

Diplomatic parade or last struggle against fatalism? Making sense of the Paris ministerial meeting on the Middle East Peace Process

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On 3 June, the French government convened an international meeting in Paris, gathering 28 high-level delegations from all around the world, from Norway to Japan, in order to discuss the state of play and future prospects of the enduring Israel-Palestine conflict.

The first ministerial meeting of the “Initiative for the Peace in the Middle East”, as it was labelled by the Quai d’Orsay, provided an important political signal, and a potential diplomatic format, to help revive the long-stalled peace process. Yet, its concrete deliverables remain beset by considerable uncertainty.

An inexistent peace process, an unsustainable status quo

The Middle East Peace Process (MEPP) has been falling apart in the past few years. Between 2013 and 2014, the latest mediation efforts by the US Administration only resulted in limited progress, and ultimately failed to achieve the resumption of bilateral peace negotiations.

So far, both the framework envisaged by the Oslo Accords from the mid-1990s and the Middle East Quartet, bringing together the United Nations, Russia, the US and the European Union (EU), have been unsuccessful in advancing peace and changing the *status quo*, with serious consequences on the ground. In fact, Israel’s settlement activities and occupation practices have been accompanied by a growing ‘silent Intifada’ on the Palestinian side. The situation is worsened by a recent spike in violence between the two sides, which has its roots in the lack of concrete prospects to end the conflict anytime soon.

What is more, volatile domestic politics both in the Israeli and Palestinian camps have been largely adverse to peace-making. While an increasingly right-leaning Israeli government remains ambiguous at best about its stated commitment to the two-state solution, the absence of a sustainable political reconciliation between Fatah and Hamas, the threat of an outright collapse of its dysfunctional statehood capacities, and growing discontent among its youth, also risk pushing the Palestinian Authority (PA) to an ever-more assertive and uncompromising stance.

The French Peace Initiative: an open process with uncertain deliverables

In an attempt to fill the void of the US’s failed mediation efforts, French diplomacy worked intensely on a new peace-making work strand in the past year or so. While original plans included a fully-fledged UN Security Council Resolution on the MEPP, and even entailed the possibility of the unilateral recognition of the State of Palestine, Paris finally opted for a more discreet work of diplomatic engagement, led by the Special Envoy Pierre Vimont, over the organisation of a preliminary gathering of like-minded countries and international organisations, without the participation of Israelis and Palestinians.

The Final Communiqué issued by the Paris meeting proved to be quite vague in its policy prescriptions. While participants reaffirmed the importance of a negotiated two-state solution for the MEPP, they only took stock of their discussion on “ways” for the international community to contribute to that goal, and welcomed France’s intention to convene another conference by the end of 2016.

While the next steps of the Paris Initiative are still to materialise, some early indications made by the French Foreign Minister, Jean-Marc Ayrault, suggest that France remains committed to setting an international diplomatic framework for the resumption of bilateral negotiations between Israelis and Palestinians, starting with some concrete suggestions – most likely in the form of thematic working groups by the Conference’s contributing parties – on some ‘peace-enabling’ topics like economic incentives, security guarantees and regional cooperation.

Admittedly, the constraints to the very success of the French Initiative remain significant. To start with, the ‘buy-in’ by the two parties in conflict needs to be secured, and while the Israeli government has already rejected the multilateral feature of the Initiative and hinted at a parallel (and still uncertain) mediation effort by Egypt, representatives from the PA leadership have not concealed their disappointment for what they consider a politically watered-down and operationally weak outcome of the Paris meeting.

Secondly, the exact articulation between the French Initiative and pre-existing formats such as the Quartet, which is expected to issue a presumably vocal report on the MEPP in the next few days, and the 2002 Arab Peace Initiative, clearly evoked by the Paris Final Communiqué as a viable negotiating basis, will have to be worked out carefully in the immediate future.

Thirdly, the future evolution of the US position *vis-à-vis* the MEPP is still likely to greatly affect the concrete impacts of the meeting. Indeed, the cautious attitude showed by State Secretary John Kerry in Paris is somewhat telling of Washington’s half-hearted commitment to the rationale and *modus operandi* of the Initiative.

A precious opportunity for the EU to revive the MEPP?

Since the historic 1980 Venice Declaration, the EU has been a staunch supporter of a two-state solution for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. However, so far Brussels has been unable to play a leading role in the MEPP both due to the high political complexities of the *dossier* and the inner difficulties in securing a strong consensus among EU member states on concrete action on the ground.

The EU High Representative and Commission Vice-President, Federica Mogherini, has made the MEPP a seeming priority in her political agenda, as signalled by the choice to visit the region in her first official mission in late 2014. In her remarks in the margins of the Paris meeting, Mogherini has pragmatically insisted on the need to at least “create the space, the possibility, the framework” for the peace negotiations to resume.

Building on that, the Paris meeting could thus present the EU with a precious chance to maximise its expected added value in the MEPP, notably by focussing on appropriate economic incentives via the Special Privileged Partnership it promised to both sides in case of peace, solid security guarantees via an overdue upgrade of its Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) missions in the region, a much-needed revitalisation of the declining role of the Quartet, closer coordination with key players in the region, including pragmatic Arab interlocutors, and stronger coordination among its own member states, starting with the various absentees from the Paris meeting.

The discussion scheduled to take place in the forthcoming Foreign Affairs Council meeting in Luxembourg on 20 June will provide a first test for the EU’s willingness to engage in such a demanding exercise. In that regard, it would be ideal that EU Foreign Ministers could come up with an agreed plan detailing the EU’s potential contribution to the ‘Paris process’.

Given the present failure of a purely bilateral resolution of the Israel-Palestine conflict, the Paris ministerial meeting might provide a last struggle against a worryingly widespread fatalism over the future of the MEPP. It should now be everybody’s responsibility to avoid that it goes down in history as an umpteenth, and tragically ineffective, diplomatic parade.

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