas rockets, only to reverse its position following large-scale violent demonstrations by French Muslims. Foreign Minister Fabius even went so far as to label Israel's military operations, aimed at protecting Israeli citizens from Hamas massive rocket attacks, as a massacre and called for an imposed international solution.

Fabius also proposed a deadline for the restart of the Israeli-Palestinian dialogue, at the end of which France would unilaterally recognize a Palestinian state. This removed any incentive the Palestinians might have had to maintain a dialogue that would require concessions, particularly on the issue of refugees.

In October 2015, in reaction to a wave of Palestinian terror attacks against Israeli citizens, Fabius called for the stationing of international inspectors in Jerusalem. This could be interpreted as support for the false Palestinian allegation that Israel aspires to retain control of the al-Aqsa mosque. It was reminiscent of the historic French call (before the creation of Israel and some years afterwards) to designate Jerusalem as a "Corpus Seperatum" to be placed under international administration.

In addition, in October 2016, France voted in favor of a UNESCO resolution denying the historical link between Israel and Jerusalem. Following numerous protests, the government apologized and described the vote as a mistake. Yet

it continued to pursue its anti-Israeli line and voted in favor of a scandalous resolution at the World Health Organization that singled out Israel for alleged abuses of health rights in the West Bank, Gaza and the Golan Heights.

As mentioned, in December 2016, Paris voted in favor of UNSC resolution 2334, which condemns Israeli settlements in Judea and Samaria as illegal under international law, in contrast to French declarations in favor of a negotiated agreement between Israel and the Palestinians.

Paris explains its diplomatic activism for the creation of a Palestinian state as being motivated by the growing instability in the Middle East, which, according to French popular opinion, is caused by the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. It also maintains that the problems arising from that conflict are later imported into France in the form of deteriorating relations between the Muslim and Jewish communities.

Both these conclusions are erroneous. Instability in the Middle East is caused by complex social, economic, political, religious and ethnic factors that have no connection to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In addition, the violence of Muslims against French Jews is triggered essentially the process of Islamic radicalization as well as by social and economic problems. It is that factor that has produced increasing support for IS and, ultimately, the horrible terror attacks that have been carried out in France.

French support for the Palestinians can be more accurately attributed to the traditional importance that Paris attaches to its relations with the Arab and Muslim worlds. In addition, France's diplomatic activism reflects certain domestic electoral considerations.

President Holland, whose popularity has declined precipitously, has announced that he will not run in the upcoming presidential elections. It is likely that before he leaves office in May 2017, Hollande will want to present some kind of achievement to contrast with his failures in domestic policy and lack of significant successes in foreign policy. Additionally, in view of the uncertainty regarding the future policy of the American president-elect, the French government would like to seize an opportunity in the last few days before Obama leaves office. Paris has consistently pushed in the last years for an international initiative on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In light of Kerry's December speech, the French might see a chance to push for some sort of international decision that might impact the way the Trump administration deals with the issue.

At the end of the day, the French peace initiative is counterproductive, since it hardens the Palestinian negotiating position. Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas declared after the June conference that the PA was now demanding full Israeli withdrawal, including from East Jerusalem. The French initiative also hardens the position of the Arab states regarding Israel's request to introduce changes in the Saudi initiative as a possible basis for resolution.

The French initiative endangers the security of Israel. No international force or guarantees can ensure Israel's security, as has been proven time and again, most recently in the case of UNIFIL in south Lebanon. But the initiative is also dangerous for the Palestinian Authority, since Israel acts as a buffer that mitigates the threat of its takeover by Hamas. Not least, the initiative undermines France's own fight against domestic and international terrorism, as it conveys the message that violence and terror incitement are effective.

Hopefully, Israel will be successful in convincing the US, the EU, and other reasonable states attending the conference that the French "peace initiative" and the internationalization of the peace process are counterproductive. There are better ways of addressing this issue.

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