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The Limited View from the Amman Summit

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The hastily-arranged summit in Amman on November 13, 2014 may have given the participants some instant gratification. In the long run, however, it will join the long list of similar summits in Aqaba, Jordan, Sharm al-Sheikh, Egypt, Washington, DC, and elsewhere that ended with no lasting impact.

The host, King Abdullah II of Jordan, needed the summit to continue the pressure on Prime Minister Netanyahu to take steps to reduce the tensions in Jerusalem, particularly in the Temple Mount / Haram a-Sharif area. Jordan had already recalled its ambassador from Israel, and King Abdullah himself issued some unusually harsh statements. The summit produced the desired – albeit short term – benefits. The King appeared to be a voice of responsibility and moderation in an otherwise tense, hostile, and volatile region. He reemphasized his role as custodian of the Islamic holy sites in Jerusalem, a reliable partner of the United States, and a key ally in the battle against ISIS. The guest of honor at the summit, Secretary of State Kerry, used the event to regain the perception of his country's role as actively engaged in the three major issues of the current Middle East: the battle against ISIS, the negotiations with Iran on the future of its nuclear program, and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The participants who were not present, Palestinian President Abbas (who met Kerry in Amman before the summit) and Egyptian President el-Sisi (who was reached by phone during the summit) scored small, trivial gains in their efforts to wrestle with domestic problems and political rivals. Abbas agreed to "reduce the rhetoric" (as Secretary Kerry said in his press conference immediately following the summit), and el-Sisi said he was prepared "to do whatever I can in order to advance the cause of peace between Israelis and Palestinians." Neither case suggests a major or concrete concession or commitment.

The third guest present at the trilateral summit, Prime Minister Netanyahu, was "left to pay the bill." In their joint press conference after the summit, Kerry and his Jordanian counterpart, Nasser Judeh, repeatedly referred to "firm commitments," "constructive steps," and "specific and practical actions" that all parties involved were willing to make. It is clear, though, that the onus was and will be put on Israel. Kerry and Judeh refused to stipulate what measures were expected, but presumably they included permission for all

Arabs to pray at Haram a-Sharif (and not limit the visitors to specific age groups) and prevention of politically oriented actions by certain Israelis such as visits covered by the press. For Netanyahu, repeating the statement in Amman he had made earlier that Israel is committed to maintain the status quo on the Temple Mount may prove to be the easier commitment. Ordering the Israeli police to block the access to Israeli politicians, some from his own party, to the Temple Mount maybe prove more difficult and politically costly, especially with the buzz about earlier than scheduled general elections in Israel.

The declared purpose of the summit was to deescalate the situation on the Temple Mount, but did Prime Minister Netanyahu make any commitment to build housing units in suburbs of Jerusalem? If so, then clearly his political troubles at home will increase. And even if he did not make such a commitment, any new Israeli action in this respect will incite the other parties and prompt accusations that Israel is undermining the efforts to restore calm on the Temple Mount.

The understandings of the Amman summit are also problematic from Israel's point of view because it is not clear, for example, whether the Palestinian efforts to gain a Security Council resolution will continue – and if a reference to East Jerusalem as the capital of the future Palestinian state will be incorporated in the draft and final text, if adopted.

Not clear in this respect is what role Jordan will assume as a member of the Security Council. Furthermore, it is not clear how the US will respond to the various versions of a draft resolution submitted to the Security Council. Thus, Netanyahu may emerge as the only one asked to take concrete steps while all the other participants at the summit, present or not, exited with vague and immeasurable commitments only. The fact that he was received in an Arab capital and spoke to the King of Jordan, the President of Egypt, and the US Secretary of State on the other major problems of the region will buy him very few points in his political campaigns expected at home.

The results of the summit in Amman should therefore be seen as tenuous and temporary. Any group of Palestinians or Israeli Arabs can easily provoke a situation that will nullify these results. Lip service was paid in Amman to efforts to resume a peace process, and attempts to deal with a single issue such as the Temple Mount, sensitive as it is, in the absence of a broader framework may prove insufficient. The summit was therefore a noble effort to calm the situation on a very limited issue, and Prime Minister Netanyahu may not have had much choice in deciding whether to attend. Nonetheless, there is still a need to look at the clouds gathering over the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.