



THE REVIVAL OF PEOPLE-TO-PEOPLE PROJECTS: RELINQUISHING ISRAELI ACCOUNTABILITY

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The People-to-People (P2P) framework, which refers to projects that bring Palestinian and Israeli civil society actors together in so-called cooperation and dialogue, is making a comeback since its decline in the early 2000s. P2P emphasizes notions of cooperation, understanding, and peace building, which seem promising at the surface. Yet the framework is deeply problematic as it presents fundamental obstacles for holding Israel accountable for its violations of Palestinian human rights, and for securing a just peace.

This policy brief examines the text of the Middle East Partnership for Peace Act, passed in the US Congress in December 2020, to present a critique of P2P projects, showing clearly the danger of this framework for securing significant justice for Palestinians. Indeed, P2P emphasizes the importance of “[cooperation across borders](#)” between conflicting sides for achieving a lasting peace. But in the case of Palestine, this is clearly inapplicable. The conflict is not one of two equal sides caught in a symmetrical struggle across a shared border. Rather, it is one of relentless Israeli settler colonialism and oppression of the Palestinians with Israel as the de facto sovereign entity between the Mediterranean and Jordan River.

P2P also promotes the false assumption that P2P initiatives and funding pots have the potential to “jump start” the Palestinian economy. Beyond misleading, this fails to hold the Israeli regime accountable for its continuous [destruction of Palestine’s economy](#). Indeed, today, the Israeli regime has full direct and indirect control over the levers of the Palestinian economy. The military occupation complements this by allowing the Israeli regime to exercise physical control over Palestinians’ daily economic activities, and to expand the expropriation of Palestinian land. The injection of money into this system through P2P-funded initiatives is therefore not what the Palestinian economy needs.

Moreover, a closer read of the language of the legislation reveals a troubling loophole which allows for the complete undermining of Palestinian rights. In September 2020, Al-Shabaka policy analyst and human rights lawyer, [Zaha Hassan, noted](#) that an earlier draft of the legislation prevented “geographic discrimination” on applying grantees from “Israel, the West Bank and Gaza.” In other words, anyone, including Israeli settlers in the West Bank, could apply for funding. By not explicitly forbidding settlers in illegal settlements from applying for the funding, the Partnership for Peace Act incentivizes settlement activity and enriches settlers.

The US Appropriations Bill proposed in July 2020 by the US House of Representatives for the 2020-2021 fiscal year included provisions for the Partnership for Peace Act. The provisions [impose a series of stipulations](#) for receiving the funding, including restricting Palestinian access should the Palestinian Authority pursue an ICC investigation into Israeli war crimes. Clauses which politicize funding by hinging it on iniquitous conditions are not only detrimental to securing the fundamental rights of Palestinians, they also undermine the entire international legal apparatus by entrenching Israeli impunity, relinquishing accountability for its grave violations of international law.

Despite these problematic realities about P2P projects, they are being increasingly promoted. Following the passing of the legislation, the Alliance for Middle East Peace (ALLMEP) took credit for the initiative, explaining that it was as a result of “[over a decade of advocacy](#)” by ALLMEP “toward the creation of an International Fund for Israeli-Palestinian Peace.” A month prior to the legislation, ALLMEP cited a British parliamentary debate which put forward the idea of having a similar fund in the UK.

The Partnership for Peace Act is certainly not a cause for optimism; it is a political tool leveraged against Palestinians who might seek legal means to hold the Israeli regime accountable for their ongoing suffering under Israeli occupation. It is a death knell for Palestinians seeking justice through the formal legal channels of the international system.

The main obstacle to “achieving peace” is the Israeli regime’s violations of Palestinian rights for over seven decades, as well as the ongoing colonization of Palestinian land. In order to stop P2P projects, and in order to truly bring about a just peace, it is vital that those who support Palestinians’ rights stand firm against such initiatives which prioritize a false veneer of dialogue over accountability, thereby undermining international law.

Politicians and policymakers should support projects and initiatives that build on the fundamental principles of international law and the protection of Palestinians’ rights. They should support [existing mechanisms](#) that stand in the way of Israel’s settler-colonial expansionism and military occupation. This includes banning illegal settlement products from entering international markets, or divesting from institutions and companies complicit in Israel’s human rights violations. Accountability is the only path through which to achieve a just peace.