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Responses: 23

**Rosner, Benn: Who is in favor of ending (Israeli) terrorism?**

Responses: 16

**Report: U.K. Jewish school ordered to change ethnic admissions rules**

Responses: 2

**Avi Issacharoff: Arab leaders came to summit for fear of Iran**

Responses: 17

**Haaretz TV: Israel does little to help battered women**

Responses: 2

**Rosner's Domain**

**Who's in favor of ending (Israeli) terrorism?**

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**09:37** [Joint statement completed just minutes before presentation](#)

**10:36** [Report: U.K. Jewish school told to cut ethnic admissions criteria](#)

**08:37** [Syria says Israel ties only after withdrawal to Green Line border](#)

**10:37** [ANALYSIS / Fear of](#)

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## The Aix-en-Provence Group

By [Akiva Eldar](#)

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The idea to open a semi-official political-economic backchannel was conceived five years ago by Prof. Gilbert Benhayoun, a Moroccan-born Frenchman. He reached the conclusion that one of the mistakes made by both sides since 1993 was to base the peace process on "gradation," without agreement on - or even discussion of - the final result. The group decided to adopt the "reverse engineering" approach: The sides first agree on their destination, that is, on the blueprint of the final agreement, and then decide how to get there.

The patronage, financing and accommodations for the meetings were provided by Paul Cezanne Aix- Marseille University, the Peres Center for Peace, and DATA Studies and Consultation of Bethlehem. The group is administered by a steering committee led by Benhayoun, Arnon, Bamyra, Dr. Ron Pundak (director of the Peres Center) and Dr. Samir Hazbun (from DATA Studies and Consultation). Other partners: the European Union, French donors, the World Bank, the French Foreign Ministry, the International Development Research Center in Canada, the General Council of the Bouches du Rhone and the Regional Council of Provence-Alpes-Cote d'Azur.

Among the Israeli institutions whose representatives took part in the discussions that preceded the document's preparation are the Foreign, Finance, and Trade and Industry ministries, the National Insurance Institute and the Bank of Israel. The Palestinians sent representatives from their ministries of Finance, Economic Affairs and Planning, and the support group of the negotiations unit. The observers did not take part in formulating the understandings. In addition to them, the group includes observers from the European Union and representatives of the World Bank and the IMF in the territories.

In the course of their work, the group met with policy makers from both sides, including Ehud Olmert in his capacity as minister of industry and trade, Meir Sheerit, in his capacity as finance minister, the governor of the Bank of Israel and the senior officials of the National Security Council. Last week, the group met with the head of the Palestinian negotiating team, Abu Ala, and separately with Olmert's advisers Shalom Turgeman and Manuel Trachtenberg, as well as with a Foreign Ministry team headed by the director general, Aharon Abramovitch. Before that, a series of meetings were held in Washington with representatives of the State Department, the National Security Council, Congress, the Treasury, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund.

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