

Tempering Expectations for the Paris Conference

by [Ghaith al-Omari \(/experts/ghaith-al-omari\)](/experts/ghaith-al-omari)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Ghaith al-Omari \(/experts/ghaith-al-omari\)](/experts/ghaith-al-omari)

Ghaith al-Omari is a senior fellow in The Washington Institute's Irwin Levy Family Program on the U.S.-Israel Strategic Relationship.



Brief Analysis

The meeting's main outcomes will probably disappoint ardent supporters and detractors alike, but the parties should not dismiss the potential progress offered by its more modest, concrete recommendations.

On January 15, representatives from around seventy countries and international organizations are expected to convene in Paris for the second of two international conferences organized under the French "Middle East Peace Initiative." The meeting is unlikely to live up to the Palestinians' exaggerated hopes or Israel's inflated concerns, but it may still produce modestly useful outcomes.

TEMPERING THE INITIATIVE

The French initiative was launched in January 2016 by then-foreign minister Laurent Fabius to "preserve...the two-state solution." While initially lacking substantive details, the proposal foresaw two international conferences. Fabius also indicated that if the effort failed, Paris would recognize a Palestinian state. Despite France's subsequent reversal of this position and a slew of statements lowering expectations, Fabius's initial tone defined the parties' reactions.

The Palestinians enthusiastically supported the initiative, as it reinforced their push toward internationalizing the conflict. It became a central feature of their diplomatic efforts and public messaging, with senior Palestinian Authority officials such as Saeb Erekat calling it "the only thing in town" last March. Yet Israel strongly rejected it out of concern that such internationalization could prejudice direct negotiations. At a joint press conference with French premier Manuel Valls in May, Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu stated, "Peace is not achieved in international UN-style conferences, nor through international diktats." He then offered to meet with PA president Mahmoud Abbas for direct talks instead. For its part, France began to temper the initial high goals expressed by Fabius, defining more modest objectives for its initiative -- namely, to refocus attention on the two-state solution and create

incentives for the parties to return to negotiations.

These objectives informed the work of the first international conference, held in Paris on June 3, 2016. Secretary of State John Kerry attended that meeting, along with foreign ministers from Europe, key Arab countries (e.g., Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan), and elsewhere, but the Palestinians and Israelis did not participate. Maintaining a muted tone, the post-conference communique "reaffirmed that a negotiated two-state solution is the only way to achieve an enduring peace" and recalled relevant international resolutions, with an emphasis on the 2002 Arab Peace Initiative. It also reflected language previously endorsed by the Quartet (i.e., the UN secretary-general, the EU, the United States, and Russia) expressing alarm 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."

The only operative aspect of the communique related to "providing meaningful incentives to the parties to make peace." The conference also established three working groups: one on civil society, headed by Sweden; one on Palestinian governance and capacity building, headed by Germany; and one on economic incentives to encourage a return to peacemaking, headed by Norway and the EU.

THE JANUARY 15 MEETING

The second conference will be held in Paris this Sunday, and while the parties are not officially participating, Abbas will be in the city that day. French officials have again sought to moderate expectations, indicating that they will not be presenting new ideas but rather "trying to keep the subject on the agenda and not letting it down because there are other crises in the world." Similarly, President Francois Hollande stated on January 12 that he is "realistic on what this conference can achieve. Peace will only be done by the Israelis and Palestinians and by nobody else."

The conference's final statement will likely echo the June 3 communique in reiterating international resolutions and urging the parties to reaffirm by word and deed their commitment to the two-state solution. The **one notable development (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/early-implications-of-the-un-settlements-resolution>)** emerging since last summer is the recently adopted UN Security Council Resolution 2334, which called on states "to distinguish, in their relevant dealings, between the territory of the State of Israel and the territories occupied since 1967." The extent to which this and other aspects of the resolution are included in the communique will no doubt be hotly debated. Yet while Secretary Kerry will attend the meeting, **the principles he outlined (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/kerrys-speech-some-continuity-some-disconnect>)** in his December 28 speech will not be included in the communique.

Much of the public debate this weekend will likely revolve around issues relating to Resolution 2334 and similar facets of high diplomacy. Both sides have already expressed their position on the resolution, so the conference is unlikely to affect their stance or behavior.

In contrast, the practical ideas and incentives developed by the three working groups will get less public attention, but they might present opportunities for actual progress. Recently, Palestinian-Israeli security cooperation has allowed for modest yet concrete gains on the ground, such as increasing Palestinian access in the West Bank and facilitating Israel's transfer of withheld funds to alleviate the PA budget crisis. Further incentivizing these measures and devising new ones along similar lines would have a positive impact on the lives and attitudes of Palestinians and Israelis. Highlighting the importance of civil society engagement and formulating policies to support such activities would also help counter recent negative trends, such as the antinormalization movement among Palestinians and the delegitimization of peace-oriented NGOs in Israel. Finally, bringing attention to issues of Palestinian governance and capacity could help reignite international interest in reform and institution-building, thereby improving the Palestinians' negative view of their own governing structures and creating solid foundations for a state once a peace

deal is reached.

CONCLUSION

The Paris meeting will probably disappoint its most ardent enthusiasts and detractors alike. As French officials have been consistently stating, their initiative is not meant to be transformative, but is rather intended to preserve the two-state solution and create incentives that move the parties closer to direct negotiations.

Israel will object to the conference's outcomes in principle, as it opposes the very idea of internationalization. It will also reject any specific criticism of its policies, particularly on settlements. But Israel's deepest concern -- that the conference will seek to impose a solution -- will not come to pass.

The Palestinians will probably celebrate the meeting as a victory, though the actual outcomes will fall considerably short of the high expectations they have built. PA officials will go back home to a highly skeptical public with little to show for what was billed as a central pillar of Palestinian diplomacy over the past year.

Yet once the dust of messaging spin settles and everybody has staked out their diplomatic positions, the parties and the international community would be well advised to take a closer look at the more modest yet concrete recommendations that might be ignored by the headlines, but which have the potential to create positive effects in reality. At a time when negotiations are off the table, the incoming Trump administration can immediately engage some of the practical measures suggested by the Paris conference. These steps might not bring about peace, but they can help bring a measure of stability and create conditions more conducive to the eventual resumption of peacemaking.

Ghaith al-Omari, a senior fellow at The Washington Institute, previously served in various advisory positions with the Palestinian Authority. ❖

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