

January 2017

### What's going to happen in Paris?

On Sunday 15 January representatives of approximately 70 countries will meet in Paris for a conference on resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The event is a follow up to a meeting that took place on 3 June 2016, attended by representatives of 28 countries.

US Secretary of State John Kerry will be attending, before visiting London the following day for talks with Boris Johnson. It is not clear if Johnson himself will attend, though he told the House of Commons on Tuesday that the UK government would be represented, with the goal of “reinforcing our message, which is that we think that both sides must get round the table and negotiate”.

The outcome of the meeting is expected to be a joint communique, the details of which are still being negotiated between the participant countries. Israelis and Palestinians did not attend the June meeting and Israel has made clear it will not cooperate with this meeting.

### What is expected to be in the communique?

A copy of a working draft of the communique [published by Ha'aretz](#) includes a general expression of support for resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict based on a two-state solution and broad ideas about how the participating states can contribute towards this, without either a specific definition of what the final resolution should look like or any clearly defined follow up action. It remains to be seen if the final version will be more concrete and detailed.

In the draft statement the parties welcome the recently passed UN Security Council (UNSC) Resolution 2334, which condemns Israeli settlement construction and affirms key terms of it, including a commitment to “distinguish, in

their relevant dealings, between the territory of the State of Israel and the territories occupied since 1967,” as called for by the UNSC Resolution.

The draft statement notes, but significantly, does not endorse, remarks of John Kerry on 28 December, “in which he stressed that no solution could be imposed and outlined his vision for final status negotiations”. Kerry’s speech, which was sharply critical of the current Israeli government, was unequivocally rejected by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. At the same time elements of his six-point framework for resolving the conflict were also sharply criticised by Palestinians, including the recognition of Israel as a state for the Jewish people alongside a Palestinian state, although several Arab states such as Saudi Arabia welcomed the speech and its proposals.

The draft Paris statement makes a general declaration of the participants “readiness to exert necessary efforts” towards a two state solution, through incentives to the parties. These include “concrete support to the implementation of the Palestinian Statehood Strategy”, which would focus on strengthening institutions and state capacity. The draft also mentions “convening Israeli and Palestinian civil society fora,” as well as the offer of a “European special privileged partnership.” This was initially raised in December 2013 and includes increased access to the European markets, closer cultural and scientific links, facilitation of trade and investments as well as promotion of business to business relations, enhanced political dialogue and security cooperation for both countries after they sign a final status agreement. These efforts and suggestions build on informal working groups formed by the participating states following the June 2016 meeting.

### What is the position of the parties?

Prime Minister Netanyahu has repeatedly affirmed his commitment to negotiating with

the Palestinians without preconditions in order to agree the terms for a two-state solution, but he has stressed that he will accept only direct bilateral negotiations with the Palestinians, and is opposed to external attempts to force terms on the parties. French President Francois Hollande reportedly invited Netanyahu and Palestinian Authority (PA) President Mahmoud Abbas to hold a bilateral meeting immediately after the international conference; but Netanyahu agreed to participate only if the international conference were cancelled. Politically, the right-wing character of Netanyahu's current coalition gives him little room for diplomatic manoeuvre, and his right-wing coalition partners feel emboldened by the support shown by the incoming Trump administration.

Netanyahu has also expressed interest in an alternative diplomatic approach based on cooperation between Israel and Sunni Arab states, whose strategic interests in the region increasingly converge with those of Israel. Following a meeting with the Norwegian Foreign Minister, Netanyahu described the Paris conference as "rigged" towards adopting "additional anti-Israel stances" which "push peace backwards".

Whilst the Palestinians are more supportive of the French initiative they are also wary of the imposition of international terms of reference for resolving the conflict, such as those outlined by Kerry which include positions they are not ready to accept. Abbas, whose domestic legitimacy is severely eroded, has generally avoided bilateral talks with the Netanyahu government, preferring to seek endorsement for Palestinian positions in international forums. He claims readiness to engage in talks, but only if Israel meets his list of preconditions, including a full freeze in settlement construction.

### What is expected to follow?

It is not yet clear what will emerge from the meeting, but if the leaked draft of the communique is indicative, then the impact of the meeting looks set to be limited. The possibility that members of the Quartet (US, Russia, EU and UN), who are expected to meet immediately after the Paris conference, will advance a resolution at the Security Council in a routine meeting on the Middle East scheduled for Tuesday 17 January, currently seems to be low. Given that the terms of reference presented by Kerry have proven unacceptable to both parties, and apparently will

not be endorsed by the Paris communique, there seems little that a new UNSC resolution can add.

In its previous efforts to engage with the Israeli-Palestinian question French leaders have mentioned the possibility of recognising Palestine as a state outside the context of an agreement. Though there are no clear indications that they intend to do so at this event, the possibility of a surprise cannot be discounted.

Whatever emerges from the international conference looks set to receive the same kind of negative reaction from the Israeli leadership as UNSC Resolution 2334 and the Kerry speech, with the Israeli government reiterating its rejection of externally imposed solutions. The Israeli public more broadly has a negative impression of the interventions of the EU, the UN and the Obama administrations in the Israeli-Palestinian arena, perceiving them to prioritise Palestinian narratives and interests over those of Israel. Whilst Israeli opposition parties will criticise Netanyahu for failing to take the initiative and causing Israel's diplomatic isolation, the Netanyahu government is able to position itself as defending Israel against hostile and biased international interventions.

Israel can expect to receive firm support for its position from the incoming Trump administration, and this may also be affecting the calculations of other international actors. It is yet to be decided whether Netanyahu will accept an invitation to attend President elect Trump's inauguration on 20 January. If he does he can expect to receive a warm welcome, and he is under pressure from the right of his coalition to take advantage of the incoming administration's support for the Israeli coalition's positions on settlements and Jerusalem.

However, the Israeli coalition is not of one mind. Whilst Jewish Home leader Naftali Bennett has declared that now is the time to bury the two-state solution and called for annexing the settlement of Maale Adumim, east of Jerusalem, Defence Minister Avigdor Lieberman has said that Israel should seek US support for continued construction in the settlement blocks in return for a freeze on construction in more isolated settlements. Netanyahu has not echoed either position, and it remains to be seen what he will seek from the Trump administration after 20 January.

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