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Another deal to kill Palestinian statehood

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The governments of the US and France are reportedly working together on a proposal to convene a conference in Paris bringing together Israelis and Palestinians in a bid to relaunch their peace negotiations. The suggested date is September 2, ahead of an expected Palestinian move to secure UN recognition of independent statehood. However, before that date, the world will have a fairer picture of the fate of the Palestinian move.

The UN Security Council is expected to discuss the issue on July 26 and it will become clear how the big powers are likely to vote on the Palestinian bid; that is, indeed, if it comes to a vote at all. Israel, backed by European and American diplomatic, political, financial and military clout, is campaigning hard to make governments oppose the Palestinian objective. In any event, it is possible that if the US and France manage to convene the conference, the Palestinians will be persuaded to call off their move at the UN. And that will only defer the issue, since Israel is unlikely to agree to meet the Palestinians' demand for a fair peace agreement. If the Paris conference takes place, according to Israeli reports, it will be attended by US President Barack Obama, French President Nicolas Sarkozy, other as-yet undisclosed European and Arab leaders, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas. An announcement will be made at the conference that Israel and the Palestinians are resuming their peace negotiations. However, Israeli sources also report that the conference is contingent on a successful end to the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation-led campaign to depose Libyan strongman Muammar Qaddafi. The ideal solution for the Libyan dilemma, sought under the US-French plan, is an agreement among the US, France, the Qaddafi regime and Libyan rebels under which Qaddafi would leave power. Such an agreement does not seem to be in the cards, given

Qaddafi's stubborn refusal to step down and the rebels' rejection of any deal that would leave the strongman in power. Reports of secret negotiations between the Qaddafi regime and the rebels, and Tripoli's pointed rebuttal of such reports, appear aimed at sowing confusion. The rebel movement, the National Transitional Council (NTC), includes several former senior officials from the Qaddafi regime who do not enjoy the full trust of their colleagues in the council. The names of some of them are being dropped around, leading to accusations within the council that they are acting behind the back of others. In the absence of the "ideal" agreement, NATO will dramatically escalate its military campaign in Libya and deliver a crushing blow – with the US assuming a direct role – that would ensure Qaddafi's departure under a power-sharing transitional administration in Tripoli between the remnants of the regime and rebel leaders, according to reports.

Russia and the African Union are also said to be part of the effort. Left out is China, which is angrily looking at what is going on in Libya, a country where Beijing has considerable investments and economic interests. However, there is a major stumbling block, the reports say: Qaddafi is said to be demanding that his sons be part of the proposed transitional administration in Tripoli. Again, such a condition is not acceptable to the rebels, who expect nothing but trouble from Qaddafi's sons, who played major roles in their father's regime and abused their positions of power and authority, and the national wealth. According to Israeli media, the effort to convene the Paris conference is led by Obama's special adviser Dennis Ross and senior French diplomat Jean-David Levitte. Ross, who has considerable experience in dealing with the Israeli-Palestinian negotiations, is said to have proposed that Israel accept the 1967 borders with territorial swaps in exchange for Palestinian recognition of Israel as the national state of the Jewish people. This appeared substantiated last week when Netanyahu stated that if the Palestinians recognised Israel as the Jewish homeland, the other outstanding issues could be easily and quickly resolved.

The Palestinians will be hard put to accept this, because recognition of Israel as a Jewish state would mean giving up the right of the Palestinian refugees from the 1948 war. Netanyahu has added another blow to his demands. He is reportedly demanding that Obama uphold a "letter of guarantee", signed by former president George W. Bush and given to the then-Israeli prime minister Ariel Sharon, in 2004. This letter stated that the US president remains committed to support "negotiations with the Palestinians based on UN Resolution 242 (which promised Israel defensible borders), to refrain from demanding Israel's return to the 1949 lines, and to acknowledge the existence of major Jewish population centres on the West Bank as demographic changes occurring in the years since the 1967 war", according to a report. Netanyahu was said to be waiting for an answer from the White House. There is said to be an indirect US-Israeli-Palestinian debate over how much territory the land swaps would leave Israel and the Palestinians, respectively, in future agreements on their borders. According to reports, the Palestinians have been insisting on a ratio of one kilometre in pre-1967 Israel for every kilometre given to Israel on the West Bank. But Israel has found this unacceptable. The big settlement blocks cover roughly 8 per cent of the West Bank area and handing over an equal area of Israeli territory would mean a return to the 1967 borders. Therefore, Israel is ready to give up only 4 per cent of its pre-1967 territory, mainly Arab villages.

The issue is said to remain deadlocked. It is not known what parts of these reports are accurate, since Israel is adept at deceiving its own media, which, for their part, are also known for playing

along with the government. However, in general, there seems to be some credibility to the report on the US-French effort, which, if successful, will serve most people's interest. The US and France could claim a victory in Libya. The Libyan rebels will be happy that they won the conflict; the suffering of the people of Libya will end; the Arab world will be relieved and so would the African Union. Israel will be happy when the Palestinians are lured into deferring their quest for UN recognition and become mired in negotiations under terms dictated by the Israelis. Of course, not everyone will be happy, least of all the Palestinians, and Qaddafi and his people.