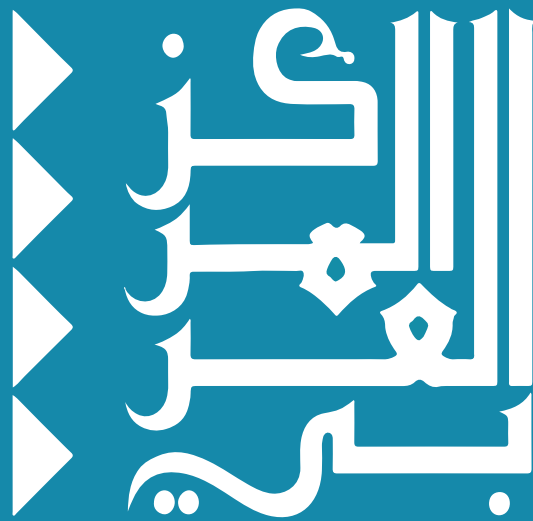


# President Abbas Will Again Spin the Wheel in Washington

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Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas once again travels to Washington looking for fresh approaches to Palestinian-Israeli peace. He leaves behind a Palestinian society questioning whether there is any more hope for peace as Israel's occupation of Palestinian land has become the enforced status quo. Abbas also comes as the rift in Palestinian ranks between the West Bank and the Gaza Strip—with their different authorities—continues with no real end in sight; as Palestinian prisoners are in their third week of a hunger strike to protest Israeli policies; and as the comatose peace process shows no signs of revival. Indeed, the sole hope permeating discussions about President Abbas's visit is a weak, some say vain, shot in the arm for this process, even if it comes from an administration that may not have the knowledge or commitment necessary to redress Palestinian rights vis-à-vis a dominant Israeli position.

Many in the Palestinian political leadership—and the Arab world for that matter—are looking at the presidency of Donald Trump as a possible opportunity for a good peace deal. On the eve of the visit, Jibril Rajoub, Secretary General of the Fatah Central Committee, wrote that Palestinians are looking forward to working with the administration to advance “a just Israeli-Palestinian peace.” According to Rajoub, an agreement “must fulfill Palestinian national aspirations” that include sovereignty, an independent state with East Jerusalem as its capital on pre-June 1967 lands, and a solution to the refugee problem. But realities on the ground in Israeli-occupied lands and an obvious

American bias in favor of Israel are likely to dash any hope that the American president will strive for the desired outcome.

### **President Abbas's Dire Straits**

It is an arguably foregone conclusion that Abbas's trip does not come at an opportune moment in his life or in the Palestinians' current situation. He is 82 years old and lacks popular legitimacy. He was elected in 2005 for a four-year term but continues in office because of an atrophied political environment in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. Polls show that 65 percent of Palestinians want him to resign, as the battle for succession looms and gets more intense. Intra-Palestinian relations leave a lot to be desired; not much has transpired after last January's declaration that the two main factions in Palestinian politics, Fatah and Hamas, had agreed to form a national unity government.

All Palestinian politicians continue to emphasize the importance of presenting a unified front, especially at the present time, yet politics continue to stymie unity and rivalries do not seem to disappear. In the meantime, the legitimacy of Palestinian institutions remains under intense pressure since national parliamentary elections have not been held since 2006, when Hamas won a majority of the seats of the Palestinian National Council. New municipal elections are set to be held on May 13 after being postponed last September following a dispute over the jurisdiction of the courts in the Gaza Strip.

What might assist Palestinian unity—and subsequently may open the political space for renewing Palestinian institutions—is a declared change in Hamas’s founding charter and position on peace with Israel. Press reports indicate that the movement has adopted a change in its founding charter accepting the establishment of a Palestinian state on land occupied by Israel after June 4, 1967, with East Jerusalem as its capital. The movement will not, however—as obvious from its official statement—recognize the state of Israel, a stance that will neither ease President Abbas’s discussions in Washington nor lift the American restrictions on dealing with Hamas (which also severed its relations with the Muslim Brotherhood). Hamas’s adherence to its original principle of not recognizing Israel also obviates any possibility for the latter to change or ameliorate its harsh policies in the Gaza Strip. Incidentally, Israel’s response to the charter change came swiftly but was expected as the spokesman for Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, David Keyes, declared that Hamas is merely trying “to fool the world” and “will not succeed.”

Moreover, the visit comes as Israeli control of Palestinian life translates daily into curfews, road closures, raids, and settlement building and expansion. At the very time President Abbas flew to Washington, all the border crossings in the entire West Bank and Gaza were shut down while Israelis observed Remembrance Day and Independence Day. As he meets with President Trump on Wednesday, at least 1,000 Palestinian prisoners would have

completed 17 days of a hunger strike they began on April 16 to protest Israel’s policies. Fifty Palestinians were injured in clashes with Israeli soldiers on a “day of rage” in support of the prisoners.

In the meantime, Israel’s settlement activity continues unabated. The Israeli Knesset in early February approved a “Regularization Law” that declared settlement outposts not sanctioned by the government as legal—as if any settlement on Palestinian land were recognized according to international law! In late March, Israel announced a renewed settlement policy that allows for intensified building within the perimeters of existing blocs, supposedly “to allow the progression of the peace process.” As the two presidents shake hands in the Oval Office, around 620,000 settlers would be occupying over 125 illegal settlements in the West Bank and East Jerusalem.

In essence, President Abbas is making a trip to Washington at a nadir in his and the Palestinians’ power to effect change in the Israeli and American positions on settlements, the peace process, or Palestinian rights in an independent state. If the outcome of negotiations is a function of a balance of power between contestants, then President Abbas comes to Washington with a very weak hand. As things are now, he seems to only have the intangible power of a people’s right to dignity and independence in addition to a verbal commitment from the Arab world to continue to support the Palestinians’ right to a state. But with Israel’s influence in the United States at its

zenith and Washington's nonchalance about the fate of the Palestinians in full view, it is clear that those two ingredients, pivotal as they are, will not strengthen Abbas's position and effectiveness when he meets with the American president.

### **The Washington Environment**

In Washington, Abbas is sure to find the deck stacked against him despite the appearance of a positive atmosphere after visits by Jordanian King Abdullah II and Egyptian President Abdel-Fattah El-Sisi. The two are said to have tried to smooth the Trump Administration's stance on Palestinian rights while adhering to the Arab Peace Initiative of 2002, whose principles center around a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza Strip along the June 4, 1967, borders, with East Jerusalem as its capital. They also came to the American capital after another Arab endorsement of this initiative at the 28<sup>th</sup> Arab League Summit in Jordan, with the understanding that border adjustments (including possible swaps) between a Palestinian state and Israel may be necessary.

But beyond the above visits and President Donald J. Trump's telephone conversation with Abbas on March 10 and invitation to the White House, there is no evidence of any movement toward an acceptable deal for the Palestinians that Abbas can take back with him to Ramallah. Moreover, nothing seems to have changed in the general pro-Israel atmosphere permeating American politics and Washington decision-making. And whatever the merits of appeasing

the Arabs and Palestinians regarding a fair and just peace deal, the fact remains that no one in the disorganized White House, the understaffed Department of State, or the captive Congress is prepared to pressure the rightwing and settlement-endorsing Israeli government to accept less than total Palestinian subjugation.

Yes, President Trump has long expressed his intention to reach an "ultimate deal" on Palestinian-Israeli peace. He has appointed a special envoy, Jason Greenblatt, who is said to be busy charting and sailing the choppy waters, and even delegated his son-in-law Jared Kushner to supervise the process. Greenblatt has been visiting all parties in the region to determine the contours of what could be acceptable, everywhere emphasizing Trump's commitment to revive the peace process. Much credence was also given to President Trump's temporary retreat (for now) from his promise to move the American embassy to Jerusalem after making it a central theme of his campaign and attempting to advance it during the first days of his administration. Israeli sources even told Haaretz that officials now believe that President Trump will most likely adhere to the policy of previous American presidents who signed waivers to postpone implementation of a 1990s law requiring the United States to move its embassy to Jerusalem.

On the other hand, in his February meeting with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu the president allowed to slip his non-adherence to the United States' position on the two-state solution. Instead, he appeared to advocate for a

single state that cannot by necessity and reality be other than an apartheid state in which Palestinians would live in Bantustans as second class citizens under Israeli rule. President Trump also chose pro-settlement-building and funder of settlements David Friedman to be ambassador to Israel, in the process sending the clearest message about where he and his administration stand on the colonies in the West Bank and East Jerusalem as well as on Israel's appropriating whatever remains of the land purportedly set for a Palestinian national state. Further, he only sheepishly asked Netanyahu during his February visit to Washington to "hold back on settlements for a little bit," as if his interlocutor and his cabinet partners were eager to oblige.

Surrounding all of this is an atmosphere of ineptitude and ignorance about the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and a policy of concentrating all peace efforts in the White House under Kushner's leadership. In reality, Kushner is close to Israeli rightwing circles and the Netanyahu government; by appointing Greenblatt and entrusting the Israel-Palestine file to Kushner, Trump sidelined the Department of State which, incidentally, does not even have the right cadre of diplomats to give the institutional support needed. With the budget for the State Department slashed by 31 percent in the administration's proposed funding for the new fiscal year, and Secretary of State Rex Tillerson reportedly planning to cut 2,300 positions from his agency, it is not hard to see how the diplomatic track in US foreign policy is going to lose its effective role. Even the responsible

principal in the Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs, Assistant Secretary Stuart Jones, is serving in an acting capacity while others are holdovers from the previous administration. In fact, all are unlikely to be asked for help; at best, they will be ignored if they provide any advice, at worst, they will lose their jobs if they challenge the White House line on Palestinian-Israeli peace.

Finally, the American Congress, especially with Republicans controlling both of its chambers, is arguably the last place where any peace deal that appears to contravene current Israeli interests and policies will be welcome. Indeed, and as if Israel does not have the full support of the American legislative and funding branch, a new pro-Israel caucus—a brainchild of the infamous Daniel Pipes who heads the pro-Israel Middle East Forum—was just launched in the House of Representatives. Its work is to convince Palestinians that they have been truly vanquished in their war with Israel and they should just recognize it as a Jewish state before any resumption of peace talks.

Today's Congress is even more sympathetic to Israel than the previous one. In the 114<sup>th</sup> Congress (2015-2016), Benjamin Netanyahu defied President Barack Obama and addressed an unusual joint session of Congress in an attempt to derail American foreign policy toward Iran. Shamefully, most members of Congress then attended that session and participated in what could be seen as a planned takeover of American decision-making. Today, it is folly to think that the pro-Israel slant in Congress would allow for a radical change in

American policy that could satisfy Palestinians' demands, no matter what the White House may be thinking.

### **Time to Stop Spinning the Wheel**

As the fiftieth anniversary approaches of the June 1967 war and the resulting occupation of what was left of historic Palestine, conditions on the ground and a skewed balance of power in favor of Israel make President Abbas's visit to Washington another spin-the-wheel exercise. Even the Obama Administration—which exerted some conscientious efforts to address Palestinian rights while assuring Israel's security—was hardly able to level the playing field between Palestinians and Israelis. Today, with an administration lacking in basic knowledge about the conflict and in needed institutional infrastructure, the prospects for a turnaround that gives the Palestinians their rightful demands appear to be farther than ever before.

What adds to the saliency of avoiding another failed restart of the peace process is the fact that the Trump Administration does not appear to have a plan for the way forward. The White House continues to send signals that peace between Palestinians and Israelis is possible and President Trump himself declared that “[t]here is no reason there's not peace between Israel and the Palestinians — none whatsoever” (a specious and vacuous claim that only exposes deep ignorance).

Subsequently, while President Abbas might be able to yet again present a compelling case for Palestinian rights in a self-determined state and against continued Israeli occupation, what is more likely to produce better conditions for a just peace is strengthening Palestinian unity, society, and institutions. Short of internal unity of purpose and deliberate and unified practices to defend their rights and their land against organized colonization, Palestinians and their politicians will only perpetuate the fruitless game of spin-the-wheel in Washington.

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