



Forget Paris. It won't be hard.

Yousef Munayyer

January 23, 2017

The Paris Peace Conference of January 15, 2017, barely amounted to a singular blip on radar. Some 70 countries participated in what was among the largest international gatherings focused on the Israeli-Palestinian issue. Two participants not in attendance? The Israelis and Palestinians. The conference was by, for, and of the international community and likely will have little impact on the situation on the ground.

The conference itself had been planned for a long time and is the culmination of a coordinated effort between the United States and France to attempt to make one last push to save the “two-state solution” and advance the cause of peace. From the outset, the Israelis rejected the conference while the Palestinians cautiously welcomed the French initiative.

Alone, the conference amounts to very little, but in the context of the moment and in particular, the past year, it signals the continuation of a very important trend: the move away from the “peace process” as we know it.

A Shift on Israel?

Israel has invested heavily in its relationship with the United States and believes there is no other country that will give it and its policies more sympathy and support. For this reason, the Israelis have long sought to ensure that any negotiations between them and other parties happen under the auspices of the United States and not under an internationalized framework. Few acts symbolize this better than the near reflexive veto cast by the United States in the United Nations Security Council on resolutions critical of Israel. Over 40 such vetoes have been cast over the past four decades, where the United States was the lone no-vote opposing a unified council.

But recently, something began to change. Israel's incessant settlement expansion, and the Israeli electorate's insistence on maintaining a right-wing government that is the self-declared most pro-settlement government in history, have made it difficult for even the United States to keep covering for them. So for the past year, keen observers of this issue have watched as the language and tone of the United States began to change in every statement addressing the situation on the ground.

A long awaited [Quartet statement](#) in July of 2016 set the tone when it made clear that, “The continuing policy of settlement construction and expansion, designation of land for exclusive Israeli use, and denial of Palestinian development is steadily eroding the viability of the two-state solution.”

Then, in response to the announcement of settlement expansion later in July 2016, the US State Department [noted](#) that “this is part of an ongoing process of land seizures, settlement expansion, legalizations of outposts, and denial of Palestinian development that risk entrenching a one-state

reality of perpetual occupation and conflict ... We remain troubled that Israel continues this pattern of provocative and counterproductive action, which raises serious questions about Israel's ultimate commitment to a peaceful, negotiated settlement with the Palestinians.”

In October 2016, the US State Department issued a [statement](#) saying, “Proceeding with this new settlement is another step towards cementing a one-state reality of perpetual occupation that is fundamentally inconsistent with Israel's future as a Jewish and democratic state. Such moves will only draw condemnation from the international community, distance Israel from many of its partners, and further call into question Israel's commitment to achieving a negotiated peace.”

The frustration with Israel was clear.

Obama’s Hurrah; Trump’s Reversal

At the very end of 2016, the United States abstained on a United Nations Security Council Resolution condemning Israeli settlement activity. [UNSC Resolution 2334](#) was important not for the language it contained in its text but rather for the symbolism its passage represented. For years, American officials, all the way up to the president of the United States, had been saying that the “status quo” of perpetual occupation “is unsustainable.” What we witnessed over the course of 2016 was that the diplomatic status quo was in fact unsustainable and changing.

The 2017 Paris conference is the culmination of this shift. For this reason, the text of its communiqué is not as relevant as the fact that it took place. But even this relevance is lost amidst the massive global change taking place and any diplomatic shift this conference might represent is too little and too late to matter.

President Donald J. Trump has signaled a sharp reversal on US policy toward Israel. He objected to the Obama Administration’s stance on settlements and, in particular, to the abstention at the UN Security Council, stating on multiple occasions that Israel was being treated unfairly and that things would be different once he was in office. His selection for US ambassador to Israel, David Friedman, is an ardent supporter of Israeli settlements who has personally overseen the [funneling of millions of dollars](#) to the Israeli settlement of Beit El. Additionally, Friedman stated he looks forward to working from a US Embassy in Jerusalem, which would require moving it from Tel Aviv—a [highly controversial move](#) that has been avoided by all previous administrations. During an event of his inauguration week, however, Trump affirmed to the Israelis that he would follow through on his promise to move the embassy in comments he made to the [right-wing Israeli tabloid Israel Hayom](#), which is owned by Republican mega-donor and Likud backer Sheldon Adelson.

The changes taking place are not limited to the United States of Donald Trump. The world order as we have understood it in the aftermath of the Cold War is changing. The United States and Russia appear to be coming closer together, Europe is lurching (toying with?) toward right-wing nationalism, and Israel is effectively saying, “what took you guys so long to catch up?” This new global configuration will have a significant impact on how the international community relates to the Israeli/Palestinian issue. Brexited Britain, for example, was [the only nation in attendance refusing to sign](#) on to the Paris conference communiqué, a blasé text filled with the usual platitudes. To be sure, Netanyahu is fully aware and excited about this global paradigm shift. In [a statement](#)

responding to the Paris Conference he said, “this conference is among the last twitches of yesterday’s world. Tomorrow’s world will be different—and it is very near.”

Given all of this, the Paris Conference amounts to little more than one last opportunity for the leading proponents of the two-state peace process to break bread.

Conclusion

As the conference was closing, the French Ambassador to the United States, Gérard Araud, [tweeted](#), “In any conflict, the stronger side wants direct negotiations and the weaker international mediation. Necessary to find a compromise.” Of course, the first part of this is undeniably true, but that latter part is more revealing. What is needed from the international community, particularly the so-called leading nations of the liberal world order, is the enforcement of relevant laws and norms that have underpinned the global order since the Second World War. Too often, and particularly in the case of Israel/Palestine, leading nations of this order have categorically failed to do so and often stood in the way of enforcing international laws and agreements. This failure is one of many reasons for the impending global crisis we are expecting today.