In Rare Move, Britain Blocks EU Council From Adopting Paris Peace Summit Statement

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Britain prevented on Monday afternoon an EU Foreign Affairs Council decision adopting the closing statement of Sunday's peace conference in Paris, European and Israeli diplomats told Haaretz.

The British move was highly irregular and came a day after Britain refused to sign the Paris conference's closing statement.

Israeli and European diplomats said it was France that moved that the Foreign Affairs Council adopt a relatively brief resolution adopting the Paris peace summit's conclusions, and stress the EU's willingness to award Israel and the Palestinians with economic incentives if they reach a peace treaty.

Several other countries, including Hungary and Lithuania, joined Britain's reservations over the summit's statement. Since resolutions in the Council must be passed unanimously, the French move was blocked.

A senior European diplomat who attended the Council's meeting told Haaretz that Britain's action angered many EU members. According to the diplomat, the British were motivated primarily by a need to cozy up to U.S. president-elect Donald Trump, who told the Times on Sunday that he expects Britain to oppose any future UN Security Council resolution against Israel. "The Brits read what Trump said and implemented it immediately," the diplomat told Haaretz. "It's madness. Just three weeks ago the Brits pushed for UN Security Council Resolution 2334 on the settlements and voted for it, and now they're blocking resolutions on the matter at the Foreign Affairs Council. With all due respect to the British, you can't base foreign policy on someone's tweets."

The British moves in the Council and at the Paris summit followed a statement issued by British Prime Minister Theresa May after U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry's speech criticizing Israel's policies. In that statement, May leveled severe criticism against Kerry and stressed that the settlements were not the only reason for the stalemate in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process.

In a press conference held after the Council's meeting, EU Foreign Minister Federica Mogherini tried to downplay the British move and said that disagreements between different members led the meeting to end without a decision. Mogherini focused on Trump's intentions to relocate the U.S. embassy to Jerusalem, noting that she hopes the president-elect considers the regional repercussions of the move before implementing.

Britain, which had an observer status at the Paris conference, did not back the final communique by 70 countries, which reaffirmed that only a two-state solution could resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and warned they would not recognize any unilateral steps by either side that could prejudge negotiations.

British Foreign Minister Boris Johnson didn't participate in the conference, and neither did Britain's ambassador to Paris. Instead, the U.K. sent a low-level functionary, expressing their displeasure with the French move.

Britain said it had reservations about the outcome of the peace conference, saying it risked "hardening positions."

"We have particular reservations about an international conference intended to advance peace between the parties that does not involve them - indeed which is taking place against the wishes of the Israelis - and which is taking place just days before the transition to a new American President when the U.S. will be the ultimate guarantor of any agreement," a Foreign Office statement said.

"There are risks therefore that this conference hardens positions at a time when we need to be encouraging the conditions for peace."

The Paris conference's concluding statement urged Israelis and Palestinians “to officially restate their commitment to the two-state solution, thus disassociating themselves from voices that reject this solution,” to “independently demonstrate, through policies and actions, a genuine commitment to the two-state solution,” and to “refrain from unilateral steps that prejudge the outcome of negotiations on final status issues, including, inter alia, on Jerusalem, borders, security, refugees.” The statement stressed that conference participants will refuse to recognize such unilateral steps.

The statement was the product of intensive negotiations among the participants over the last day, and was considerably softer than the draft the French had presented on Saturday. For instance, the final statement makes no mention of the June 4, 1967 lines as a basis for negotiations, nor does it urge participating countries to distinguish, in all their actions, between Israel and the settlements.

The clause urging Israeli and Palestinian leaders to dissociate themselves from opponents of two states was also softened; the draft had demanded that they “disavow official voices on their side that reject this solution.”

The final statement urged both sides “to take urgent steps in order to reverse the current negative trends on the ground, including continued acts of violence and ongoing settlement activity, and to start meaningful direct negotiations.” It welcomed UN Security Council Resolution 2334, which condemned the settlements and deemed them illegal, as well as U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry’s speech last month outlining the principles for a two-state solution and a July report by the Quartet, comprising the United States, European Union, United Nations and Russia.

Finally, the statement announced that any of the conference participants who so desired would reconvene toward the end of 2017 to review progress toward Israeli-Palestinian peace in the interim.

During the summit, Kerry spoke to Netanyahu and promised the Paris peace conference will not lead to further action at the United Nations or in any other international forums.