



**INSTITUTE OF  
STRATEGIC STUDIES**

**web:** [www.issi.org.pk](http://www.issi.org.pk)  
**phone:** +92-920-4423, 24  
**fax:** +92-920-4658

## Issue Brief

# Paris Peace Conference: Much Ado About Nothing

**Arhama Siddiqa**, Research Fellow, ISSI

January 24, 2017

On January 15, 2017 officials from 70 countries congregated in Paris for a one-day conference to deliberate the future of the waning Middle East peace process. The most noticeable aspect of this event was the absence of the two parties directly affected by its conclusions: the Israelis and the Palestinians.

The conference took place at a time when tensions in the region are reaching a peak, and there is a pronounced fear that the plans to move the US embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem will stoke tensions further. The meeting also came at a time when there is a marked tension between Israel and the international community after the UN passed a resolution last month condemning Israeli settlements on occupied land.

In his inauguration speech, French President Francois Hollande stressed that the international community had to be reminded time and again of its obligations to build peace. He stated: "The naivety is to believe that the much-needed reconciliation between Israel and its neighbours can go forward without peace between the Israelis and Palestinians...and the cynicism is to sink into the status quo, hoping the situation would find a natural solution as a result of all excesses"<sup>1</sup>.

A Parisian peace conference is not a new affair. Over the years, there have been many such gatherings. There was the Paris Peace Conference in 1919 at the end of World War I; the Paris Peace Accords in 1973 that marked the Vietnam War; and the 1994 Paris Protocols, where the agreement governing economic relations between Israel and the Palestinian Authority were debated upon. These certifiable international conferences actually led to something concrete. Few expected the same to materialize from this conference in Paris, especially given the fact that the new president of the United States is bound to object to this type of Middle East initiative so unyieldingly opposed by one of the concerned parties: Israel.

The participants who met in Paris on January 15, 2017 reaffirmed their support for an impartial, durable and cyclopedic resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. They reiterated that a negotiated two-state solution should meet the following:

- Legitimate objectives of both sides, including the Palestinians' right to statehood and autonomy,

---

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-38608990>

- Fully end the occupation that began in 1967, satisfy Israel's security needs and resolve all permanent status issues on the basis of United Nations Security Council resolutions 242 (1967) and 338 (1973), and all other relevant Security Council resolutions.

Moreover, the delegates highlighted the potential for security, stability and prosperity for both parties that could result from a peace agreement. They expressed their enthusiasm to use necessary efforts towards realization of the two-state solution and to contribute extensively for ensuring the sustainability of a negotiated peace agreement, in particular in the areas of politics and economics, the consolidation of Palestinian state capabilities, and civil society discourse. Among other things, these would include: a European special privileged partnership; augmented private sector involvement; support to bolster efforts by the parties to improve economic cooperation and continued financial backing to the Palestinian authority in building the infrastructure for a sustainable Palestinian economy. They further accentuated the importance of the Arab Peace Initiative of 2002 as a comprehensive structure for the resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict, and thus helping furnish regional peace and security.

The conference's closing statement called on both sides to avoid "unilateral steps" and stressed that the basis for negotiations should be the 1967 borders, before Israel occupied the West Bank and east al-Quds.

A "two-state solution" of a Palestinian country alongside Israel has long been supported by both sides, but there are sharply deviating visions as to the type of state which would materialize if this solution is to be implemented. Israel rejects international involvement in the peace process, saying an agreement can only come through direct talks. Despite years of talks, major disparities still separate the two sides. Palestinians fiercely object to Israeli settlement activity in the occupied West Bank and East Jerusalem, territory it wants for a future state. The settlements- home to about 600,000 Israelis- are considered illegal under international law, though Israel challenges this. Israel also states Palestinian incitement and violence, and a refusal to accept Israel as a Jewish state, as key impediments to peace.

The Palestinians had welcomed the French initiative with open arms. The Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) even called on conference host France "to immediately recognize the State of

Palestine on the 1967 borders with east Jerusalem as its capital<sup>2</sup>, all the while urging all the countries that attended the meeting in Paris to “recognize Palestine in line with their recognition of Israel”<sup>3</sup>.

However, the conference was strongly rejected by Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu even before it began. He had blatantly stated that the conference was “rigged” and would only served to push “peace backwards”. Israel envoy to the UN, Ambassador Danny Danon also echoed thoughts about potential moves against Israel and called the conference a “reward to the Palestinians for continuing to avoid negotiations while promoting terrorism”<sup>4</sup>.

Former, Secretary of State John Kerry thanked France for hosting the conference and maintained that the United States had negotiated at the Paris conference to prevent Israel being treated unfairly. He even called Prime Minister Netanyahu from the conference to brief him on the efforts the US was making to “soften the language” of the concluding statement<sup>5</sup>.

The Paris Peace Conference Declaration did not garner unanimous support. The United Kingdom was notably absent from the conference, and sent only a junior delegation to act solely in an “observer status” capacity. It refused to sign the Paris declaration citing “particular reservations” about the meeting taking place without Israeli or Palestinian representatives<sup>6</sup>.

Australia was represented at the conference by diplomatic officials from the Australian embassy in Paris. Following the conference, Australia’s foreign minister Julie Bishop distanced the Australian government from the contents of the concluding statement, maintaining that government representation in no way meant agreement with every element of the declaration.

In response, Saeb Erekat, Secretary General of the Executive Committee of the PLO strongly criticized and denounced the reservations made by the United Kingdom and Australia to the final statement of the Paris peace conference, which showcased the commitment of the international community towards peace in the region.

---

<sup>2</sup> <http://dmop.pt/category/media/>

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.israelnationalnews.com/News/News.aspx/223228>

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.jpost.com/Arab-Israeli-Conflict/Major-powers-warn-Israel-PA-against-unilateral-measures-harmful-to-peace-478514>

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.timesofisrael.com/uk-says-paris-summit-may-harden-palestinian-positions/>

All in all, this conference is likely to be recalled as one convened amid great fuss, that led nowhere. It seems the drive for the conference in Paris, like similar international efforts before it, was not to address the reality and the roots of the issue, but rather to bottle up what is considered as another Middle Eastern nuisance. The fact that the Paris conference deliberately chose to bypass the actual voices of those dealing with the consequences of the oppression is evidence to the continued refusal of the international community to be in touch with the reality on the ground. Beyond the etiquette and the fireworks, this conference lacked any real substance. International conferences are intended to serve as channels where conflicting parties can reach an agreement while they hold direct negotiations. The international community's job is to provide motivation to both sides in order for them to sit down at the negotiating table and make it clear to them that without bilateral discussion, each side stands to lose. But so far it appears to be doing everything apart from holding a concrete discussion that might lead to tangible and sustainable results.