

CHINA BROKERS A PEACE DEAL IN PALESTINE

ISRAEL ITCHES FOR WAR

The article retraces the evolution of the conflict in West Asia, marked by the escalation of the Israeli operations in Gaza and of the reciprocal attacks between Hezbollah and the Israel Defense Force (IDF). Prime Minister Netanyahu has so far derailed the negotiations for a ceasefire and a prisoner swap that threaten his tenuous hold on power. The Israeli Government and its US backers are worried about China's successful initiative in support of a United National Reconciliation Government to rule Gaza. China, Russia, Saudi Arabia, and other Arab and African states are behind the Beijing Declaration on Ending Division and Strengthening Palestinian Unity whereas Iran is heightening its collaboration with Hezbollah, Syria, the Iraqi Islamic Resistance, and Yemen's Houthis.

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Nudged by Saudi Arabia which called upon the international community to recognise Palestine as an independent state (27 July 2024), Qatari Prime Minister Mohammed Bin Abdul Rahman al-Thani and Egyptian spy chief Abbas Kamel met with CIA director Bill Burns and Mossad director David Barnea in Rome (28 July 2024) to discuss modalities for a permanent ceasefire and exchange of Hamas-held hostages for Palestinians incarcerated in Israel, to end the crippling war in Gaza, Palestine.

Anxious to scuttle both the ceasefire and prisoner swap negotiations that could end his political career and cold-shouldered by Democratic and Republican Party leaders during a recent visit to the United States, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu escalated tensions dramatically. A Palestinian peace deal facilitated by Beijing was also factored in.

On 31 July 2024, Hamas's key negotiator for peace, Ismail Haniyeh, was assassinated in Teheran and Hezbollah commander Fuad Shukr was killed in Beirut. However, Israel's claim to have eliminated Qassam Brigades chief Marwan Issa and Hamas commander Mohammed al-Deif in the Gaza Strip, and Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) Aerospace Forces commander Amir Ali Hajizadeh in Damascus, Syria, were denied or unconfirmed at the time of writing.

The assassinations come close on the heels of China's diplomatic coup in uniting all 14 Palestinian factions, including Hamas and Fatah, in a "national unity" agreement aimed at maintaining Palestinian control over Gaza after the war ends. Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu, who visited the United States at the same time the agreement was being signed in Beijing on 23 July 2024, shrugged aside the mounting Western criticism of Palestinian casualties and declared his intention to attack Hezbollah in Lebanon.

Beirut was attacked soon afterwards, and as tensions in the region rose, Saudi Arabian Prime Minister Prince Mohammed bin Salman (Mbs) urged citizens to leave Lebanon immediately, as did other nations.

As Washington and Europe grow weary of the war and mounting civilian casualties (termed genocide by many nations), UK Prime Minister Keir Starmer called for an immediate ceasefire in Gaza. Speaking in Parliament on 22 July 2024, he stressed the urgency of humanitarian aid and the return of hostages. Calling the situation in Gaza "intolerable," Starmer said, "the world will not look away as innocent civilians, including women and children, continue to face death, disease, and displacement". (*It cannot go on: British premier calls for immediate cease-fire in Gaza, Anadolu Ajansi, 22 July 2024 <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/euro-pel-it-cannot-go-on-british-premier-calls-for-immediate-cess-fire-in-gaza/3282404>*) He pointed out that the Labour government has resumed British funding to the UN agency for Palestinian refugees (UNRWA) and reaffirmed London's opposition to the expansion of illegal settlements and support for a two-state solution.

China's feat, at par with the Saudi-Iran détente it brokered in March 2023, is

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truly remarkable as the Palestinian schism has resisted all attempts at mediation since 2007 when the militant Hamas seized the Gaza Strip from the moderate Fatah. The closing ceremony of the conference was attended by BRICS members Russia, South Africa, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia, and diplomats from Algeria, Qatar, Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, and Türkiye.

Saudi Arabia's backing gives heft to Beijing's move. Riyadh and Teheran are full-fledged members of BRICS (2023) and support China and Russia in their drive to reduce the dominance of the US dollar in international trade (de-dollarisation). This could facilitate the rise of the petroyuan.

Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi hailed the 23 July 2024 accord, the fruit of three days of intense discussions in Beijing (21-23 July), as a "historic moment for the cause of Palestine's liberation". Referring to the West Bank administration run by Fatah, Wang Li said the agreement establishes "that the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) is the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people". (*The PLO: A New Era of Unity, Jewish Socialist Group, July 24, 2024. <https://www.jewishsocialist.org.uk/news/item/the-plo-a-new-era-of-unity>*)

Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said, "We welcome the agreements on overcoming the inter-Palestinian split... We expect these agreements to be implemented." She underlined the importance of Palestinian unity and the administrative and political integrity of the Palestinian territories within the 1967 borders as essential for establishing sustainable Palestinian-Israeli peace negotiations.

The Beijing Declaration on Ending Division and Strengthening Palestinian National Unity posits the formation of an "interim national reconciliation government" to rule post-war Gaza. The goal is an independent Palestinian state with Jerusalem as its capital, as per various United Nations resolutions and with the right of return under Resolution 194. The plan to end the war envisages: promoting a lasting ceasefire; upholding the "principle of Palestinians governing Palestine"; and recognising the state of Palestine as part of a two-state solution with full UN membership.

Israel swiftly rejected the idea of a unity government for Gaza, Jerusalem and the West Bank, and reiterated its determination to crush Hamas in retaliation for the 7 October 2023 assault.

China has historically been sympathetic to the Palestinian cause and has long supported a two-state solution to the Israel-Palestine conflict. Chairman Mao Zedong had sent weapons to the Palestinians as part of his support for "national

liberation” movements around the world. Mao equated Israel to Taiwan as a base of Western imperialism.

Earlier in May, President Xi Jinping had called for an international peace conference to end the war. (*China's Xi Jinping calls for peace conference and 'justice' over war in Gaza as Arab leaders visit Beijing*, Simone McCarthy, Fri May 31, 2024, <https://edition.cnn.com/2024/05/30/china/xi-jinping-arab-leaders-china-intl-bnk/index.html>) The July accord demonstrates Beijing's growing clout in the Middle East. Beijing is likely to press for Palestine to become a full member of the United Nations; currently, it has observer status.

The Chinese foreign minister explained that the main achievement of the meeting “is that the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) is the sole legitimate representative of all Palestinian people”. The PLO is a coalition of parties that signed a peace treaty with Israel in 1993 (Oslo Accords) and formed the government of the Palestinian Authority (PA). Hamas was not a party to the Accords and does not recognise Israel.

Hamas's role in the interim unity government is unclear, as it is not part of the PLO and has been designated as a terrorist group by both Israel and the United States. Hamas and Islamic Jihad (its ally in Gaza) assert that any agreement on a unity government must include holding elections for the PLO parliament, which could secure their inclusion. These and other glitches will require patient diplomacy.

Senior Hamas official Husam Badran told Reuters that the Beijing Declaration “creates a formidable barrier against all regional and international interventions that seek to impose realities against our people's interests in managing Palestinian affairs post-war”. (*Palestinian factions agree for unity government after talks in China*, 24 July 2024, https://www.business-standard.com/world-news/palestinian-factions-agree-for-unity-government-after-talks-in-china-124072400003_1.html) He said that a unity government would oversee reconstruction in Gaza, manage the affairs of Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza and prepare the conditions for elections.

Mustafa Barghouti of the Palestinian National Initiative said “all the parties” have agreed that they should join the PLO. He told CNN, “There was a very clear feeling that what Israel is doing is really threatening everybody”. (*Hamas signs*

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unity declaration with Fatah at China summit, 24 July 2024, <https://www.nation.com.pk/24-Jul-2024/hamas-signs-unity-declaration-with-fatah-at-china-summit>

The Beijing Declaration envisages a temporary national unity government with the consensus of the Palestinian factions by decree of President Mahmoud Abbas based on the Palestinian Basic Law. (*World Insights: Unity declaration by Palestinian factions paves way for peace, huaxia, 26 July 2024, <https://english.news.cn/20240726/b91c1b60c0de4716a0fc89e614672f83/c.html>*) This government will begin by unifying all Palestinian institutions in the territories of the Palestinian state, initiating the reconstruction of the Gaza Strip, and preparing for general elections under the supervision of the Central Elections Commission as soon as possible, according to the approved election law.

The immediate lacuna is that the Beijing Declaration does not specify an implementation mechanism or timetable. Ashraf Abu el-Houl, managing editor of the Egyptian state-owned paper *Al-Ahram*, said similar declarations in the past had failed to fructify and that nothing would happen without Washington's approval. He said the United States, Israel, and Britain rejected the idea of a unity government with Hamas.

China first hosted Fatah and Hamas in April 2024. Both sides “expressed their political will to achieve reconciliation through dialogue and consultation.” The July talks were attended by Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh and Fatah's deputy head Mahmoud al-Aloul.

The Palestinian factions present at the meeting include the Palestinian National Liberation Movement (Fatah); Islamic Resistance Movement (Hamas); Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine; Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine; Palestinian Islamic Jihad Movement; Palestinian People's Party; Palestinian Popular Struggle Front; Palestinian National Initiative Movement; Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine; General Command; Palestinian Democratic Union (FIDA); Palestinian Liberation Front; Arab Liberation Front; Arab Palestinian Front; and Vanguard of the Popular Liberation War (As-Sa'iqah Forces).

The declaration, which specifically mentions “Zionist aggression”, “genocide”, attacks on the Al-Aqsa Mosque and other Islamic and Christian holy sites in Jerusalem, and the International Court of Justice's interim ruling on Israel, is likely to encounter stiff resistance in Tel Aviv, Washington, and some Western capitals. (*The PLO: A New Era of Unity, 23 July 2024, <https://www.jewishsocialist.org.uk/news/item/the-plo-a-new-era-of-unity>*) The attendees agreed on the following points:

1. Unifying national efforts to confront Zionist aggression and stop the genocide perpetrated by the occupying state and settler gangs supported by

the United States of America. They also agreed to resist attempts to displace our people from their homeland, Palestine, and to force the Zionist entity to end its occupation of the Gaza Strip and all other occupied territories, while maintaining the unity of Palestinian lands, including the West Bank, Jerusalem, and the Gaza Strip.

2. The Palestinian factions welcome the opinion of the International Court of Justice, which affirmed the illegitimacy of the Israeli presence, occupation, and settlements on the land of the State of Palestine and emphasized the need for their removal as soon as possible.
3. Based on the National Reconciliation Agreement signed in Cairo on 4/5/2011 and the Algiers Declaration signed on 12/10/2022, the factions agreed to continue following up on the implementation of agreements to end the division with the assistance of Egypt, Algeria, and friends in the People's Republic of China and the Russian Federation as follows:
 - a) Commitment to the establishment of an independent Palestinian state with Jerusalem as its capital, in accordance with relevant United Nations resolutions, particularly Resolutions 181 and 2334, and ensuring the right of return in accordance with Resolution 194.
 - b) The right of the Palestinian people to resist occupation and end it in accordance with international laws and the United Nations Charter, and the right of peoples to self-determination and their struggle to achieve it by all available means.
 - c) Formation of a temporary national unity government with the consensus of the Palestinian factions and by a decision from the President based on the applicable Palestinian Basic Law. This government will exercise its powers and authorities over all Palestinian territories, emphasizing the unity of the West Bank, Jerusalem, and the Gaza Strip. It will begin by unifying all Palestinian institutions in the territories of the Palestinian state, initiating the reconstruction of the Gaza Strip, and preparing for general elections under the supervision of the Central Elections Commission as soon as possible, according to the approved election law.
 - d) Until practical steps are taken to form the new National Council according to the approved election law, and to deepen political partnership in bearing national responsibility and developing the institutions of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), it was confirmed to activate and regularise the unified temporary leadership framework for partnership in political

decision-making as agreed upon in the Palestinian National Reconciliation Document signed on 4 May 2011.

4. Resisting and thwarting attempts to displace our people from their homeland, especially from the Gaza Strip or in the West Bank and Jerusalem, and affirming the illegitimacy of settlements and settlement expansion in accordance with the decisions of the United Nations Security Council and General Assembly and the opinion of the International Court of Justice.
5. Working to break the brutal siege on our people in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank and to deliver humanitarian and medical aid without restrictions or conditions.
6. Supporting and endorsing the heroic steadfastness of our struggling people and their valiant resistance in Palestine to overcome the wounds and destruction caused by the criminal aggression, and to rebuild what the occupation destroyed, supporting the families of martyrs and the wounded, and all those who lost their homes, properties, and sources of livelihood.
7. Confronting the occupation's conspiracies and its continuous violations against the Al-Aqsa Mosque and resisting any harm to it and the city of Jerusalem and its Islamic and Christian holy sites.
8. Paying tribute to the martyrs of the Palestinian people and reaffirming full support for the brave prisoners in the occupation's prisons and camps, who are subjected to various forms of torture and repression, and prioritizing all efforts possible to liberate them from the occupation's captivity."

The delegates agreed on a collective mechanism to implement all aspects of the declaration and to consider the meeting of the General Secretaries as a starting point for the work of the joint national teams. They decided to set a timeline for implementing the declaration.

The UN Secretary General's spokesperson said Antonio Guterres "very much welcomes the signing of the Beijing Declaration by the Palestinian factions". (*UN chief welcomes agreement between Palestinian factions Fatah and Hamas, 23 July 2024, (<https://news.un.org/en/story/2024/07/1152431>)*) Calling the deal "an important step towards furthering Palestinian unity", Stéphane Dujarric said the secretary-general "encourages all factions to overcome their differences through dialogue and urges them to follow up on the commitments that were made in Beijing and the declaration they signed on to." Guterres lauded China's diplomatic efforts and the efforts of other countries involved in facilitating the agreement.

It is undeniable that Israel's attack on Beirut and the assassinations have complicated the peace deal. The Chinese President said Hamas was about to sign a ceasefire deal with Israel when Israel intensified tensions. Positive movement is now unlikely till the US elections are over. Humiliated by the killing of a guest at the swearing-in of its new president, Iran has officially informed the United Nations of its intent to retaliate under Article 51 of the UN Charter. In a telephone call to the Iranian Foreign Minister, Antonio Guterres confirmed that Iran has the 'inherent right to self-defence' against violations of its national security and territorial integrity. *(Secretary-General Urges*

Exercising Restraint, Stepping Back from the Brink', in Remarks to Security Council Session Concerning Iran's Attack on Israel, 14 April 2024, <https://press.un.org/en/2024/sgsm22188.doc.htm>)

Tehran is reportedly firming up its strategy with representatives from Hezbollah, the Houthis, and the Iraqi Islamic Resistance, among others. Iran's then acting Foreign Minister Ali Bagheri warned Qatar and Saudi Arabia not to permit Israel to use their air space against Iran. Kuwait has announced that it will not allow its land or airspace to be used for military attacks against a "brotherly country" like Iran. Meanwhile, as Washington and Moscow move across the geopolitical chessboard, China will have to carry the burden of peace with its legendary stoicism. ❏ (DI2832024CBPDIPSJ@3845)

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