Exclusive: Paris Peace Summit to Urge Netanyahu, Abbas: Disavow Officials Who Oppose Two-state Solution

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The dozens of countries attending the Middle East peace conference in Paris on Sunday are expected to call on Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas to publicly renew their commitment to the two-state solution, and to renounce officials in their respective governments who oppose it. The clause is contained in an updated draft of the conference’s summary statement, a copy of which was obtained by Haaretz.

Western diplomats involved in preparations for the conference noted that the clause refers both to declarations that have been made by Israeli ministers like Naftali Bennett, who called to remove the two-state solution from the agenda, and to senior PA and Fatah officials who have incited to violence against Israel.

According to the draft, participating countries will stress that they won’t recognize any changes to the June 4, 1967 borders, including in Jerusalem, except for any changes the two sides might agree during negotiations. The countries will also emphasize that they are committed to distinguishing, in all their actions, between the territories of the State of Israel and the settlements in the territories that Israel occupied in 1967.

The participants will “call on each side to independently demonstrate, through policies and actions, a genuine commitment to the two-state solution and refrain from unilateral steps that prejudge the outcome of final-status negotiations, in order to rebuild trust and create a path back to meaningful direct negotiations,” according to the text.

Last Friday, there was a meeting of senior diplomats from the dozens of Western and Arab countries that will attend the conference. The French delegate, Pierre Vimont, presented them with the first draft of the conference’s summary communiqué and asked for comments.

According to Western diplomats, Vimont said France wants to reach a consensus among the participating states on a balanced statement that would stress the centrality of the two-state solution to the international community, but would take this month’s transfer of presidential power in the United States into account.

After receiving comments, the French drew up a new draft (the document being quoted here).

Western diplomats noted that there will be two more rounds of consultations on the statement’s wording before the conference, as well as discussions among the foreign ministers at the conference itself, but they did not anticipate any dramatic changes in the text.

The statement clarifies that the participating countries are committed to resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and emphasizes that “a negotiated solution with two states, Israel and Palestine, living side by side in peace and security, is the only way to achieve enduring peace.”

It says the international community expects Israel and the Palestinians to reiterate their commitment to the two-state solution and “to take urgent steps in order to reverse the current negative trends on the ground and to start meaningful, direct negotiations.”

The updated draft includes a nod to last month’s speech by U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry, “in which he stressed that no solution could be imposed and outlined his vision of principles for a final status agreement.” However, the draft text does not enumerate or adopt the six principles Kerry said must underlie the quest for peace. Nevertheless, it states that the two-state solution must balance between Israel’s security needs and the rights of the Palestinians to a state and sovereignty, and the end of the occupation.

Last month’s UN Security Council vote on the settlements is also mentioned. The conference participants “welcomed the adoption” of UN Security Council Resolution 2334 on December 23, “which clearly condemned settlement activity, incitement and violence, and called on both sides to take steps to advance the two-state solution on the ground.”

The draft also states that conference participants see an Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement as having the potential to contribute to the security, stability and prosperity of both sides. The document lists several proposals put forward by the international community that the participating countries could advance to support the move toward a final-status arrangement.

These suggestions and ideas are the result of discussions held in recent months by delegates from the leading countries that will attend the conference, and include:

\* Economic incentives – first and foremost a European Union proposal to both sides to upgrade their status to a “special privileged partnership,” and to encourage private sector investment;

\* Concrete support for building Palestinian state institutions, including further meetings between international partners and Palestinians to advance their development;

\* Convening a forum of Israeli and Palestinian civil society organizations, to rekindle public discussion of the two-state solution on both sides.

The draft also addresses the role of the Arab states in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. It says participating countries view the Arab Peace Initiative as still valid and believe in its potential for promoting regional stability. The draft also encourages closer cooperation between the Arab states and the Middle East Quartet (the United States, Russia, the United Nations and the EU) in advancing the peace process.

The Paris conference is convening as part of the peace initiative announced in January 2016 by former French Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius, and which has been advanced by his successor, Jean-Marc Ayrault, with the support of French President François Hollande. As part of this initiative, the foreign ministers of 30 countries convened last June without any Israeli or Palestinian representatives present, and stressed the need to preserve the two-state solution.

Since then, the French have continued to promote their initiative, hoping to convene an international conference by the end of last year – to be attended by Netanyahu and Abbas – that would lead to the resumption of direct negotiations between the parties. Abbas expressed willingness to attend, but Netanyahu made it clear several times in recent months that he opposes the initiative.

A month ago, Hollande invited Abbas and Netanyahu to meet with him in Paris the day after the conference. French diplomats said Hollande was responding to Netanyahu’s declarations that he wants to meet with Abbas. The PA president agreed, but Netanyahu refused, telling the French president he would not agree to a meeting in the framework of the French peace initiative. He stressed to Hollande that if the peace conference were to be called off, he would agree to meet Abbas in Paris for direct talks with no preconditions.

Despite Netanyahu’s opposition, the French did not cancel the conference and continued to advance their initiative. After Kerry confirmed that he would attend the conference – which is taking place five days before U.S. President-elect Donald Trump’s inauguration – the French invited the foreign ministers of no less than 70 countries, along with representatives of international organizations. UN Security Council Resolution 2334 gave the gathering an additional boost.

Netanyahu fears that the final communiqué of the Paris conference will be adopted next Monday by the EU foreign ministers’ council and the foreign ministers of the Quartet, and might also be the basis for another resolution at the Security Council, which is scheduled to convene next Tuesday for its monthly debate on the Israeli-Palestinian issue.

“We find ourselves only a few days before the Paris conference and, only a few days later, a Security Council debate,” Netanyahu said at the start of the weekly cabinet meeting on Sunday. “We are making a great effort to prevent another Security Council resolution.”