



**NORMALISING
OCCUPATION,
DENYING JUSTICE:**

THE INTERNATIONAL FUND FOR
ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN PEACE &
THE RETURN OF P2P PROGRAMMES

POLICY BRIEFING

OCTOBER 03, 2023

BACKGROUND

1. Since the early 1990s, successive Middle East political initiatives have failed to bring about a just peace and the **realisation of Palestinians' inalienable rights** to self-determination and the right of return of refugees.
2. These initiatives have departed from the **multilateral framework** of the UN and adherence to international law, and the international consensus on the essential requirements for a just peace. Instead there has been a reliance on unilateral US initiatives and the adoption of inappropriate and ineffective peace-making models designed to resolve ethnic or religious conflict.
3. Such approaches reflect a persistent failure to respond to the **reality on the ground**: a decades long occupation, the dispossession of a people and the denial of their basic rights at the hands of a powerful state and military force. These 'peace processes' have consistently failed to treat Israel as an occupying power, nor seek to hold it accountable for its violations of international law.
4. The result has been the prolonged suffering and dispossession we see today, the increasing **erosion of the rule of law** and the entrenching of a structure of domination that a growing consensus of Palestinian, Israeli and international human rights organisations and policy analysts recognise as a form of **apartheid**.
5. The most recent and extreme iteration of this approach is US President Trump's 'outside-in' strategy of **bypassing the Palestinians** altogether by achieving bilateral peace treaties between Israel and the Arab states, **normalising the occupation** at the regional level whilst simultaneously advancing key Israeli policy goals such as the recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital, the annexation of the Golan Heights, Israeli settlements in the West Bank and defunding UNRWA. While the Biden administration has taken some steps to reverse some of these measures, the core elements of this approach remains.

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THE 'INTERNATIONAL FUND FOR PEACE': RESURRECTING A FAILED PARADIGM, REINFORCING ASYMMETRIES OF POWER

6. Joint Israeli-Palestinian civil society initiatives and dialogue groups – so-called **'People-to-People' (P2P) programmes** – were originally introduced as a pillar of the Oslo peace process.
7. These programmes relied on the misapplication of **'contact theory'**, an approach that emerged in the 1950s designed to tackle mutual prejudice between communities. While proponents argued that mutual stereotyping could be overcome through intergroup contact, the equal status of the groups was a prerequisite and not an outcome of the process.
8. By presenting Israel's military occupation and dispossession of the Palestinians as an ethnic conflict between Palestinians and Israelis, and ignoring the fundamental **asymmetry of power** between the two peoples, these programmes have contributed to delegitimising the application of international law while normalising occupation and structural violence against Palestinians at the level of civil society. They are widely considered to have been part of the failure of Oslo to address the structural changes required for conflict resolution: end to occupation, the ongoing dispossession of Palestinians, colonisation of Palestinian land and widespread human rights violations.
9. A research study commissioned by DfID and published in 2021 on the value for money of P2P programmes in Israel/Palestine found **insufficient evidence of positive impact**.
10. Former participants and staff in some of the most well-touted success stories of P2P programming have called for them to be shut down, citing concerns that the model was based on outdated research and worked to cover up the structural issues at play between Israel and the Palestinians (see a longer article on the topic): <https://jewishcurrents.org/all-talk/>
11. Despite these failures, P2P programmes have been resurrected in recent years, most notably through the **International Fund for Israeli-Palestinian Peace**. Promoted by the Alliance for Middle East Peace (ALLMEP), this initiative seeks to create a \$200m annual fund for P2P programmes. Progress towards this goal was achieved in December 2020 with the passage of the **Lowey Fund** into law by the US Congress. Policy analysts have criticised ALLMEP and the Lowey Fund for reproducing the flaws of P2P programmes by 'sustaining the inequalities between two the two sides and thereby maintaining the conflict'.

WHO SUPPORTS THE INTERNATIONAL FUND AND WHAT IS THE UK GOVERNMENT'S POSITION?

12. In the US, the International Fund is promoted and supported by mainstream **pro-Israel organisations** (such as AIPAC) and has received bipartisan support among pro-Israel members of Congress who also advocated sanctions on the International Criminal Court for its investigation into the situation in Palestine.
13. The Fund's corollary project in the US, the **Middle East Partnership for Peace Act (MEPPA)** has been presented as the centrepiece of the Biden administration's policy on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and its chair has promoted the Fund as a new policy tool for the Biden administration to advance the normalisation policy of the Trump Administration.
14. In the absence of any political initiative in Parliament to advance Palestinian rights or hold Israel accountable for its violations of international law, the International Fund has increasingly become a call adopted by MPs as an alternative to upholding the UK's moral and legal **obligations to the Palestinian people or as a way to deligitimise solidarity activities such as campaigns for boycott, divestment and sanctions**. In the House of Commons debate on the anti-boycott bill, the then Shadow Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Lisa Nandy MP condemned support for BDS: "the one bright spot on a very difficult horizon that I have seen on my trips to the middle east has been the co-existence and joint venture projects that have flourished, through which BDS drives a coach and horses."
15. In the UK, groups with an established history of anti-Palestinian advocacy and opposing international law-based approaches to the conflict have been promoting the International Fund:
 - **Conservative Friends of Israel** and its members have repeatedly endorsed the International Fund in statements and correspondence while simultaneously seeking to close down accountability and multilateral approaches to justice and peace: <https://twitter.com/CFoI/status/1364308218206380041>
 - Support for an International Fund by the British government is a key campaign of **Labour Friends of Israel**.
 - In a Westminster Hall debate on the topic in November 2020, MPs supporting the Fund in the same breath condemned UK charities and NGOs who oppose the occupation for having a "politicised and partisan approach to the middle east" and accused UNRWA's definition of refugees as "perpetuating division rather than bringing people together".

FOUR CRITICAL FAILURES OF THE INTERNATIONAL FUND'S APPROACH:

1. Ignoring international law will not lead to peace

- There has been a steady movement away from a multilateral, international law-based approach to achieving peace in the Middle East. This was accelerated during the Trump years with the 'Deal of the Century' attempting to create a new far-right norm to undo decades of international consensus and erode the international rule of law.
- UN human rights experts and international human rights organisations have repeatedly insisted that impunity for violations of international law allow Israel to continue to flout it, and creates a larger precedent for international rules based systems. As the UN Special Rapporteur, Francesca Albanese has emphasised, "The international community has systematically failed to hold Israel accountable, thus enabling its impunity and permitting its settler colonial endeavours."
- The consensus amongst Palestinian and Israeli human rights organisations is that international law must be the normative basis for any viable peace initiatives.
- **RECOMMENDATION: The focus of the UK government and opposition parties should be on strengthening international law and ensuring accountability. Supporting initiatives which ignore international law in such a context would mean strengthening far-right forces that depend on impunity and erosion of international law.**

2. The Palestinian people and their demands for justice have been ignored

- There is currently no constituency of Palestinian civil society supporting an International Fund for Peace or further P2P projects – a reality that any attempt a meaningful consultation with Palestinians would show. Of the 150 member organisations of ALLMEP, only a handful are Palestinian founded and run. The mainstream of Palestinian civil society remains opposed to all forms of *tatbi* or 'normalisation', which include P2P projects that are not premised on opposing the occupation and the forms of discrimination and oppression to which the Palestinian people are subjected.
- **RECOMMENDATION: The government and opposition parties should reject proposals to advance P2P funding which are coupled with policy positions which seek to undermine the rule of international law or Palestinian rights. In line with the UK's stated support for Palestinian self-determination and international best practice, it should ensure that Palestinians are meaningfully consulted in policymaking decision-making which would impact them.**

FOUR CRITICAL FAILURES OF THE INTERNATIONAL FUND'S APPROACH:

3. The Palestinian people are facing a crisis: UK funding should go to support Palestinians human rights defenders and civic needs

- Cuts in foreign aid are having a devastating impact on Palestinians' access to healthcare, educational support, and other critical needs. Palestinian civil society and human rights defenders struggle to receive the funding they need.
- UNRWA, which serves over 5 million refugees, faces an existential financial crisis, which UK cuts have only exacerbated. The Palestinian Authority is struggling to pay salaries.
- This is especially the case in the Gaza Strip, but the increased need there will also impact what is distributed to West Bank communities facing de facto annexation, rampant settler violence, demolitions and forced displacement.
- In a situation where human rights abuses are proliferating, annexation is being implemented and displacement are becoming even more commonplace, priority for financial and political assistance should be based on these clear and articulated needs.
- **RECOMMENDATION: The UK government and opposition parties should be supporting funding for Palestinian civil society organisations working to realise Palestinian rights rather than promote P2P funding at a time of aid cuts, particularly in the context of a protracted humanitarian and human rights crisis affecting Palestinians.**

4. The Fund could enable investment in illegal settlements

- Policy experts who observed the development of this Fund in the U.S. have raised red flag concerns that it makes way for investments in illegal settlement infrastructure to support 'co-existence'
- For example, Israeli factories in the occupied West Bank, employing Palestinians, have presented themselves as 'peace projects' in the past—these types of factories are considered a war crime under international law, and undermine the rights of the (captive) Palestinian people whose own economic freedom is curtailed by occupation. See this article for more: <https://responsiblestatecraft.org/2020/09/02/new-fund-palestinian-economy-benefit-israeli-settlers/>
- **RECOMMENDATION: The end use of International Peace Fund financing should be investigated and in particular, financial support for illegal settlers or settler activity.**



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