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The Meeting of the Foreign Ministers in Paris: What Next?

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On June 3, 2016, after intensive diplomatic activity that began in late January 2016, France succeeded in holding an international summit designed to lay the groundwork for restarting the Israeli-Palestinian political process by means of an international conference to take place before the end of the year. The summit, held in Paris at the foreign minister level and opened by French Prime Minister François Hollande, lasted only a few hours and hosted representatives from 28 nations, the EU, and the UN. Israel and the Palestinian Authority were not invited.

On the eve of the summit, France prepared a document that spelled out the points the participants were asked to endorse. Among the most noteworthy: agreement on the need for an external process that will lead the sides back to the negotiating table; emphasis on the urgency of resolving the conflict, as it is the focus of instability and its protracted nature fuels extremes of both violence and rhetoric; agreement that continued construction in the Jewish settlements in the West Bank and the turning of Israeli-Palestinian discourse into hostile rhetoric endanger the two-state solution, which is the only viable option for a resolution of the conflict; an international decision that any future negotiations over the permanent settlement between Israel and the Palestinians be subject to a deadline; recognition of the need to formulate principles for solving the core issues that would guide the talks to be conducted; establishment of working teams focusing on the economy, regional security, and regional cooperation, and tasked with formulating recommendations for steps to be taken before the international conference convenes in order to prevent escalation in the conflict arena and maintain the relevance of the two-state solution; attainment of a consensus that will consider the Quartet's soon-to-be-published report, which contains scathing criticism of Israel for construction in the Jewish settlements, as well as the initiative by Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, who in May 2016 called on Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and PA Chairman Mahmoud Abbas to renew the dialogue; and a need to reserve a date for the conference, which France hopes can be convened before the end of 2016.

A close reading of the summit's concluding statement reveals a gap between the goals France set for itself on the eve of the summit and what was actually attained. The

concluding statement contained some general declarations over which there is already consensus in the international community: opposition to the continued status quo in the Israeli-Palestinian arena; emphasis on the importance of the Arab Peace Initiative as a foundation for negotiations; the pivotal role of the Quartet and key nations in the region in restarting the process; and an agreement-in-principle on an international conference before year's end, even though no date was set. However, no reference was made to the principles for discussing the core issues or to the operational aspects of the steps to be taken until the conference convenes. Still, at the press conference at the end of the summit, French Foreign Minister Jean-Marc Ayrault said that in late June working groups will meet to start formulating a series of confidence-building steps, security guarantees, and financial incentives.

In light of the above, was the summit, which was supposed to have been the first step in the attempt to revive the effort to renew talks between Israel and the Palestinians, an exercise in futility designed in fact only to serve the interest of President Hollande himself, whose domestic standing is at an all-time low, in projecting himself as someone heavily invested in foreign affairs? It would seem not.

The summit, as well as el-Sisi's initiative, reflects a growing sense of frustration in the international community and the Middle East with the long-lasting political deadlock, since the failure of Secretary of State John Kerry's efforts to mediate a settlement between the sides (April 2014). It likewise bespeaks the growing sense, expressed by the summit participants, that the status quo furthers instability and endangers the potential viability of the two-state solution, which is still viewed by the international community as the only realistic resolution. Barring the slim possibility that Israel and the Palestinians would renew their talks on their own initiative, and considering that France and other nations view the conflict as a destabilizing factor demanding a response, France will presumably continue its efforts to convene the planned conference. Responding to Israel's opposition to the initiative, the French foreign minister told Netanyahu in a telephone conversation after the summit, "The train has already left the station."

France's ability to promote its initiative depends heavily on the position of the US administration. In fact, the outcome of the summit in part reflects the tension between the French aspirations and the interests of the Obama administration. Secretary of State Kerry's participation in the summit by no means indicates full US support for the French move. The United States took behind-the-scenes action to keep any mention of a date for the planned conference out of the summit's concluding statement; likewise, it opposed reference to any principles for resolving the core issues. Moreover, in his speech at the summit, Kerry made his intention to continue to push for direct negotiations between the parties perfectly clear. The Obama administration is interested in freezing activity on the Israeli-Palestinian issue, which will necessarily encounter Israeli opposition, until the

presidential election in November, because the President does not want to harm the chances of Hillary Clinton, presumably the Democratic nominee, of being elected. At the same time, however, the administration is debating different ideas on how to use the period between the presidential election and the inauguration of the new administration in January 2017 to present an initiative on the Israeli-Palestinian issue. At the core of this initiative would be principles for renewed Israeli-Palestinian talks, whether via a presidential announcement or via the passage of a resolution in the UN Security Council. Thus the French initiative arrived at a problematic time from the administration's perspective, and it has no choice but to suspend and/or undermine parts of it. Still, it may be that after November the French initiative could dovetail with a US plan, if President Obama does in fact intend to formulate one.

Israel's reservations about the very fact of the French move, which Prime Minister Netanyahu expressed both before and after the summit, did not – and in all probability, will not – succeed in causing France to lose heart. Netanyahu's attempt to point to the Egyptian President's initiative promoting a regional move as the program that ought to be the focus of attention received little support, either regionally or elsewhere. Moreover, Egyptians from el-Sisi's inner circle made it clear that the Egyptian President's initiative mustn't be viewed as new, but rather as his attempt to point to new horizons in the context of international policy. In other words, from the Egyptian perspective, there is no conflict between the el-Sisi and French initiatives. In his statement at the Paris summit, Egyptian Foreign Minister Sameh Shoukry spoke of his country's willingness to help prepare the Palestinian side and jumpstart the Arab Peace Initiative in the context of renewing the political process.

It thus seems that the cliché “the importance of the event lay in its taking place” holds true for the Paris summit. For most of the participants, the summit's occurrence and demonstration of the urgency of reviving the political process were more important than the results in practice. This attitude was also reflected in the concluding statement, which lacks any operational conclusions. France will likely persevere in the effort to convene an international conference after the US presidential election but before the end of 2016. Jerusalem's opposition will not be enough to obstruct the move, unless Israel presents a credible alternative in the form of some other political process. But at this point such an Israeli initiative is not on the horizon.

