



Assessing the Potential Impact of the Paris Peace Conference: Vive la France or Forget Paris?

*By Yousef Munayyer
June 3, 2016*

One hundred years after the Sykes-Picot agreement, international stakeholders met in Paris on June 3 to discuss the outlines of an Israeli-Palestinian peace plan with no Israelis or Palestinians at the table. A Joint Communiqué representing the shared positions of the participating parties was released featuring generally predictable and uncontroversial positions. Was the conference useful at all? The answer is in the eye of the beholder whether raised in Tel Aviv, Ramallah or Washington, DC. In the following analysis paper I discuss how the Paris Conference might contribute positively and negatively to the prospects for peace in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

The Positives

First, let us consider the good news. For the first time in recent memory, a player other than the United States was at the forefront of a Middle East peace mediation effort. This is, in and of itself, an important reality worth reflecting on. For decades, Washington has essentially monopolized the peace process to itself, blocking any efforts to internationalize negotiations through its overused veto in the UN Security Council and constant refrain about “no short cuts.” By cornering the process in this manner, Washington has essentially acquiesced to an Israeli demand that any conversations about Israeli-Palestinian issues happen solely under the auspices of the US where Israel can rely on unwavering American support.

This conference in Paris represents a shift away from that long-standing policy, and predictably the Israelis were not pleased. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his coalition partners repeatedly slammed the conference warning that the diplomatic effort is “doomed to failure.” Importantly, the Americans chose to attend despite Israeli objections, signaling their continued frustration with an intransigent Israeli government, and an unprecedented, at least in recent times, openness to the internationalization of the process.

What is yet to be seen is whether this move by Washington is the start of a genuinely different policy posture, or just a short-term gimmick meant to set up yet another last-ditch effort by President Obama to put forward an American peace initiative. In either case, the prognosis is grim. If Washington will move in the direction of its own peace initiative after this Paris conference proves to have not advanced the process, it will almost certainly [go nowhere](#). If this is indeed a shift on Washington’s part however, which is less likely, there is a chance that the internationalization of Middle East peace could resuscitate the process. Even if this does happen however, the goal that this process aims for – “a two-state solution” – is not attainable. The positions laid out in the Joint Communiqué make that quite clear.



The Negatives

To fully understand how problematic the positions in the Joint Communiqué are, it is worth parsing them section-by-section. It opens with, “The participants met in Paris on June 3, 2016 to reaffirm their support for a just, lasting and comprehensive resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict” and continues:

They reaffirmed that a negotiated two-state solution is the only way to achieve an enduring peace, with two states, Israel and Palestine, living side by side in peace and security. They are alarmed that actions on the ground, in particular continued acts of violence and ongoing settlement activity, are dangerously imperiling the prospects for a two-state solution.

In the above paragraph, the statement indicates that only one type of solution is possible and that the viability of that solution is in peril. Setting aside the problem policy makers created with such a dogmatic approach that restricts their options, taken at face value, this would seem to create a sense of urgency for action. If only one type of solution is possible and it is dying, a refrain we have heard for years, then something must be done urgently, particularly to curb the stated acts that are “imperiling the prospects” of said solution. But there is nothing mentioned in terms of action. The parties are effectively saying; there is one way to solve this conflict, that one way is becoming impossible because of specific actions, and therefore we are concerned, but at the same time, we are not prepared to take steps to curb those actions.

Since the “two-state solution” is an idea based on the partitioning of land into two viable states, it is clear that the actions that truly imperil it are those that are physically changing the landscape and make such a partition impossible, i.e. Israeli settlement building. The parties throw in a mention of “continued acts of violence” likely referring Palestinian acts to create a semblance of “balance” in the statement but there is no balance in the capabilities of both sides to alter the landscape. Only one side, the Israeli side, is capable of physically altering the map by building settlements, checkpoints and walls, as well as destroying Palestinian homes and structures throughout much of the West Bank.

The Communiqué continues:

The participants underscored that the status quo is not sustainable, and stressed the importance of both sides demonstrating, with policies and actions, a genuine commitment to the two-state solution in order to rebuild trust and create the conditions for fully ending the Israeli occupation that began in 1967 and resolving all permanent status issues through direct negotiations based on resolutions 242 (1967), 338 (1973), and also recalling relevant United Nations Security Council resolutions and highlighting the importance of the implementation of the Arab Peace Initiative.



Here the parties repeat one of the most problematic and important myths in the discourse about Israeli-Palestinian peace namely concern by the international community, and Western States in particular, about the sustainability of the status quo. In reality, the status quo in Israel-Palestine, where Israeli military occupation governs the lives of millions of Palestinians with no right to vote for the system that rules them, has been one of the most sustainable enterprises in the Middle East over the last 50 years. It has outlasted Mubarak and Gaddafi, quite a feat accomplished largely because Western States, especially the United States, have helped sustain it. By protecting Israel from the costs of the status quo, both through direct subsidies in the form of financing the Israeli military and the Palestinian Authority, and shielding both from international opprobrium, the US and Europe have ensured the status quo can last indefinitely.

Finally, the Communiqué addresses steps the conference participants would take:

The participants discussed possible ways in which the international community could help advance the prospects for peace, including by providing meaningful incentives to the parties to make peace. The participants also highlighted the potential for regional peace and security as envisioned by the Arab Peace Initiative.

“Providing meaningful incentives to the parties to make peace” is perhaps a perfect summation of all that is wrong with this Communiqué and the positions outlined therein. What greater incentive is there than peace itself? This statement is an implicit acknowledgement that significant interests opposed to peace do exist. Otherwise, why would you have to create incentives for peace? Yet while the Communiqué begins with a dramatic sense of urgency highlighting the anti-peace actions that are killing the one and only solution the parties see as possible, the parties do not mention the use of any *disincentives* to prevent these actions from happening and persisting.

Ineffectual Approach

This approach, feigning concern and urgency all while financing the very status quo they claim is unsustainable, is precisely what has brought us to the point we are in today, where a half-century-old Israeli occupation is more deeply entrenched than ever. *Three years ago*, Secretary of State John Kerry told Congress that the two-state solution would expire in *two years*. Today, Kerry participates in a peace conference that continues to express the same sentiment, perpetually extending the expiration date and undermining what little credibility the peace process had left. It is a policy that has surpassed its expiration date and has been ineffectual indeed.



This Communiqué signals that the Paris effort, like earlier attempts led by Washington, is incapable of breaking away from decades of failed policy, even if it emanates at this time from a different side of the Atlantic. The inability of players in the state system to impose costs on Israel for policies that violate international law and Palestinian rights and are destructive to peace is an abdication of the responsibility by the international community. This abdication is a signal to civil society that it is incumbent upon them to play the role of imposing costs since governments have failed to do so. This Communiqué will send a message to those civil society actors who have responded to the Palestinian call for Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions that they have made the right choice and a message to those who have yet to heed the call that they have no viable alternative to doing so