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The Paris Conference on Israel-Palestine Peace Comes at a Wrong Time

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Though Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu had not formally rejected the invitation, Israel's participation in the Paris conference scheduled for January 15 hangs in balance. Without him, it is like playing Hamlet without the prince of Denmark but to have Israel on board, French President François Hollande will have to dilute his grandiose ambition of kick-starting the peace process that was stalled since the nine months of marathon but futile shuttle diplomacy by US secretary of state John Kerry that ended in April 2014.

A public conference expected to be attended by 70 countries and organizations and a private one-to-one Netanyahu-Abbas meeting appears to be the French strategy. Paris wants both the leaders to publically renew their commitments to a two-state solution.

The French got the timing horribly wrong. Though there were similar suggestions in the past, a formal French announcement came on December 22, weeks after the shocking defeat of Hillary Clinton in the US presidential election and a couple of days before the US joined others in criticizing Israel's settlement activities in the occupied territories. The decision of the Obama administration to abstain and thereby facilitate UN Security Council resolution 2334 has considerably angered Israel and Netanyahu sees the Paris conference as yet another bid to isolate Israel.

For long, Israel has been weary of the idea of an international conference and has been reluctant to accept anyone other than the US from playing a dominant role in the Israeli-Palestinian negotiations. The Madrid Middle East Peace Conference held in October 1991 still remains the

last successful international effort aimed at resolving the conflict but that was possible because of the tectonic shift in the international system and the end of the Cold War. The emergence of the US as the pre-eminent power and the format of direct and unconditional negotiations with the Arab interlocutors enabled the Israeli participation in the conference also co-sponsored by the weakened and about to disintegrate USSR.

In recent days Israeli leaders have been calling the French move as a “futile exercise”, “modern Dreyfus Trial” and a precursor to renewed anti-Israeli moves in the UNSC. Netanyahu had not formally rejected the invitation but declined to meet Mahmoud Abbas in private as part of the French invite. The terror attack on Sunday in Jerusalem in which four Israeli cadets were killed will only harden his position.

France lacks regional influence needed for an active role and moreover Hollande is a lame duck president. His term ends in May and he refused to seek re-election. Moreover, any Israeli absence from Paris would not be the first; in March 2005 when Tony Blair hosted the London conference to over the stalemate in the Israeli-Palestinian track, Israel Prime Minister Ariel Sharon chose to boycott it over terrorism.

The unexpected victory of Donald Trump has added immense uncertainty over the wisdom of the French initiative when the contours of the new US administration are far from certain. A possible Israel's absence could result in two likely outcomes and neither of them would facilitate any meaningful progress. Citing Israeli absence prominent countries and groups might not show up at Paris or send low-level delegations. Alternatively as happened recently in the UNESCO over the question of Jerusalem, reeling under Arab-Palestinian pressure, the conference might adopt an overtly anti-Israeli position, which would eventually pave the way for increased activism against the Jewish State. If the later was the course of action, then one should expect rejuvenated boycott, disinvestment and sanctions campaign against Israel.

For over a decade, the Israelis and Palestinians have been suffering from trust deficit and hence their negotiations were nothing more than photo ops. While increase settlement activities have become a major force that binds the fragile coalition headed by Netanyahu, it also precluded any political agreement between the two sides. The French effort comes against the backdrop of the failure of the Obama administration to bridge the gap between the two sides and the long buried Oslo process. Israel is literally counting the hours for a regime change in Washington and hence the Paris conference is the last thing Netanyahu needs.

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